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*Alchemy and Exemplary Narrative in Middle English Poetry*

by

Curtis Runstedler

A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Durham

2017

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## ABSTRACT

### *Alchemy and Exemplary Narrative in Middle English Poetry*

This thesis examines the role of alchemy in Middle English poetry from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, particularly how these poems present themselves as exemplary narratives to raise moral points about human behaviour, fallibility, and alchemical experimentation. The introduction suggests the compatibility between the emergence of the vernacular *exemplum* and the development of alchemical practice and literature in late medieval England. I follow J. Allan Mitchell's 'ethics of exemplarity' for reading the alchemical poems in this study, extending his reading of Middle English poetry to understand the exemplary and ethical values of alchemy in poetry, which in turn helps the reader to understand the *good* of alchemical examples in medieval literature. Reading these alchemical poems as exemplary reassesses the role of alchemy in medieval literature and provides new ways of thinking about the *exemplum* as a literary framework or device in Middle English poems containing alchemy.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the history of alchemy in the classical world, particularly its connection to metallurgical techniques and early theoretical developments, through to its transmission into the Arabic world before reaching late medieval Europe. The second chapter continues this history, focussing on the development of alchemy in medieval England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I examine the importance and impact of several key alchemical figures or poets who write about alchemy including Roger Bacon, William Langland, Thomas Norton, and George Ripley, as well as discussing the legal and societal responses to alchemical practice in England. These chapters contextualise the role of alchemy in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Middle English poetry, and explore the growing interest in writing vernacular alchemical poetry.

The third chapter concentrates on John Gower's use of alchemy in the *Confessio amantis*, in which it is presented as a model for ideal yet unattainable labour. Following R.F. Yeager's reading of Gower's 'new *exemplum*' in the *Confessio amantis*, I suggest that Gower's alchemical section follows this new, emerging style of vernacular exemplary writing and can also be read on its own as an exemplary narrative, which recognises alchemical failure as a post-lapsarian decline and a sign of human shortcomings.

In the fourth chapter, I examine Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, linking it to Gower's use of the 'new *exemplum*' in the previous chapter to show how alchemy can be used within an exemplary framework to make points about moral blindness and human fallibility. The Canon's Yeoman's unreliability and dubious nature as a narrator suggest Chaucer's subversion of the exemplary format, yet he still uses alchemy and exemplary narrative for moral purposes.

The fifth chapter of this dissertation examines an alchemical version of John Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird* found in Harley MS 2407. Following Joel Fredell's reading of the poem and Mitchell's exemplary reading of Lydgate's poem, I discuss the anonymous author's use of alchemy as subject matter within the poem, particularly its presentation as an *exemplum* and how these added alchemical stanzas affect its exemplary reading.

The sixth and final chapter focusses upon two fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical dialogues: one between Morienus and Merlin, and the other between Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves. Through the dialogue form, the characters in these poems collaborate in their alchemical pursuits, forming the moral examples that are consistent throughout the works studied in this dissertation. These identify the 'right path' to moral well-being and healthy living as well as successful alchemical practice and experimentation.

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*For my parents and Poppa*  
*Per ardua ad astra*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Medieval Alchemy in Popular Culture

Medieval alchemy and the alchemist have long conjured exciting images of smoky laboratories, magical secrets, and colourful transmutations.<sup>1</sup> While medieval alchemy is now regarded as a pseudo-science, or to a lesser extent the foundation or prelude to chemistry, its concepts and themes have seen a resurgence in literature within the last century.<sup>2</sup> In J.K. Rowling's debut novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, for example, the antagonists Lord Voldemort and Professor Quirrell seek out the Philosopher's Stone as a means of prolonging Voldemort's life and restoring his power.<sup>3</sup> They almost succeed, and yet, with the use of the Mirror of Erised, only Harry manages to effectively acquire the Stone, which is depicted as an actual physical object in the book.<sup>4</sup> Voldemort's attempts to seek the eternal in confronting and trying to

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<sup>1</sup> Following Anke Timmermann's definition, I use the term 'alchemy' according to its late medieval understanding, that is transforming matter. See Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation: A Corpus of Middle English Alchemical Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 1 n.1. I further discuss the term 'alchemy' and its connotations in Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> For works on alchemical literature and its connections to modern science, see notably F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists, Founders of Modern Chemistry* (London: W. Heinemann, 1951); H. Stanley Redgrove, *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern* (Washington, D.C.: Westphalia Press, 2015); John Read, *Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy, Its Literature and Relationships* (London: G. Bell and Sons Limited, 1936); Allen G. Debus, *Man and Nature in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); B.Y.T. Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy, or The Hunting of the Green Lyon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 10 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1923-58); and more recently Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Principe and Newman, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire: Starkey, Boyle, and the Fate of Helmontian Chymistry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Principe, *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and His Alchemical Quest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature: From Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry 1575-1700: From Previously Unpublished Manuscripts* (London: Routledge, 2013); Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996); and Linden (ed.), *Mystical Metal of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture* (New York: AMS Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Principe comments that Rowling's American publishers made the unfortunate decision to title the American edition *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Ziolkowski adds that the publishers feared that American readers would not want to buy the book if 'philosopher' was in the title. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 1, and Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 2 n.6.

<sup>4</sup> See J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), pp. 213-6. Cf. John Granger, *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter: Understanding the Meaning, Genius, and Popularity* (Zossima Press, 2002), and Granger, 'The Alchemist's Tale: Harry Potter and the Alchemical Tradition in English Literature',

overcome death, lead to his ruination and destruction. Not only is alchemical practice central to the core themes of the novel, but Rowling also uses alchemy to depict a sort of moral tale as well. Voldemort, who tries to misuse the Stone and its power, goes to unscrupulous lengths to attain it. Despite his atrocities and lack of humanity, Voldemort is still essentially human, and driven by human desires for power, greed, and by extreme selfishness. In his quest for his own well-being, he paradoxically cannot acquire what he seeks to acquire. This echoes the failings of the medieval alchemists, who also fail in their trade due to their human fallibility.

George R.R. Martin also includes alchemists in his *A Song of Fire and Ice* series, although alchemy is featured to a much lesser extent than in *Harry Potter*. In his medieval universe, the alchemists practice both alchemy and pyromancy. They are part of an ancient guild, in which the alchemical adepts are known as ‘wisdoms’, and their apprentices help them in their art. The queen mother of Westeros Cersei Lannister also commissions the alchemists to produce significant quantities of wildfire in preparation for the Battle of King’s Landing in *A Clash of Kings*.<sup>5</sup> Although the alchemists claim that their alchemy and their wildfire work, there is no evidence of any successful transmutation of the metals, and their influence upon the Seven Kingdoms is dwindling. Cersei’s dwarf brother Tyrion is suspicious of their talents, and Martin writes that even the most experienced members of the guild ‘no longer even pretended to transmute metals’, suggesting a connection between (im)morality and alchemical practice.<sup>6</sup>

The interest and influence of English medieval alchemy in recent literature also appear notably, albeit much more loosely, in the manga series *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2001-2010).<sup>7</sup> The

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*Touchstone*, 16.9 (2003), last accessed 1 August 2017 <  
<http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-09-034-f>>

<sup>5</sup> George R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (London: Voyager, 2003). For more on the role of alchemy in this series, see notably my forthcoming article ‘Cersei Lannister, Regal Commission, and the Alchemists in *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Fire and Ice*’, in *Tales of Ice and Fire: Queenship, Female Agency, and the Role of Advice in Game of Thrones*, ed. Zita Rohr and Lisa Benz (2018); and Edward Cox, ‘Magic, Science, and Metaphysics in *A Game of Thrones*’, in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper than Swords*, ed. Henry Jacoby (Hoboken: Wiley, 2012), pp. 129-41.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 701.

<sup>7</sup> See Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, 27 vols. (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2001-10).



series features two brothers (Alphonse and Edward Elric), who practice alchemy and battle against the anthropomorphic Seven Deadly Sins. While it does draw from classical, medieval, and Paracelsian alchemical ideas, the series is more interested in the basic premise of alchemy, that is changing the elements and transmuting metals to restore human life. At the beginning of the series, this involves the attempted resurrection of the brothers' recently deceased mother, which backfires with dire consequences, and reflects the medieval post-lapsarian imperfections of its practitioners. Using alchemy to resurrect humans is highly dangerous and strictly forbidden; it literally costs Edward an arm and a leg, and Alphonse disintegrates, only to be restored as a possessed metal giant. These alchemical narratives can also be read for the moral, and moreover show the different ways in which alchemy can be used as a symbol for human imperfection and fallibility, continuing the medieval theme of the post-lapsarian decline.

Alchemy can also serve metaphorical purposes in other seemingly unrelated disciplines, symbolising the 'perpetually abstruse processes of the commercial economy'.<sup>8</sup> Alchemy as a metaphor is not solely limited to finance, however. Richard E. Rubenstein's reassessment of terrorists and terrorism, for example, is titled *Alchemists of the Revolution*.<sup>9</sup> The term 'alchemy' even lends itself to titles such as Petra Ahnert's *Beeswax Alchemy*, which describes how to make beeswax soaps, candles, balms, and creams.<sup>10</sup> In many of these titles, alchemy has become a buzzword and risks losing the specificity of its medieval and classical core themes.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Epstein, 'Dismal Science: Chaucer and Gower on Alchemy and Economy', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 36 (2014), 209-48, at p. 209. Epstein cites Neil Irwin's *The Alchemists*, which concerns the global financial crisis in 2008, as well as George Soros's *The Alchemy of Finance*, which again focuses on personal investments and finance rather than traditional alchemical practice. For more on the role of alchemy as a metaphor within a wider context, see Irwin, *The Alchemists: Inside the Secret World of Central Bankers* (London: Headline, 2013), and Soros, *The Alchemy of Finance* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> See Richard E. Rubenstein, *Alchemists of Revolution: Terrorism in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> See Petra Ahnert, *Beeswax Alchemy: How to Make Your Own Soap, Candles, Balms, Creams, and Salves from the Hive* (Beverly: Rockport, 2015).

### Reading Middle English Alchemical Poems as *Exempla*

These contemporary examples of the use of alchemy are clearly informed by medieval alchemy and alchemical themes. Yet the focus of this dissertation is not on contemporary depictions of alchemy or the ‘alchemy’ of finance, but rather the moral uses of alchemy in Middle English poetry. While medieval alchemical poems were also written in France, Germany, and other countries in the late Middle Ages, this dissertation will primarily focus on alchemy in Middle English poetry, since as Didier Kahn comments, medieval England was where alchemical poetry ‘developed most fully’ as well as where most surviving medieval alchemical poems were produced.<sup>11</sup> This thesis will show that Middle English alchemical poetry, or the use of alchemy in Middle English poetry, is not monolithic or static, but instead diverse, and that alchemy is depicted both positively and negatively in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, representing different meanings in different contexts. The study of alchemy in medieval poetry also helps one to understand and answer questions about how Middle English writers used alchemy in their poetry for moral purposes to offer examples of ethical or unethical practice in Middle English poetry.<sup>12</sup>

Alchemical poetry (or the use of alchemy in Middle English poetry), which brings together medieval science and imaginative literature, remains largely unexplored in medieval studies. The best-known examples of alchemy in Middle English poetry include Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales* and to a lesser extent John Gower’s alchemical section in Book IV of the *Confessio amantis*. While these two examples are highly influential and form the contents of the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation,

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<sup>11</sup> Didier Kahn, ‘Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis, Part I - Survey’, *Ambix*, 57.3 (2010), 249-74, at p. 254. Cf. Kahn, ‘Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis, Part II - Synthesis’, *Ambix*, 58.1 (2011), 62-77, and Katherine Eggert, *Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> As I will explain in my first chapter, medieval ‘science’ or *scientia* refers to the study of natural philosophy in the late Middle Ages rather than the modern understanding of science. Cf. Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 1 n.1.

there are other less well-known Middle English poems containin alchemy, such as an alchemical version of John Lydgate's poem *The Churl and the Bird* in British Library, Harley MS 2407 as well as anonymously written alchemical dialogues/recipes between Merlin and Morienus and between Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves that I will discuss in my sixth and final chapter. These examples reveal the ways in which these Middle English authors used alchemy for moral purposes or to make moral points about alchemical practice.

The texts that I will be looking at use alchemy in different ways. Chaucer and Gower, for instance, present their alchemical sections as part of a literary and social framework, and show the growing interest in writing about English alchemy in the vernacular, which would become even more widespread in fifteenth-century England. The fifteenth-century Middle English poems examined in this dissertation, however, are much shorter and independent from a wider framework, and suggest the increasingly literary appeal of alchemy. Literature containing alchemy during this period was no longer necessarily confined to obscure alchemical treatises in a workshop or laboratory but could also reach a wider literate audience and thus provide a wider context and meaning.<sup>13</sup> The authors featured in this dissertation are also connected through their interest in using alchemy within fictional narratives, which provide a suitable medium to explore their exemplary ideas and themes.

The study of alchemy in medieval poetry and morality prompt philosophical questions - 'What should one make of the use of alchemy in medieval poetry?' and 'What moral values does it have for its medieval audience?' - as well as literary questions: 'What is the *good* of alchemical examples in medieval literature?' and 'How is this author using alchemy within an exemplary framework, or how does he subvert the *exemplum*?' These alchemical narratives are morally driven and form exemplary narratives; as I argue, they are not always solely about

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<sup>13</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 18. In fifteenth-century England, Middle English alchemical poems were read by university scholars, craftsmen, noblemen, and the literate public. Cf. Schuler's distinction between literary and didactic alchemical poetry in 'Three Renaissance Scientific Poems', *Studies in Philology*, 75.5 (1978), i-152, at p. 1.

alchemical practice, but also about bettering human behaviour and labour. In this dissertation, I discuss the ways in which these Middle English poems containing alchemy are presented as exemplary narratives, and these poets use them to make moral points about human fallibility, alchemical experimentation, and moral blindness. Reading these Middle English poems as *exempla* provides diverse ways of thinking about the interactions between medieval science, ethics, and well-being. While alchemy itself does not work in the view of many of these authors (e.g. the transmutations of metals are not successful, and gold is not produced), Middle English poems containing alchemy can offer the possibility of human transformation (or lack thereof) and the potential for moral improvement. These poets use alchemy to write about moral behaviour, pointing out the use and misuse of alchemical and scientific knowledge within a moral context.

### **The Medieval *Exemplum* and the History of the Exemplary Narrative**

When reading poems containing alchemy as exemplary narratives, it is also important to understand the history of the *exemplum* in medieval England and its secular uses in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England.<sup>14</sup> J. Allan Mitchell observes that the term *exemplum* originates from the Latin verb *eximere*, ‘to take out, to cut’, signifying excising a section from a greater whole. He further stresses that the *exemplum* is one in which ‘we recognise what we should be

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Mosher defines the *exemplum* as a ‘short narrative used to illustrate or confirm a general statement’, and an illustration based on human experience. G.R. Owst describes the *exemplum* as a ‘moralised anecdote’. More recently, R.F. Yeager provides two definitions for *exempla*; firstly, they are ‘mere similes, metaphors, and figures of speech’, and secondly ‘illustration based on real events’. David Jones defines *exempla* as ‘plausible stories, drawn from literary sources or from life, which are used to seize the attention of a preacher’s audience and illustrate a moral or theological point’. See Mosher, *The Exemplum in the Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), pp. 1, 6; Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 149; Yeager, ‘John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form: Tale Models in the *Confessio amantis*’, *Mediaevalia*, 8 (1985), 307-335, at p. 308; and *Friars’ Tales: Thirteenth-Century Exempla from the British Isles*, trans. David Jones (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 1. Jones’s definition is accurate in terms of religious *exempla*, but while these stories are always moral, they are not always religious. Cf. Claude Bremond, Jacques le Goff, and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *L’exemplum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), pp. 27-39, and J.-Th. Welter, *L’exemplum dans la littérature religieuse et didactique du moyen âge* (Paris and Toulouse: Occitania, Guitard, 1927), p. 1.

*doing*', or what not to do, as in Chaucer.<sup>15</sup> In this dissertation, I define *exemplum* as a short narrative or description with the purpose of moral instruction. The ethics of the *exemplum* by this definition seems quite clear: the *exemplum* seeks to improve or prompt a course of action for self-improvement by illustrating these moral points. Alchemy may not work, but literary alchemists can be examples for moral improvement or cautionary tales of greed and covetousness. Most importantly, how does one achieve the ideal, or uncover the secrets of nature? These Middle English poets were interested in exploring these questions and their possibilities, and I aim to draw attention to this aspect of their work.

The medieval *exemplum* originated in the Bible, particularly (but not exclusively) in the New Testament. Christ used the parable as a means of moral instruction to his followers, and in the Middle Ages he would become the ideal figure for exemplary storytelling.<sup>16</sup> The *exemplum* served to 'educate and persuade, not to analyse or test doctrines', and could be used as a powerful demonstrative tool.<sup>17</sup> The *exemplum* also featured in the stories of the Desert Fathers, notably in Athanasius of Alexandria's early hagiography of St Antony, and in the writings of Gregory the Great.<sup>18</sup> The first *exempla* to appear in medieval England were from the writings of Gregory the Great in his *Pastoral Care* and *Dialogues*, which were translated

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<sup>15</sup> J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Mosher, *The Exemplum in England*, p. 9. Alexander Gelley comments that *exempla* stress 'factuality and pictorial immediacy' through the life of Christ. Leah Sinanoglou comments that the *exemplum* was so effective because good *exempla* could convince even Doubting Thomases of the faith, acting as effective preaching aids. See Gelley, 'Introduction', in *Unruly Exempla: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*, ed. Alexander Gelley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 4, and Sinanoglou, 'The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the *Corpus Christi* Plays', *Speculum*, 48.3 (1973), 491-509, at p. 491.

<sup>17</sup> Gelley, 'Introduction', p. 4. See also John D. Lyons, *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 11-2.

<sup>18</sup> The medieval *exemplum* could also employ the fable as a rhetorical device to raise moral points and exemplary truths; I explore this aspect in greater detail in my fifth chapter. For more on the medieval fable and its exemplary aspects, see notably F.R. Whitesell, 'Fables in Mediaeval *Exempla*', *The Journal of English and German Philology*, 46 (1947), 348-66; Karl-Heinz Stierle, 'Story as *Exemplum*—*Exemplum* as Story: On the Pragmatics and Poetics of Narrative Texts', in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, ed. Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange and trans. David Henry Wilson et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and more recently Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 397; and Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 57-80. The medieval fable also shared the medieval *exemplum*'s moral narrative and story. Cf. Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

by Alfred the Great into Old English in the ninth century.<sup>19</sup> Gregory the Great draws predominantly from the Old Testament for his *exempla*, including the stories of Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hezekiah, and Balaam.<sup>20</sup> Gregory believed that the *exempla* were ‘more effective in doctrine than in inspiring audiences’.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he viewed the exemplary narrative as a ‘memorial activity’.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that this type of narrative is not only memorial, but also contemplative and interactive, causing the audience member or reader to react and respond to the story in a transformative way. In the case of religious *exempla*, the audience responds to follow and conform to the model of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Gregory’s writings were highly influential and helped promote more exemplary sermons and devotional literature.<sup>24</sup>

David Jones links this shift in the exemplary audience to the decree from the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which required ‘every Christian man and woman to confess to their own parish priest and to take communion at least once a year’.<sup>25</sup> In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the *exempla* as preaching aids were used among the mendicant orders, particularly the Dominicans.<sup>26</sup> The exemplary mode became a staple for Christian sermons until the twelfth century in medieval England, when *exempla* started to become less overtly religious, particularly among the friars, to appeal to a wider lay audience, where it was still used for moral purposes.<sup>27</sup> Owst cites Robert Rypon, Jacques de Vitry, Nicholas Bozon, and John Bromyard

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<sup>19</sup> Mosher, *The Exemplum in England*, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Mosher, *The Exemplum in England*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 19. See also Frederick C. Tubach, ‘*Exempla* in the Decline’, *Traditio*, 18 (1962), 407-17.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 17, and Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 264-5.

<sup>23</sup> See also my article ‘Saintly Bodies, Cult, and Ecclesiastical Identity in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria’, *Postgraduate English*, 32 (2016), 1-18, in which I discuss the connection between the saint’s life and Christ.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, *Friars’ Tales*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, *Friars’ Tales*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, *Friars’ Tales*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Mosher, *The Exemplum in England*, p. 24. Jones notes that the first English *exemplum* appears in the thirteenth century. See Jones, *Friars’ Tales*, p. 1. Cf. H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 81. Yeager comments that the secular *exemplum* ‘could become a highly serviceable vehicle for conveying meaning’. See also Yeager, ‘John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form’, p. 307.

as notable preachers who evidence the successful use of the secular *exempla*.<sup>28</sup> The *Gesta Romanorum* exemplifies this tradition, since it is secular in content and its popular entertainment is the moral instruction.<sup>29</sup> Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* 'desires to hear "talys" on the part of the common people', demonstrating further developments and shifts in the exemplary tradition.<sup>30</sup>

In the late fourteenth century, Gower presents what Yeager terms a 'new *exemplum*'.<sup>31</sup> While the confessional framework of the *Confessio amantis* retains the sermonising aspects of the traditional *exempla*, Yeager suggests that Gower's use of secular *exempla* enables the creation of a new type of *exemplum*.<sup>32</sup> The 'new *exemplum*' effectively joins together a secular narrative with the moral storytelling in the exemplary tradition, fitting Gower's fictional framework and providing a 'center of moral instruction' in the *Confessio amantis*, and is a helpful term for understanding the exemplary uses of alchemy in Middle English poetry in this dissertation.<sup>33</sup> As Yeager suggests, Gower uses the secular *exemplum* not only for moral instruction, but also for a 'paradigm for narration'.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Gower's use of *exempla* in the *Confessio amantis* as rhetorical tools forms networks of narratives on linked themes within the framework of the seven deadly sins. Moreover, Gower constructs his narratives as he does because he expects them to 'work like *exempla*'.<sup>35</sup> Gower takes on the role of the preacher and Genius tells exemplary stories as a preacher would, but his *Confessio* audience is

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<sup>28</sup> See Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, p. 149ff.

<sup>29</sup> Mosher, *The Exemplum in England*, p. 80. I further examine the *Gesta Romanorum*, its *exempla*, and its influence on Lydgate's poem *The Churl and the Bird* in my fourth chapter.

<sup>30</sup> Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, p. 153. Fritz Kemmler also provides a case study of Mannyng's treatise. See Kemmler, *Exempla in Context: A Historical and Critical Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's Handlyng Synne* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1984). Cf. Jacques de Vitry, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane (London: D. Nutt, 1890).

<sup>31</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 308.

<sup>32</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 308.

<sup>33</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 308. Mosher challenges this view, arguing that the *exemplum* 'loses its identity with Gower', that the introduction of secularised content in his *exempla* differentiates it from the exemplary form. I agree with Yeager that the *exemplum* does not lose its identity but continues to change and evolve with Gower's influence. See Mosher, *The Exemplum in England*, p. 125.

<sup>34</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 314.

<sup>35</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 312.

secular rather than religious.<sup>36</sup> Gower's secular *exempla* also share an interest in attaining and promoting human good, and the *Confessio* is framed around this central idea.<sup>37</sup> Chaucer and Lydgate use the secular *exemplum* in complex ways too, and the 'ensample' takes on different forms and meanings in their work.<sup>38</sup> In this dissertation, I also extend this understanding of the 'new *exemplum*' to fifteenth-century poems containing alchemy as well to understand how alchemy is being portrayed and depicted in exemplary ways. I will also explore how alchemy fits this model in the work of late Middle English authors, and how alchemy connects to this idea of attaining the higher good or moral ideal.

### History of Alchemical Scholarship

While this is the first study to focus on the use of alchemy in the Middle English exemplary tradition, I am indebted to the works of F. Sherwood Taylor, H. Stanley Redgrove, J.R. Partington, John Read, and the other founders of *Ambix* (the journal for the Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry) for helping to reassess alchemy as an academic study. This dissertation supports F. Sherwood Taylor's belief that alchemy was a practical science rather than purely phenomenological, and 'true alchemists were chemical technicians who devoted long hours to laboratory work'.<sup>39</sup> While alchemical narratives can be read for self-improvement and seeking the moral good, the alchemical experiments were predominantly practical in nature. As the alchemical literature and the archaeological record reveal, alchemy was indeed

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<sup>36</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 312-3.

<sup>37</sup> Jessica Rosenfeld, *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love After Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 73.

<sup>38</sup> Kurt Olsson, 'Rhetoric, John Gower, and the Late Medieval Exemplum', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 8 (1977), 185-200, at p. 186.

<sup>39</sup> A.V. Simcock, 'Alchemy and the World of Science: An Intellectual Biography of F. Sherwood Taylor', *Ambix*, 34.3 (1987) 121-39, at p. 133. Apparently, F. Sherwood Taylor also conducted alchemical experiments by distilling eggs. These attempts were not successful. Mircea Eliade similarly argues that medieval alchemy was mostly practical, not symbolic, and traces this evidence back to the ancient mining and metallurgical cults. While his reading is accurate in assuming medieval alchemy's practicality, it is also very symbolic, as this study shows. See Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structure of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 10ff.



a very practical science, whether it led to failure, new discoveries, or improved distillation techniques.<sup>40</sup>

While this dissertation is more interested in alchemy than magic, it is also important to consider the relationship between the two. Richard Kieckhefer explores this relationship; his reading of Thomas Norton is particularly relevant to this dissertation.<sup>41</sup> Corinne Saunders also examines the relationship between alchemy and magic in medieval romance and provides key readings of Middle English alchemical poems such as Gower's alchemical section in the *Confessio amantis* and Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.<sup>42</sup> More recently, Sophie Page's book *Magic in the Cloister* provides a case study of the medieval magical texts found in St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, where alchemy features tangentially.<sup>43</sup> Following Lynn Thorndike's argument, magic and medieval science are symbiotically linked in these works as well.<sup>44</sup>

In endorsing F. Sherwood Taylor's more practical approach to medieval alchemical study, I disagree with Carl Jung's psychological reading of alchemy. Jung argues that alchemical experimentations and their goals were phenomenological, offering metaphysical

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<sup>40</sup> Spike Bucklow, for instance, suggests that medieval scribes were also adept chemists. See Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), p. 69. In Marco Beretta, *The Alchemy of Glass: Counterfeit, Imitation, and Transmutation in Ancient Glassmaking* (Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, 2009); Linda Ehrsam Voigts, 'The Master of the King's Stillatories', in *The Lancastrian Court: Proceedings of the 2001 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Jenny Stratford (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2003), pp. 233-52, at pp. 240-1; Rachel Tyson, *Medieval Glass Vessels Found in England* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2000); Vladimir Karpenko, 'Coins and Medals Made of Alchemical Metal', *Ambix*, 25.2 (1988), 65-76; and Dorothy Wyckoff, 'Albertus Magnus on Ore Deposits', *Isis*, 49.2 (1958), 109-22, for example, the authors provide evidence of practical alchemical experimentations using recovered artefacts and sites. Some authors, such as Robert Allan Bartlett and David Goddard, continue alchemical practice into the twentieth-first century using alchemical techniques based on Paracelsian alchemy. Some of the alchemical processes, such as producing divine cinnabar, are extremely dangerous and can result in death. While his work is practical to some degree, there is still a phenomenological element to it. See Bartlett, *Real Alchemy: A Guide to Practical Alchemy* (Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2009), and Goddard, *The Tower of Alchemy: An Advanced Guide to the Great Work* (Boston: Weiser, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> See Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), especially pp. 135-48.

<sup>42</sup> Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 1, p. 1.

rather than practical implications.<sup>45</sup> He further suggests that the goals of alchemy and alchemical symbolism can be deciphered as a means of understanding the collective unconscious, showing that alchemical processes could be re-enacted in the dreams of his patients. While Jung overlooks the practical aspects of alchemy, he does recognise the use of alchemy as analogy, which I also recognise in this study. F. Sherwood Taylor refuted Jung's theory, claiming that it was 'abstract', although he published one of Jung's article in *Ambix*.<sup>46</sup> Another issue with Jung's alchemical readings is that they leave all potential readings open to alchemical interpretation. One *could* potentially read every story as alchemical to some degree, but eventually the alchemical reading becomes so abstract and vague that it risks becoming obscure or even nonsensical. I am interested in exploring poems containing alchemy that show evidence of a practical alchemical narrative. This dissertation thus presents alchemy as both practical *and* literal, although moral aspects are central to my alchemical readings as well.

Thorndike's monumental ten volume *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* is also crucial to this study, particularly volumes 3 and 4.<sup>47</sup> Thorndike rightly argues that medieval magic and alchemy are intrinsically linked. While Thorndike was writing in the early twentieth century, much of his information and case studies remain useful for this dissertation. Similarly, Dorothy Waley Singer's three-volume catalogue on medieval alchemical manuscripts in England and Ireland is essential to this study, particularly in Chapters 3 and 4, although she omits certain manuscript entries.<sup>48</sup> Linda Ehram Voigts provides a more recent and

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<sup>45</sup> See C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), and Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, trans R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

<sup>46</sup> See Simcock, 'Alchemy and the World of Science', p. 134, and Jung, 'The Bologna Enigma', *Ambix*, 2 (1946), 182-91.

<sup>47</sup> See Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vols. 3-4.

<sup>48</sup> Dorothea Waley Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts in Great Britain and Ireland Dating from Before the XVI Century*, (Brussels: Lamartin, 1928-31), 3 vols. Timmermann recently updated the Cambridge alchemical manuscript catalogue. See Timmermann, 'Alchemy in Cambridge: An Annotated Catalogue of Alchemical Texts and Illustrations in Cambridge Repositories', *Nuncius*, 30.2 (2015), 345-511. See also Julia Boffey and A.S.G. Edwards, *A New Index of Middle English Verse* (London: British Library, 2005), and Linne R. Mooney et al., *The Digital Index of Middle English Verse* (Blacksburg: Center for Applied Technologies in the Humanities and Center for Digital Discourse and Culture, Virginia Tech, 2011).

comprehensive catalogue of scientific and medical writings in Middle English, including numerous alchemical writings.<sup>49</sup> Adam McLean also provides a helpful online database of alchemical manuscripts and their contents.<sup>50</sup>

While there has been no major study of reading Middle English poems containing alchemy as exemplary narratives thus far, recent scholarship on alchemical literature and the history of alchemy follows F. Sherwood Taylor's approach to alchemical interpretation and the Middle English alchemical tradition. Stanton J. Linden argues that Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* begins an English tradition of alchemical satire that extends into the Renaissance period.<sup>51</sup> While Linden's readings of Middle English poems containing alchemy are helpful, he only devotes a few pages to Middle English poems, aside from Chaucer.

Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman are two of the foremost scholars of the history of alchemy and chemistry today. In a collaborative article, Principe and Newman distinguish alchemy from chemistry, arguing that the term 'chemistry' emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a distinction from 'alchemy'.<sup>52</sup> Chemistry referred to the 'art of analysis and synthesis' whereas alchemy referred to metallic transmutation; they conclude that the term *chymistry* is best applied to the history of alchemy before this time (i.e. 1500-1750) to avoid anachronisms and inaccuracies.<sup>53</sup> While Newman and Principe have written on medieval alchemy, their main academic focus is upon *chymistry* and early

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<sup>49</sup> See Voigts and Patricia Deery Kurtz, *Scientific and Medical Writing in Old English and Middle English* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2000). See also recently Alpo Honkapohja, *Alchemy, Medicine, and Commercial Book Production: A Codicological and Linguistic Study of the Voigts-Sloane Manuscripts Group* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> Adam McLean, 'Database of Alchemical Manuscripts', *The Alchemy Web Site*, last accessed 1 August 2017 <[http://www.levity.com/alchemy/alch\\_mss.html](http://www.levity.com/alchemy/alch_mss.html)>

<sup>51</sup> Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, pp. 54-61.

<sup>52</sup> Principe and Newman, 'Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake', *Early Science and Medicine*, 3.1 (1998), 32-65, at p. 38. Principe and Newman suggest using the terms *chymist* and *chymistry* to distinguish the increasingly blurred boundaries between alchemy and chemistry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>53</sup> Principe and Newman, 'Alchemy vs. Chemistry', p. 39ff.

chemistry.<sup>54</sup> Schuler's introduction to *Alchemical Poetry, 1575-1700* has been particularly helpful for this dissertation, particularly the introductory chapter, although most of the book examines unpublished early modern alchemical treatises and poems.<sup>55</sup> He does, however, provide useful information concerning the circulation and production of fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical poems, and particularly the benefits of verse form.

Jonathan Hughes has written two books which examine medieval alchemy in fourteenth and fifteenth century England in manuscripts and literature and attempts to link it to kingship.<sup>56</sup> Anke Timmermann's book examines the fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical verses known as the *Verses upon the Elixir*, and helps to reassess the role of alchemical poetry in late medieval England.<sup>57</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski's recent book *The Alchemist in Literature* also takes a literary approach to medieval and early modern alchemy, focussing on the figure of the alchemist rather than alchemical imagery.<sup>58</sup> His offers helpful readings and summaries of medieval alchemists or poets writing about alchemy, particularly Chaucer, Gower, and Dante, but as with Linden, much of the book is predominantly devoted to early modern alchemical literature. While her study concentrates on Renaissance English alchemical poetry, Katherine Eggert also explores how alchemy was attractive for non-alchemical authors because of its potential allegorical mobility. She also coins the term 'disknowledge', referring to the 'deliberate means by which a culture can manage epistemological risk' and citing the paradox where the aspiring adept knows nothing yet they are expected to know everything.<sup>59</sup> Eggert's research is helpful for this dissertation because she examines the use of alchemy by English

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<sup>54</sup> See notably Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 27-82; Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*; Newman, 'What Have We Learned from the Recent Historiography of Alchemy?', *Isis*, 102.2 (2011), 313-21; and pseudo-Geber, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber*, ed. William R. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

<sup>55</sup> Schuler, *Alchemical Poetry*, xv-xlvii.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England: Plantagenet Kings and the Search for the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Continuum, 2012); and Hughes, *Arthurian Myth and Alchemy: The Kingship of Edward IV* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002). For a recent review of Hughes's scholarship, see Jennifer M. Rampling, 'The Englishing of Medieval Alchemy', *Ambix*, 63.3 (2016), 268-72.

<sup>57</sup> Timmermann, *Verses and Transmutation*.

<sup>58</sup> See Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*.

<sup>59</sup> Eggert, *Disknowledge*, p. 8.

writers in Renaissance literature. While her literary examples and readings are quite convincing, however, her term ‘disknowledge’ can appear more complicated than helpful, and her study predominantly concentrates on Renaissance literature rather than medieval. While these recent studies explore the use of alchemy in medieval poetry, much more could be said about how medieval English writers are using alchemy in moral and ethical ways in their works, and my study will explore these aspects and ideas.

### **Alchemy and Exemplary Narrative in Middle English Poetry**

My interest in reading alchemical poems as exemplary narratives stems from the work of J. Allan Mitchell on exemplary reading and what he terms the ‘ethics of exemplarity’ in the works of Gower and Chaucer in his book *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*. Mitchell argues that Chaucer and Gower both use the exemplary mode, albeit to different ends: Gower applies moral rhetoric straightforwardly in his presentation of narrative *exempla*, whereas Chaucer uses moral rhetoric subversively in order to stimulate moral action.<sup>60</sup> While Gower’s approach to moral rhetoric in *Confessio amantis* seems more straightforward, Chaucer subverts the expectations and structure of the exemplary form in the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in his satirical take on alchemy in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, which is also presented as an exemplary narrative. Mitchell also argues for the value of examples, commenting that ‘examples are meant to move or improve you’ and exemplary narratives are ‘directed at improving the world’.<sup>61</sup> His exemplary reading of Chaucer and Gower also aims to help break down the traditional reading of ‘moral Gower’ and ‘genial Chaucer’, two epithets

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<sup>60</sup> Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, p. 2. See also Mitchell, *Ethics and Eventfulness in Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, pp. 1, 3.

which have dichotomised the reading of these authors and scholarship on them since the fourteenth century.<sup>62</sup>

In this study, I marry Mitchell's reading of exemplarity in Middle English poetry with poems containing alchemy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, revealing their interconnectedness and more importantly their exemplary role. I argue that Chaucer and Gower first explore the possibilities of alchemy in the exemplary tradition with their early alchemical writing in the vernacular. These exemplary readings can extend not only to the alchemical sections of Chaucer and Gower, however, but to other Middle English narratives containing alchemy as well, as I will show in chapters 5 and 6. Naturally, most if not all medieval stories can be read as moral, but like Mitchell, I am interested in *how* this ethics of exemplarity applies to the work of Chaucer, Gower, and other Middle English alchemical poems, and how they can be read as exemplary narratives to improve or transform one's life.<sup>63</sup> In reading these poems as exemplary, the reader can extend the ethical possibilities of medieval literature to the realm of medieval science, particularly alchemical practice.<sup>64</sup> Like Eggert, I am also interested in how alchemy can be used as an effective metaphor in alchemical poetry, particularly in an ethical and exemplary framework. These authors in this study used alchemical examples for moral reflection or as cautionary tales against covetousness and unethical practice.

The first and second chapters of this dissertation provide a brief overview of the history of alchemy. The first chapter covers the history of alchemy in the classical world, the Arabic world, and continental medieval Europe. Beginning with its Western origins in the classical world and then through the Arabic world, I examine its reception and development in late medieval England. From the thirteenth century, Latin alchemical translations and adaptations

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<sup>62</sup> Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, p. 142. See also Rosemary Woolf, 'Moral Chaucer and Kindly Gower', in *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 221-245.

<sup>63</sup> Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, p. 141.

begin to enter the vernacular. The second chapter covers the history of alchemy in medieval England. Chaucer, Gower, and to a lesser extent Langland write Middle English poetry containing alchemy in the fourteenth century, yet they are not alchemical practitioners. This tradition continues to develop into the fifteenth century in the form of alchemical recipes and dialogues and alchemical versions of exemplary poems, such as Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*, and many of these are written anonymously. The second chapter also surveys key figures and literature which influences the production and thought processes behind these Middle English alchemical poems.

Following Yeager's reading of Gower's secular *exempla*, my third chapter examines Gower's alchemical section in Book IV as well as Book V in the *Confessio amantis*. Gower interprets alchemy as the highest form of human labour. Although Genius sees alchemy as unattainable, it is presented as the opposite of Sloth. In this chapter, I argue that the alchemical exegesis in Book IV, coupled with his reading of labour in Book V, is a crucial part of the *Confessio amantis*, or as Yeager writes, form the 'center of Gower's poetic'.<sup>65</sup> More importantly, I suggest that Gower's 'new *exemplum*' establishes a new way of using alchemy as a vehicle to explore ideas about post-lapsarian decline and human failings. I further argue that Gower's alchemical section, while it appears discursive, can also be read as exemplary, both as a section and as part of the rest of Book IV. While Gower does include an alchemical section in the *Confessio amantis*, he seems more interested in the moral example it provides rather than the practice of alchemy. I also examine the alchemical section in his French poem *Mirour de l'Omme* to discuss his views and use of alchemy.

The fourth chapter looks at Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales* as exemplary narratives. I examine both the conversation between the Canon and his Yeoman in the *Prima Pars* as well as the Yeoman's tale in *Pars Secunda* as

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<sup>65</sup> Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), p. 165.

exemplary, and explore and connect the alchemical symbolism, both literally and metaphorically. I also discuss how themes of human fallibility and moral blindness are manifested in the tale, and how this reading links to the ‘new *exemplum*’ that Gower presents in the previous chapter. I also extend this reading to the *Second Nun’s Tale*, which suggests its own alchemical transmutations, and analyse the alchemical symbolism of the tale. Following Mitchell’s reading of ‘moral Chaucer’, Chaucer the poet can be seen to provide a more complex *exemplum* with his tale than Gower, subverting the form of the *exemplum* with the unreliable Canon’s Yeoman as storyteller. This chapter concludes with the Parson’s praise for virtuous behaviour and remedies for sin in the final fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, and links them to the exemplary aspects of the *Tales*. Chaucer continues to explore the alchemical themes in Gower’s *Confessio amantis* while also providing more complex examples of alchemical practice, showing that Chaucer’s use of alchemy in the *Canterbury Tales* also has exemplary value for its audience.

In the fifth chapter, I provide an exemplary reading of an alchemical version of Lydgate’s poem *The Churl and the Bird* in Harley MS 2407, and examine how the author uses alchemy in the poem to make moral points about human failure, moral blindness, and experimentation. I begin by reading Lydgate’s poem as an *exemplum* and examine its presentation as an exemplary narrative in the alchemical version and its implications. My alchemical and exemplary reading of Lydgate follows my readings of Gower and Chaucer, but this poem also shows the diverse and innovative ways in which the exemplary use of alchemy in Middle English poetry continues into the fifteenth century. Rather than being derivative or monolithic, the alchemical additions to this poem provide a more complex and engaging reading of the original poem as an *exemplum* and raise interesting questions about alchemical knowledge, secrecy, and access. In this instance, the alchemical version of *The Churl and the Bird* is a cautionary tale of how *not* to procure the Stone and practice alchemy, following the theme of



covetousness seen in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. As I suggest, Elias Ashmole's commentary on the alchemical poem proves to be an invaluable starting point for understanding and appreciating its value as an alchemical *exemplum*. The author of the poem clearly saw its potential for moral example through alchemical allegory, and it is important in linking the alchemical sections of Gower and Chaucer with the anonymous fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical poems examined in this dissertation.

The sixth and final chapter of this dissertation focuses on two late fifteenth-century alchemical dialogues: one is between Morienus and Merlin, and the other is between Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves. The recipe and dialogue format of the fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical poems and their more positive depictions of alchemy identify them as important texts for this study, and I consider these two little known poems as exemplary narratives. While most of the alchemical poems featured in this dissertation are predominantly secular, the Morienus/Merlin dialogue is religious, explicitly linking their alchemical practice to Christian belief. Despite its non-secular context, however, this poem also reveals a more positive portrayal of alchemy in an exemplary narrative, and the format and structure of the poem are comparable to the other alchemical dialogue I examine in this chapter. Through the dialogue form, the characters in these poems collaborate in their alchemical pursuits, forming the moral examples that are consistent throughout the works studied in this dissertation. These identify the 'right path' to moral well-being and healthy living as well as successful alchemical practice and experimentation. I will also discuss how these narratives containing alchemy further explore the themes from previous chapters and how these authors use alchemy to make their moral points, particularly through the master/apprentice relationship between alchemists.

While alchemy may not be successful in real life, these alchemical narratives explore the ways in which it can be used for different literary purposes, expressing ideas about alchemical experimentation, failures, success, and moral well-being. Although alchemy is the main subject

in these poems, many of these authors, such as Chaucer and Gower, do not focus primarily on alchemy; rather, it becomes a means for them to express their exemplary ideas and make moral points. Reading poems containing alchemy for the moral enables the modern reader to reassess their understanding and expectations of medieval 'science' and 'poetry'. Alchemy is more than pseudo-science or the foundations of chemistry; it is valuable as a literary device and motif for exemplary purposes. As this dissertation will show, Middle English poetry containing alchemy is important in moral and ethical ways. From Gower to Chaucer to Lydgate and to the end of the Middle Ages, these poems containing alchemy continue to engage the reader morally in new and exciting ways as well as influencing the early modern world.

## CHAPTER ONE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALCHEMY

### Introduction

This chapter and the following chapter provide a brief introduction to medieval alchemy and its origins, as well as key alchemical literature, themes, and ideas which are referred to in the following chapters. The chapter begins with the origins of alchemy in the classical world, citing key figures, texts, and ideologies which influenced and shaped alchemical understanding in late medieval England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition, I consider the status of alchemy as it was filtered through the Arabic world before being received in medieval England and the consequences of this, notably the influence of Jabir al-Hayyan as well as the impact of Avicenna's anti-alchemical views. Alchemy as a study and doctrine continues to evolve and change in medieval Europe, facing repeated condemnations, decretals, and some commissions. I identify some of the influential continental European figures here such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas as well as John of Rupescissa. Some of these alchemical writers such as Arnald Villanova and Ramon Llull were most likely not practising alchemists, yet the works attributed to them were crucial to alchemical authors in late medieval England.

In the following chapter, which continues the history of alchemy in Europe, I examine the literary depictions of alchemy in fourteenth and fifteenth-century England, considering the influence of Jean de Meun's alchemical section in the *Roman de la Rose* on fourteenth-century writers such as Chaucer and Gower as well as Dante's alchemical section in the *Inferno*. The fifteenth century is important for English alchemical writing as well because there is greater interest in producing vernacular alchemical manuscripts, and many of the Latin texts are translated into Middle English. George Ripley and Thomas Norton are two key authors in the fifteenth century who represent this growing vernacular alchemical tradition in England, and they further establish the importance of the alchemist being moral and virtuous. Elias Ashmole makes a special appearance at the end of this chapter since he is a recurring character in this

study. While he writes in the seventeenth century, his comments on English medieval alchemical poems, notably Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the alchemical section in Book IV of John Gower's *Confessio amantis*, an alchemical version of John Lydgate's poem *The Churl and the Bird*, and the alchemical dialogue between Morienus and Merlin, are all important for this study, as is their inclusion in his influential 1652 compendium *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. While the focus in this dissertation is on medieval alchemy, not classical or early modern, the texts discussed all raise questions about the relationship between poetry and alchemy and how alchemy is used in moral ways in alchemical poetry. These chapters also show the connections between these historical sources and the texts examined in this dissertation.

### **Alchemy in the Making**

The etymology of the term 'alchemy' is subject to debate.<sup>1</sup> Read suggests that the idea of the Philosopher's Stone was conceived at the end of the Alexandrian era in the seventh century, linking neo-Platonic and Alexandrian beliefs in magic.<sup>2</sup> More recently, however, Timmermann argues that the origins of the Stone are still unclear.<sup>3</sup> The Philosopher's Stone was a transmuting agent which could change base metals into gold, and it was also a means of making the imperfect perfect, which made it much sought after.<sup>4</sup> While such an agent would be

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<sup>1</sup> Read and E.J. Holmyard argue that it possibly stems from the Greek *khem*, which refers to the coming of the black alluvial soil along the Nile. The Arabs interpreted it as *al-kimiya* ('from the black land', which also likely refers to the Nile), and when the practice was rediscovered in the Western world it was Latinised as 'alchemy'. Read suggests, however, that it is more likely that the term *kimia* comes from the Greek *chyma*, which means fusing or casting a metal, relating to metallurgical processes. More recently, Principe convincingly links the term 'alchemy' to *cheimeia*, which he suggests derives from the mythical founder of alchemy Chemes or Chymes whom Zosimos of Panopolis mentions. See Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, pp. 4, 17; E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 17; and Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 4, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, pp. 12, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 18 n.3. Timmermann suggests that Albertus Magnus may have originated the term *lapis philosophorum* when he writes that 'lapis quem philosophi laudant ubique' ('the stone which the philosophers everywhere laud').

<sup>4</sup> Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, p. 118.

invaluable in late medieval England, however, there are no confirmed medieval success stories of its discovery.

Alchemy is the study of the transmutation and formation of inanimate objects, particularly metals.<sup>5</sup> The practice has two goals: firstly, it aims to produce gold or silver from the transmutation of base metals, and secondly, to create an *elixir vitae* that can prolong the life of its user.<sup>6</sup> Gold was considered incorruptible; it could not be destroyed in the fire, but could only be dissolved in *aqua regis* (nitric and hydrochloric acid), and it was considered noble because it did not rust.<sup>7</sup> Medieval alchemists saw alchemy as a means of accelerating natural processes rather than merely copying them.<sup>8</sup> In their search for the Philosopher's Stone, the alchemists improved tools and apparatus for experimentation, such as furnaces and stills, which contributed to chemical experimentation in later centuries.<sup>9</sup>

The medieval study of alchemy also relied on understanding matter and form on a metaphysical level. Medieval alchemists believed that the goals of alchemy could be achieved through the successful transmutation of different substances (specifically metals), which are comprised of matter and form. Aristotelian metaphysics deals with primary substances, proposing that all substances are comprised of matter and form. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that the natural world is the genesis of all living things, and the cause of the primary elements.<sup>10</sup> These incorruptible substances could be created through the perfect balance of elements, based on Empedocles's theory of the four elements (all things are made of earth, air,

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<sup>5</sup> Read, 'Alchemy and Alchemist', *Folklore*, 44.3 (1933), 251-78, at p. 251.

<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Krebs, *Groundbreaking Scientific Experiments: Inventions and Discoveries of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), p. 177. The first goal is most prominently discussed in the poems examined in this dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint*, p. 126. See also Ronald Pearsall, *The Alchemists* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Karpenko, 'Systems of Metals in Alchemy', *Ambix*, 50.2 (2003), 208-30, at pp. 209-10.

<sup>9</sup> Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), vol. 2, I.980a25.1-6, 1552-1728, at p. 8.

fire, and water).<sup>11</sup> Each of the elements has four qualities, which are moist, dry, hot, and cold.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle describes the *primum mobile*, or prime mover, as the first cause of being, causing form to be naturally attracted to matter, so that they unite to create a substance. Similarly, a body has the potential to become a living being. The body is corporeal, yet it requires a soul to activate its intellectual faculties. Both matter and form have the potential to create substance, with the perfection of a substance being its final cause.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the alchemists believed that all things were composed of prime matter (*prima materia*), which could be constituted into higher forms.<sup>14</sup> Aristotle also developed the concept hylomorphism, which recognises that ‘all things have shape and substance’.<sup>15</sup> Citing these principles concerning the unity between substances, the alchemists believed that they could transmute base metals into gold since the properties of the inferior metals could be altered.<sup>16</sup> Newman recently challenges the metaphysical aspects of medieval alchemy, arguing that Mercury and Sulphur had a practical rather than metaphysical foundation.<sup>17</sup> While I agree that these alchemical principles had a practical dimension, especially in terms of metallurgy and laboratory experiments, medieval alchemy, particularly the Mercury-Sulphur theory, was also deeply philosophical in its experimentation. In this study, these principles notably feature in Chaucer and Gower’s alchemical sections but can also extend to the fifteenth-century poems as well.

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<sup>11</sup> Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Meteorology*, trans. E.W. Webster, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, IV.378b1.10-15, 555-625, at p. 609.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, vol. 1, VII.1037a1.5-6, p. 1635.

<sup>14</sup> Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Spike Bucklow comments that biblical Adam exemplifies hylomorphism because he is created in the image of God from dust, which is formless, before reaching his potential as a human being. See Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint*, pp. 78-9. In the Middle Ages, this concept was also applied to alchemical study. Cf. Arthur John Hopkins, *Alchemy, Child of Greek Philosophy* (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2014), p. 28. Hopkins similarly lists ‘hylozoism’ as an alchemical principle, which states that ‘all Nature is like man, alive and sensitive’.

<sup>16</sup> Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> See Newman, ‘Mercury and Sulphur Among the High Medieval Alchemists: From Rāzī and Avicenna to Albertus Magnus and Pseudo-Roger Bacon’, *Ambix*, 61.4 (2014), 327-44.

## Alchemy in the Classical World

Alchemy was believed to have originated in Hellenic Egypt after Alexander the Great's conquest (334-323 B.C.), with experiments taking place in first century Alexandria.<sup>18</sup> From the third century A.D. onwards, however, theories arose that real gold could be made from base metals. The process for making gold in the Greek world was called *chrysopoeia* from *chryson poiein*, to make gold, and it is accompanied by the less common (and less lucrative) *argyropoeia*, the making of silver'.<sup>19</sup> Goldsmiths also used metallurgical processes such as cupellation to extract noble metals such as gold and silver from base metals or pyrite. This technique could also purify alloys when heated over a furnace using bellows at high temperatures.<sup>20</sup>

The earliest surviving alchemical text is *Physica Kai Mystika (Of Natural and Hidden Things)*, which is attributed to pseudo-Democritus in the third or fourth century A.D.<sup>21</sup> It describes the alchemical process in four stages in accordance with their colourations, which include blackening (*nigredo*), whitening (*albedo*), yellowing (*citrinatus*), and reddening (*rubedo*). These transmutations are achieved through fire.<sup>22</sup> Hermes Trismegistus was also an important and influential figure in early alchemical literature. His name means 'thrice great'

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<sup>18</sup> Principe further comments that smelting and the making of brass and copper alloys had endured for thousands of years before alchemy. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 5, 9-10. While there is some evidence that alchemy was practiced earlier in China and India, Principe comments that there is not enough understanding to write comprehensively on it. Nathan Silve argues that Western alchemy was influenced by Chinese alchemy, but for the purposes of this study, I will concentrate on the Western tradition. See Silve, *Chinese Alchemy: Preliminary Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968). Cf. Ho Ping-Yu and Joseph Needham, 'The Laboratory Equipment of the Early Medieval Chinese Alchemists', *Ambix*, 7.2 (1959), 58-112. See also Peter H. Marshall, *The Philosopher's Stone: A Quest for the Secrets of Alchemy* (London: Macmillan, 2001); Andrea de Pascalis, *Alchemy: The Golden Art* (Rome: Gremese International, 1995), pp. 15-22. The early Chinese alchemists were interested in earthly immortality as an alchemical goal rather than the transmutation of base metals into gold. For more on Indian alchemy, see P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *The Chemical Choir: A History of Alchemy* (New York: Continuum, 2008), pp. 19-28.

<sup>19</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 13. Bucklow also comments that gold was recycled and synthesised with other metals. See Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint*, p. 175.

<sup>20</sup> Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint*, p. 193.

<sup>21</sup> William H. Brock, *The History of Chemistry: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 15. The real Democritus was a Greek atomist (he argued that matter at its most fundamental level was comprised of atoms and not infinitely divisible) who lived in the fourth century B.C. See also Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> Brock, *The History of Chemistry*, p. 15. See also pseudo-Democritus's original treatise in Robert Steele, 'The Treatise of Democritus *On Things Natural and Mystical*', *Chemical News*, 61 (1890), 88-9.

since he was known as a king, philosopher, and priest, and he is a legendary character who is identified as the Greek equivalent of the Egyptian god Thoth.<sup>23</sup> He was known for understanding the occult arts, notably the secrets of plants and stones, alchemy, and astrology; the term Hermeticism stems from his name, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* is comprised of the early alchemical tracts attributed to him.<sup>24</sup> While he was most likely not a real person, he was highly influential for writers on alchemy in the late Middle Ages, particularly his treatise *Tabula Smaragdina (The Emerald Tablet)*.<sup>25</sup> In this treatise, he describes the secrets of finding the Philosopher's Stone, which were said to be set forth on an emerald tablet. This treatise also identifies several key themes that would be familiar to the medieval alchemist, including the chemical union of the male and female to create the Philosopher's Stone ('The father thereof is the Sun, the mother the Moon').<sup>26</sup> He also posits 'That which is above is like to that which is below', referring to the notion that the macrocosm was guided by the same principles as the microcosm.<sup>27</sup> In late antiquity, the planets were used as *Decknamen* ('cover-names') for the metals. In the Middle Ages, however, the alchemists took it a step further, with the seven planets corresponding to the seven known terrestrial metals (i.e. Gold became the Sun, Silver was the Moon, etc.).<sup>28</sup> Hermes's views on alchemy influence all the poems examined in this dissertation, particularly Chaucer and Gower's depiction of the *Decknamen* in their sections as well as the bird of Hermes (named after Hermes) in the alchemical *The Churl and the Bird* in Chapter 5.

Zosimos of Panopolis, who lived in the late third and early fourth centuries A.D. and exemplified the active engagement with alchemy in Alexandria at the time, is also a key

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<sup>23</sup> Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 9 and 27. The earliest of his writings, which Principe argues stems from pseudo-epigraphical Arabic works, appears in the fourth century A.D. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>25</sup> Linden reprints it in *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> Newman, 'Medieval Alchemy', in *The Cambridge History of Science Vol. 2: Mediaeval Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Michael H. Shank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 385-403, at p. 389.



influence for Chaucer and Gower's depictions of alchemy.<sup>29</sup> According to Holmyard, Zosimos wrote 28 alchemical treatises during his lifetime, and countless more were attributed to him.<sup>30</sup> He also described and constructed alchemical apparatuses and established a commitment to secrecy. His treatise *Visions* exemplifies the 'dense allegory, enigmatic expression, and obscure symbolism' that would become conventional for alchemical treatises in the medieval world.<sup>31</sup> He believed that his alchemical gold was superior to ordinary gold, and this mimetic gold could impart its yellowness to other ordinary forms of gold, thus 'multiplying' them.<sup>32</sup> This idea of alchemical gold 'multiplication' became a convention for alchemical practice in late medieval England, as seen in Gower and Chaucer's comments on alchemy, for example.<sup>33</sup> For medieval alchemists, classical alchemists such as Zosimos and Hermes established what alchemy *should* be and were seen as successful in their art.

Zosimos also attributes the water bath, or *bain marie* (i.e. a double boiler), which was used in alchemical experimentation, to a female alchemist named Mary the Jewess, of whom little is known. In *On Furnaces and Apparatuses* (a treatise attributed to her), she describes making numerous apparatuses out of glass, metal, clay, and using them to facilitate her alchemical experiments, notably distilling and sublimating various metals such as mercury.<sup>34</sup> Mary the Jewess's technological innovations greatly influenced the English alchemists of the Middle Ages and early modern period.<sup>35</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 4, Chaucer satirises the alchemists who use similar apparatuses in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.

## Medieval Alchemy in the Arabic World

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<sup>29</sup> Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> Holmyard, *Alchemy*, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 50. See also F. Sherwood Taylor, 'The Visions of Zosimos', *Ambix*, 1.1 (1937), 88-92.

<sup>32</sup> Read, *Prelude to Alchemy*, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Linden suggests that though Zosimos may have had practical alchemical experience in laboratories, he believed that the primary goal of alchemy was 'purificatory and contemplative'. See Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Brock, *The History of Chemistry*, p. 15-6.

<sup>35</sup> Brock, *The History of Chemistry*, p. 16.

Before reaching medieval England, alchemy was filtered through the Islamic world, where it underwent further additions and changes which would affect its understanding in the West. Principe identifies Egypt as a centre for the transmission of alchemy from the Greek world to the Arabic world.<sup>36</sup> In the Islamic world, alchemy was read, practised, and further developed as a medieval science. The Qur'an provided a metaphysical foundation for alchemy, and Arabic philosophers connected these beliefs to Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>37</sup> The reception of alchemy and Aristotle, transmitted through the methodologies and commentaries of the Arabic philosophers, also threatened the orthodox beliefs of Christendom, and due to the nature of its practice, clerical writers often considered alchemy as magic.<sup>38</sup>

All of the poems discussed in this dissertation show an understanding of the Mercury-Sulphur theory, which was proposed by Abu Musa Jabir ibn-Hayyan (c. 721-815), a Persian alchemist. His name was attached to numerous alchemical treatises in the Arabic world and in Western Europe. Jabir popularised the use of alchemical secrets in his *Book of Clarification*.<sup>39</sup> Rather than convey individual ideas in a single text, he separated his ideas into different texts, distributing them piecemeal in order to preserve the secrets of his art.<sup>40</sup> Late medieval alchemists such as Roger Bacon followed this tradition, but the issue with secrecy was that the terminology could become so esoteric that the recipe would be impossible to understand.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> He also cites the Hermetic writings as Greco-Egyptian in origin. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam and Science* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002), p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> See Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 1, pp. 193-99.

<sup>39</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 35. Newman further identifies Jabir with the prolific, much imitated, and widely received Arabic writer Geber, whom Gower mentions by name. See Newman, 'New Light on the Identity of Geber', *Sudhoffs Archiv für die Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften*, 69 (1985), 76-90.

<sup>40</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Bacon, *Epistola de Secretis Operibus Artis et Naturae, et de Nullitate Magiae*, trans. John Dee (London: Simon Miller, 1659). While the authorship of the treatise has been disputed, Newman confirms that Bacon actually wrote it, citing the parallels between the ideas presented in the treatise and in Bacon's *Opus minus*. See Newman, 'An Overview of Roger Bacon's Alchemy' in *Roger Bacon and the Sciences*, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 317-36, at p. 328. For more on his thoughts on alchemy, see also Bacon, *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*, ed. John Henry Bridges, 2 vols. (London: William and Norgate, 1900), vol. 1, pp. 214-15; and Newman, 'The Philosopher's Egg: Theory and Practice in the Alchemy of Roger Bacon', *Micrologus*, 3 (1995), 75-101. In his discussion of theories to prolong life, Bacon articulates that the challenge of alchemy and prolonging one's life is not merely transmutation of metals, but to 'promote gold in its highest degree of perfection'. See also Bacon, *The Opus Majus*, vol. 1, lciiii.

Jabir also proposed the influential Mercury-Sulphur theory, which became popular in the Latin Western tradition.<sup>42</sup> Jabir describes the Mercury-Sulphur theory in his book, drawing upon Aristotle's laws of the exhalations to support it: different exhalations such as dry and smoky or wet and steamy could produce stones or minerals from the earth, thus justifying alchemical practice.<sup>43</sup> Gold results from the chemical union of the two principles Mercury and Sulphur when they are mixed in exact proportions.<sup>44</sup> Bucklow comments that Mercury and Sulphur are principles rather than the lower case mercury and sulphur, which are elements.<sup>45</sup> This theory endured until the eighteenth century, and remained popular among medieval alchemists because it presented observable phenomena as evidence.<sup>46</sup>

In the thirteenth century, a supposed author appeared in numerous treatises following the Jabirian *corpus* under the Latinised name 'Geber'.<sup>47</sup> Paul of Taranto accumulated much of the Arabic knowledge of alchemy and his treatise circulated widely in the thirteenth century among English alchemists; he likely used Jabir's name due to his alchemical authority.<sup>48</sup> Paul wrote his *Theoretica et practica* on alchemy, following Jabir's Mercury-Sulphur theory and using observations and explanations to support his view that alchemy was rational. While other

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<sup>42</sup> Gower comments 'to the rede and to the whyte', referring to Sulphur and Mercury. See Gower, *Confessio amantis*, in *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, 2 vols., EETS ES 81 (1899-1902), vol. 1, IV.2571. Principe traces the origins of the mention of the 'red and white' in alchemical treatises to Ibn al-Faq al-Hamadani, who describes the Caliph of al-Mansur's visit to the Byzantine Emperor in 754-5. During the visit, the emperor revealed storehouses filled with bags of red and white powder. In order to demonstrate the power of these powders, he melted down lead and cast white powder into the mixture, and the lead became silver. To create gold, he mixed red powder with melted copper, transmuting the base substance into gold. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> While Jabir follows Aristotelian philosophy with the proposition of his Mercury-Sulphur theory, Principe argues that Aristotle was an indirect source for him, and he was most likely drawing from Balinus's ninth-century source *Book of the Secrets of Creation*. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint*, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> For example, when iron and copper are powdered and burned in fire, they emit a sulphur-like odour, which suggests a sulphuric component. As well, tin and lead can easily melt and their malleability when melted suggests mercurial properties. These observations helped the Mercury-Sulphur theory endure in medieval alchemy. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 36.

<sup>47</sup> Newman recently identified 'Geber' as a Franciscan friar named Paul of Taranto. See Newman, 'Technological and Alchemical Debate in the Late Middle Ages', *Isis*, 80.3 (1989), 423-45, at pp. 433-4. Cf. Newman, 'New Light on the Identity of Geber', pp. 76-90.

<sup>48</sup> Brock, *The History of Chemistry*, p. 18. Brock notes that this caused great confusion for scholars of the twentieth century, who had trouble differentiating Jabir from Geber.

*Theoretica et practica* treatises focussed on mathematics and astronomy, Paul's version was unique because it focussed on alchemy.<sup>49</sup> Under the Geber name, however, he wrote his most famous work, the *Summa perfectionis* (*The Sum of Perfection*), which was immensely popular through the Middle Ages and until the seventeenth century as a comprehensive text on alchemy.<sup>50</sup> Geber's *Summa* presents a favourable view of alchemy, and includes information about metals and minerals, experimental techniques and practices, and purification of the metals, which helped to test the purity of the resulting transmuted metals.<sup>51</sup> Gower cites pseudo-Geber as one of the successful ancient alchemists in the *Confessio amantis*, and tracts and treatises attributed to him appear in numerous fourteenth- and fifteenth-century alchemical compendiums, including Harley MS 2407, which I examine in Chapter 5.

The famous Persian Avicenna's views on alchemy were also very important for the depiction of alchemy in late medieval English poetry. Gower notably cites the famous Persian scientist Avicenna as a successful alchemist. Ironically, however, Avicenna was sceptical of alchemical success:

As to the claims of the alchemists, it must be clearly understood that it is not in their power to bring about any true change of species. They can, however, produce excellent imitations...Yet in these [dyed metals] the essential nature remains unchanged; they are merely so dominated by induced qualities that errors may be made concerning them [...]<sup>52</sup>

For Avicenna, alchemists could change the colour of the metals and produce a worthy imitation, but this did not change the species or essence of the metal. His anti-alchemical views led to a reassessment of the relationship between art and nature, and later writers used his views in challenging alchemy as a practice into the English late medieval period.<sup>53</sup> Chaucer's scepticism of alchemical practice also reflects Avicenna's views in this dissertation. Despite

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<sup>49</sup> Cathy Cobb, Monty L. Fetterolf, and Harold Goldwhite, *The Chemistry of Alchemy: From Dragon's Blood to Donkey Dung, How Chemistry was Forged* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2014), p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 56.

<sup>51</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Avicenna, 'On the Formation of Minerals and Metals and the Impossibility of Alchemy', in *A Source Book in Medieval Science*, ed. Edward Grant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 569-75, at p. 272.

<sup>53</sup> Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 112.

Avicenna's firm position against the possibility of alchemy (although he uses the Mercury-Sulphur theory), he was often cited alongside alchemical authorities in English alchemical texts, as evidenced in Gower's section.<sup>54</sup>

### **Alchemy Arrives in Latin Christendom**

Alchemical works were not accessible in Latin Christendom during the early Middle Ages, and it was not until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that they were transmitted from the Arabic world alongside Greek philosophy. Adelard of Bath, who tutored Henry II, was largely responsible for the rediscovery of philosophical and scientific material in the West.<sup>55</sup> He travelled to Syria, Greece, Sicily, and Toledo (one of the major centres for Islamic philosophical study) and produced prolific translations into Latin of the works he found there. In doing so, he helped introduce the lost works of Aristotle as well as Greek and Arabic treatises on astronomy, philosophy, and astrology to Western audiences in the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>56</sup> Other translators followed in his wake, with Robert of Chester introducing alchemical treatises into England in 1144.<sup>57</sup> Robert of Chester translated Morienus's alchemical treatise into the *Liber de compositione alchimie* (*Book on the Composition of Alchemy*), and thus it became the first Latin alchemical text in Western Christendom.<sup>58</sup> Robert's intention was to include alchemy in a more general study of the arts and sciences in Western Europe since it would have been unfamiliar in the twelfth century.<sup>59</sup> Hermes Trismegistus was originally credited with the authorship, which was then passed on through the Christian scholar

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<sup>54</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, 'The Alchemical Works of Stephanos of Alexandria', *Ambix*, 1.2 (1937), 116-35, at p. 95.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Haskins, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), vii.

<sup>56</sup> Richard C. Dales, *The Scientific Achievement of the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> Barbara Obrist, 'Views on History in Medieval Alchemical Writings', *Ambix*, 56:3 (2009), 226-38, at p. 229. Maxwell-Stuart comments that although Robert of Chester's text was the first alchemical treatise in the Western world, alchemy was first mentioned in a Western source c. 1050 as a 'fraudulent transmutation into gold by a Byzantine Jew named Paul'. He does not provide any further details about Paul or his source. See Maxwell-Stuart, *The Chemical Choir*, p. 55.

<sup>59</sup> Obrist, 'Views on History in Medieval Alchemical Writings', p. 229.

Adfar of Alexandria to Morienus, a Byzantine Greek practising alchemy in the mountains near Jerusalem.<sup>60</sup>

Alchemy did not have an established tradition in Latin culture, unlike astrology, magic, and medicine, and it was not considered one of the seven liberal arts.<sup>61</sup> Its proponents sought to establish it as *scientia*, that is ‘human knowledge, knowledge about the world, and knowledge [derived] from first principles’, and further tried to recognise it as a ‘legitimate branch of natural philosophical enquiry’, linking it to Aristotelian concepts of matter and form (Vincent of Beauvais describes this as ‘generatio spirituum et corporeum’).<sup>62</sup> In the thirteenth century, Vincent, a teacher and librarian in the court of Louis IX of France, listed alchemy under *artes mechanicae* as a means of giving it more veracity and authenticity. He also devotes twenty-eight chapters of his work *Speculum majus* to justifying it.<sup>63</sup>

More broadly, alchemical study within the Christian tradition focussed on the study of nature, with the rediscovered Aristotelian philosophy, which arrived in medieval England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries alongside the alchemical treatises from the Arabic world, and reconciled the occult study of alchemy with natural philosophy.<sup>64</sup> This approach to alchemy further developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly among the Franciscan Spiritualists, but it also appeared in Middle English poetry by secular poets, as I will show in the following chapters.

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<sup>60</sup> Obrist, ‘Views on History in Medieval Alchemical Writings’, p. 229. For more on this authorship, see also Lee Stavenhagen, ‘The Original Text of the Latin Morienus’, *Ambix*, 17:1 (1970), 1-44, at p. 2, and Aksel Haaning, ‘The Philosophical Nature of Early Western Alchemy: The Formative Period c. 1150-1350’, in *Art and Alchemy*, ed. Jacob Wamberg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2006), pp. 23-39, at p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> See Rampling, ‘Alchemical Traditions’, in *The Voynich Manuscript*, ed. Raymond Clemens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 45-51, at p. 46.

<sup>62</sup> Rampling, ‘Alchemical Traditions’, p. 46; and Andrew Cunningham and Roger French, *Before Science: The Invention of the Friars' Natural Philosophy* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 74. See also Félix Lecoy's edition of Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum naturale* (Paris: Champion, 1973), p. 301, quoted in Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> Will H.L. Ogrinc, ‘Western Society and Alchemy from 1200 to 1500’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 6.1 (1980), 103-32, at p. 105. Ziolkowski notes that he was an encyclopaedist and probably not an alchemist. See Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Haaning, ‘The Philosophical Nature of Early Western Alchemy’, p. 30.

One of the core debates about alchemy in the late Middle Ages centred upon whether or not transmuted metals could be perfect replicas of the original, or if they were inferior imitations of nature. In his *Physics*, Aristotle famously comments that ‘art imitates nature’, functioning as an act of representing nature, and the resulting product is called *mimesis*.<sup>65</sup> While gold production was an important part of the alchemical process, it was also important to understand how to mimic the natural process by understanding nature.<sup>66</sup>

The medieval alchemists further held an organic or ‘animistic’ view of the world.<sup>67</sup> Alchemical gold ideally formed ‘seeds’ which could be multiplied, and the purification of these ‘seeds’ through the alchemical process enabled them to germinate and multiply.<sup>68</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor clarifies this metaphor, writing that ‘Gold does not grow into gold, for a cabbage does not grow into cabbages, but into cabbage seed that will grow into cabbages’.<sup>69</sup> Petrus Bonus further comments that ‘As the egg of the hen without the seed of the male bird can never become a chicken, so common quicksilver without sulphur can never become gold’.<sup>70</sup> Petrus uses the metaphor for chicken sexual reproduction to illustrate the importance of these ‘seeds’ for gold multiplication. The ‘seeds’ further indicate that the alchemical process was a living, organic process, with Sulphur and Mercury unifying as the rooster and the hen unite to form offspring. Pseudo-Arnald of Villanova also compares this process to a foetus in the womb.<sup>71</sup> These depictions of alchemical processes would further develop in medieval England. In this dissertation, these alchemical ‘seeds’ are notably satirised in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, in

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<sup>65</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), II.2.194a21. See also Francis Wolff, ‘Three Pleasures of Mimesis According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*’, in *The Artificial and the Natural: An Evolving Polarity*, ed. Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and William R. Newman (Cambridge: MIT, 2007), pp. 52-66, at p. 58.

<sup>66</sup> Haaning, ‘The Philosophical Nature of Early Western Alchemy’, p. 30.

<sup>67</sup> Paul S. Agutter and Denys N. Wheatley, *Thinking about Life: The History and Philosophy of Biology and Other Sciences* (New York: Springer, 2009), p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, p. 138.

<sup>69</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>70</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, ed. J. Lacinius and trans. A.E. Waite (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), p. 290. I was unable to find a suitable edition of this text in the original Latin.

<sup>71</sup> Schuler, *Alchemical Poetry*, xix.

which the alchemists ruin their ‘seeds’ rather than multiply, and used for allegorical effect in the *Argument between Morien and Merlin*.

### **Clerical Attitudes and Responses to Alchemy**

Alchemical practice in medieval England was constantly challenged and debated and its merits disputed.<sup>72</sup> Pope John XXII’s decretal against alchemy in 1317, which was aimed at alchemical practises throughout Western Christendom, was arguably the most famous and influential:

all who have been found concerned in any capacity in the production of alchemical gold shall incur infamy and shall give to the poor in true gold as much as they have made of the false variety.<sup>73</sup>

The opening epigram of Pope John XXII’s treatise *De crimine falsi (On Counterfeiting)* criticises alchemists and counterfeiters for making promises that they cannot keep.<sup>74</sup> Ronald Pearsall comments that the ban on alchemy was ‘widely disregarded among those peoples who were in the process of evolving their own form of Christianity and to some alchemists the ban was not unwelcome, obliging them to pursue their activities in even greater secrecy than before’.<sup>75</sup> He observes that John XXII was not very popular in England: a ‘financial juggler who used extortion to bolster up his revenues, he was particularly disliked in England’.<sup>76</sup> This may help to explain why alchemy was still practised in England despite the decretal. In fourteenth and fifteenth-century England, interest in the possibilities of transmutation

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<sup>72</sup> Wilfred Theisen argues that the explicit reasons for opposing alchemy boil down to fraudulence, its potentially demonic agency, it was expensive, and it was unhealthy. See Theisen, ‘The Attraction of Alchemy for Monks and Friars in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Centuries’, *American Benedictine Review*, 43.3 (1995), 239-53, at p. 250.

<sup>73</sup> Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 3, pp. 31-2. Thorndike stresses that the decretal was aimed at counterfeiters as much as alchemists, and thereby creates a link concerning economic and immoral motives between the two professions. Alchemists could be accused of both alchemy and sorcery for artificially creating gold.

<sup>74</sup> Despite this, however, Thorndike provides evidence that Pope John XXII may have actually patronised alchemy, relating an incident in 1330 where the Pope gave money to a physician Gufre Isnard, Bishop of Cavaillon, for an alembic to make *aqua ardens* and ‘a certain secret work’, which Thorndike interprets as an attempt to make gold or an *elixir vitae*. See Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 3, p. 34. Thorndike also mentions that several dubious alchemical treatises were attributed to him.

<sup>75</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Alchemists*, p. 65.

<sup>76</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Alchemists*, pp. 61-3.



continued to grow, and its impact on English poetry is notably reflected in Chaucer and Langland.<sup>77</sup>

Alchemy was not only challenged in the religious orders. Many English alchemists sought patronage and commissions from kings. Edward III abetted alchemy, and two alchemists named William Dalby and John le Rous appear in the *Patent Rolls* for 1329 and are credited under his patronage, although they were not successful.<sup>78</sup> There is some evidence that English kings were connected with alchemical study and practice, although this is usually related to prohibitions or decretals against alchemy. Henry IV's Statute of 1403-4 forbade the practice of alchemy in England:

It is ordained and stablished, That none 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.<sup>79</sup>

This statute led to a series of responses requesting licenses for alchemical practice.<sup>80</sup> In 1414, Henry V passed an act that banned any craft which attempted to multiply gold (i.e. alchemy).<sup>81</sup> Yet the fifteenth-century poems examined in this dissertation reveal that there was still interest in alchemy during this time.<sup>82</sup> In 1463, Henry Grey received Edward IV's permission to practice alchemy, but was not successful with his experiments.<sup>83</sup> Edward IV also granted licenses to David Beaupree and David Merchaunt, but there is no record of their experiments.<sup>84</sup> D. Geoghegan reveals that a request for a license to practice alchemy was sent to Henry VI in

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<sup>77</sup> Alchemy was also challenged in the mendicant orders. The 1272 Dominican Provincial Chapter of Narbonne addressed the concerns about friars practising alchemy. Moreover, the Chapter at Pest during the following year determined that 'no brother anywhere shall study alchemy, nor teach it, nor do any sort of work, nor keep any writings or knowledge of it'. Yet the Franciscans in particular were drawn to the study of alchemy and attempted to justify it by linking it to medicine. There were also a series of repeated bans on alchemical writing in the Dominican friaries through the fourteenth century, showing that interest in alchemy was still enduring. For more on the reception of alchemy among the late medieval friars, see Angela Montford, *Health, Sickness, Medicine and the Friars in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 205, 209-10.

<sup>78</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Alchemists*, p. 65. See also F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 123.

<sup>79</sup> See *The Statutes of the Realm*, ed. A. Luders et al. (London, 1816), quoted in D. Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy', *Ambix*, 10.1 (1957), 10-7, at p. 10 n.1.

<sup>80</sup> Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy', p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Alchemists*, p. 65.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Anthony Gross, *The Dissolution of the Lancastrian Kingship: Sir John Fortescue and the Crisis of Monarchy in Fifteenth-Century England* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Alchemists*, p. 73.

<sup>84</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Alchemists*, p. 73.

1456, but only three of the practitioners were granted the license (John Fauceby, John Kyrkeby, and John Rayny).<sup>85</sup> In their petition, the writers appeal to the medicinal values of the Philosopher's Stone and alchemy:

[...] cuius medicine virtus tam efficax et admirabilis existeret quod per eam quecunque infirmitates curabiles curarentur faciliter, vita humana ad suum naturalem prorogaretur terminum, et homo in sanitate et viribus naturalibus tam corporis quam anime, fortitudine membrorum, memorie claritate et *ingenij* viuacitate ad eundem terminum mirabiliter preservaretur, quecunque eciam vulnera curabilia sine difficultate sanarentur que insuper contra omne genus venenorum foret summa et optima medicina. Sed et plura alia comoda nobis et rei publice regni nostri utilissima per eandem fieri possent veluti metallorum transmutationes in verissimum aurum et finissimum argentum, nos frequenter meditacione multa revolvimus quam delectabile et quam utile tam pro nobis quam pro regni nostri Re Publica foret si huiusmodi medicine preciose diuina fauente gracia per labores haberentur virorum doctorum [...]<sup>86</sup>

[[...] a medicine whose virtue would be so efficacious and admirable that all curable infirmities would be easily cured by it; human life would be prolonged to its natural term, and man would be marvellously sustained unto the same term in health and natural virility of body and mind, in strength of limb, clearness of memory, and keenness of intellect; moreover, whosoever had curable wounds would be healed without difficulty; and it would also be the best and most perfect medicine against all kinds of poisons. But also many other benefits, most useful to us and the well-being of our kingdom, could result from the same, such as the transmutation of metals into true gold and very fine silver; and we, by much frequent cogitation, have considered how delectable and useful it would be, both for ourselves and the well-being of the kingdom, if precious medicines of this kind were had, with God's grace, by the labours of learned men [...]]<sup>87</sup>

The petitioners hype up the possibilities of alchemy to gain the king's favour, but they also point out the virtuous and medicinal aims of the practice, notably the impact of full-scale transmutation of base metals into gold and its consequences for the economy of the kingdom. Moreover, they stress that they are operating lawfully and ethically, and thus opposing the fraudulence that the Statute sought to prohibit. These views are comparable to those expressed by the poets discussed in Chapter 6 of this dissertation. Coincidentally, the fifteenth-century alchemist Thomas Norton mentions one of the petitioning alchemists, Gilbert Kymer, in his

*Ordinal of Alchemy*:

*Gilbert Kymer* wrote after his devise,  
Of 17 Proportions, but thei maie not suffice  
In this Science, which he coude never finde;  
And yet in Phisick he had a nobil minde.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy', p. 10. Geoghegan also comments that the petitioners stressed that they were 'most learned in natural sciences', which I suggest was likely an attempt to present alchemy as a legitimate and natural study. See Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy', p. 13.

<sup>86</sup> Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy', p. 15.

<sup>87</sup> Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy', pp. 15-6.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Norton, *Thomas Norton's Ordinal of Alchemy*, ed. John Reidy, EETS OS 272 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), V.1559, p. 50. See also Gilbert Kymer's entry in *Medical Practitioners in Medieval*

Norton must have been familiar with Kymer's alchemical practices to make this comment.<sup>89</sup> As I will later discuss, the alchemical roles of Ripley and Norton during the late fifteenth century are also worth considering. Despite the possibility of acquiring licenses to practise alchemy, many English alchemists still tried to practise their craft outside the law. Henry VI responded to this in 1452 by appointing three commissioners to arrest anyone who multiplied metals.<sup>90</sup> While alchemists were still interested in practising and indeed members of the court were interested in alchemical practice, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the late medieval English kings were genuinely interested in alchemy.

### **Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas**

Alongside classical and Arabic sources, medieval English alchemical writers were also influenced by European continental sources. The views of the thirteenth-century German Dominican friar and theologian Albertus Magnus, and to some extent his pupil Thomas Aquinas, greatly influenced English alchemical thought, and his alchemical reception in particular is central for understanding his role in Chapter 6 of this dissertation. Albertus Magnus was nicknamed *Doctor Mirabilis*; he was *the* scientist of his day, and his comments on alchemy as well as geology and mineralogy were crucial for late medieval English alchemy.<sup>91</sup> In *De mineralibus*, Albertus comments: 'For at one time I became a wanderer,

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*England: A Biographical Register*, ed. C.H. Talbot and E.A. Hammond (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1965), pp. 60-3.

<sup>89</sup> Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy', p. 12.

<sup>90</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 126.

<sup>91</sup> Pearl Kibre comments that while numerous alchemical treatises were attributed to him after his death, there is no evidence that Albertus participated in laboratory procedures. Dorothy Wyckhoff argues, however, that Albertus conducted his own field work, notably observing ore deposits and commenting on the nature of their formation as well as visiting mines and mining districts to observe cupellation and extraction techniques. See Pearl Kibre, 'Albertus Magnus on Alchemy,' in *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays 1980*, ed. James A. Weisheipl (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980), pp. 187-202, at p. 196; and Wyckhoff, 'Albertus Magnus on Ore Deposits', pp. 109-110. Cf. two other essays in the anthology: John M. Riddle and James A. Mulholland, 'Albertus Magnus on Stones and Minerals', pp. 203-34; and Nadine F. George, 'Albertus Magnus and Chemical Technology in a Time of Transition', pp. 235-62.

making long journeys to mining districts, so that I could learn by observation the nature of materials'.<sup>92</sup> He further comments on alchemy:

And for the same reason I have inquired into the transmutations of metals in alchemy so as to learn from this, too, something of their nature and accidental properties. For this is the best and surest method of investigation because then each thing is understood with reference to its own particular cause, and there is very little doubt about its accidental properties.<sup>93</sup>

If his testimony is to be believed, then, he was probably acquainted with alchemy to some degree, even if he did not practise it. Albertus likely believed in the possibility of the transmutation of metals, yet he also recognised that many alchemists were imposters and swindlers.<sup>94</sup> Albertus also comments that alchemists 'hide their meanings behind metaphors, which was never the practice of philosophers'.<sup>95</sup> He was also well acquainted with Latin translations of Arabic alchemical texts. The real Albertus follows Avicenna's alchemical theory, namely that 'alchemists cannot change the species, but metals are coloured to look like gold', as well as his own observations based upon Aristotelian metaphysics.<sup>96</sup> Albertus is not only interested in the philosophy of alchemical practice, but also its practical and experimental aspects, and this is reflected in the pseudo-epigraphic material which was later ascribed to him.<sup>97</sup>

In the pseudo-Albertan tradition, the *Semita recta de Alchimia* (*The Right Path of Alchemy*) or *Libellus de Alchimia* was perhaps most renowned in the medieval world for its alleged alchemical views. It can be traced back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (and continues into the seventeenth century), where it appears in the pseudo-Albertan tradition in more than one hundred manuscripts.<sup>98</sup> The Latin *Semita recta* focusses on alchemical dyes,

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<sup>92</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Wyckhoff (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), III.i, p. 153. I was unable to find a suitable edition of this text in the original Latin.

<sup>93</sup> Albertus, *Book of Minerals*, ed. Wyckhoff, III.i.1, p. 153.

<sup>94</sup> J.R. Partington, 'Albertus Magnus on Alchemy', *Ambix*, 1.1 (1937), 3-20, at p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> Lee Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances: Form and History in the Canterbury Tales* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 169.

<sup>96</sup> Partington, 'Albertus Magnus on Alchemy', p. 13. Cf. John A. Norris, 'The Mineral Exaltation Theory of Metallogenesis in Pre-Modern Mineral Science', *Ambix*, 53.1 (2006), 43-65, at p. 43.

<sup>97</sup> Kibre, 'Alchemical Writings Ascribed to Albertus Magnus', *Speculum*, 17.4 (1942), 499-518, p. 196.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Grund, "'ffor to make Azure as Albert bides": Medieval English Alchemical Writings in the Pseudo-Albertan Tradition,' *Ambix*, 53.1 (2006), 21-42, at p. 25. For more on the *Semita recta* tradition, see also Grund,

chemicals, and minerals.<sup>99</sup> Unlike his stance in *De mineralibus*, in the *Libellus de alchimia* he claims that alchemical transmutation is possible and true. He also instructs his readers on the means of attaining alchemical success:

Now, in this little work of mine, I shall describe for you, briefly and simply, how you should undertake the practice of such a great art. I shall first point out, however, all the deviations, errors, and stumbling blocks of this art, into which many and, [indeed], nearly all [are inclined to] fall.<sup>100</sup>

He then details not only the steps involved in alchemical success, but also the proportions and quantity of the vessels and furnaces that are necessary for the job.<sup>101</sup> In the *Semita recta*, pseudo-Albertus makes the case that alchemy is true and it works, thus validating alchemical experimentation: ‘it is also possible, through this art, to bring about a new body, since all species of metals are produced in the earth from a commixture of sulphur and quicksilver’.<sup>102</sup> Despite the unlikelihood of Albertus’s actual alchemical practice, his comments on alchemy, both authentic and non-authentic, help to establish him as an authority for medieval alchemists. His philosophical approach to alchemy also helped to promote it as a philosophical art. As I show in the final chapter of this dissertation, pseudo-Albertus’s alchemical views also find new life in a fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical dialogue between him and the Queen of Elves.

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‘Textual Alchemy: The Transformation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s *Semita Recta* into the Mirror of Lights’, *Ambix*, 56.3 (2009), 202–225, at pp. 202–4. He further argues that the *Semita recta* first appears in the thirteenth century, but it is not authentic. Kibre traces it back to the fourteenth century, although she points out that only the earliest surviving copies are from the fifteenth century. See Kibre, ‘The *Alkimia Minor* Ascribed to Albertus Magnus’, *Isis*, 32.2 (1940), 267–300, at pp. 267–8.

<sup>99</sup> David J. Collins argues that the *Semita recta* contradicts Albertus’s arguments in *De mineralibus*, which suggests that it is a pseudo-Albertus text rather than an authentic one. See Collins, ‘Albertus, Magnus or Magus? Magic, Natural Philosophy, and Religious Reform in the Late Middle Ages’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 63.1 (2010), 1–44, at p. 15. Marguerite Matheson Halversen suggests that the author is John of Rupescissa due to the treatise’s internal references, such as the author being in prison, which seems plausible. See Halversen, ‘“The Consideration of Quintessence”: An Edition of a Middle English Translation of John of Rupescissa’s *Liber de Consideratione de Quintae Essentiae Omnium Rerum* with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary’, Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1998, p. 85. Cf. Robert Multhauf, ‘John of Rupescissa and the Origin of Medical Chemistry’, *Isis*, 45 (1954), 359–67.

<sup>100</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Libellus de alchimia*, trans. Virginia Heines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 5. I was unable to find a suitable edition of this text in the original Latin.

<sup>101</sup> Pseudo-Albertus, *Libellus de alchimia*, pp. 14–8.

<sup>102</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Libellus de alchimia*, in *A Source Book in Medieval Science*, ed. Edward Grant, pp. 586–601, at p. 588.

While Thomas Aquinas was not as renowned in the alchemical world as his teacher, he was still instrumental in the reception of alchemy in medieval England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>103</sup> In the *Summa theologica*, he argues that alchemical transmutation is possible, albeit extremely difficult:

[...] aurum et argentum non solum cara sunt propter utilitalem vasorum quae ex eis fabricantur, autaliorum hujus modi, sed etiam propter dignitatem et puritatem substantiae ipsorum. Et ideo si aurum vel argentum ab alchimis factum veram speciem non habeat auri et argenti, est fraudulenta et injusta venditio, praesertim cumsint aliquae utilitates auri et argenti veri, secundum naturalem operationem ipsorum, quae non convenient auro per alchimiam sophisticato; sicut quod habet proprietatem laetificandi, et contra quasdam infirmitates medicinaliter juvat; frequentius etiam potest poni in operatione, et diutius in sua puritate permanet aurum verum quam aurum sophisticatum. Si autem per alchimiam fieret aurum verum, non esset illicitum ipsum pro vero vendere [...]<sup>104</sup>

[Gold and silver are costly not only on account of the usefulness of the vessels and other things made from them, but also on account of the excellence and purity of their substance. Hence if the gold or silver produced by alchemists has not the true specific nature of gold and silver, the sale thereof is fraudulent and unjust, especially as real gold and silver can produce certain results by their natural action, which the counterfeit gold and silver of alchemists cannot produce. Thus the true metal has the property of making people joyful, and is helpful medicinally against certain maladies. Moreover, real gold can be employed more frequently, and lasts longer in its condition of purity than counterfeit gold. If however real gold were to be produced by alchemy, it would not be unlawful to sell it for the genuine article [...]]<sup>105</sup>

While Aquinas appears ambivalent about alchemy, particularly the authenticity and selling of alchemical gold and silver, he does suggest that it could work. Like the decretals against alchemy, Thomas's moral concern with alchemy is aimed at the fraudulent, namely the counterfeiters. Thomas discusses whether the sale of alchemical gold or silver is deceptive or not, and he concludes that it is only fraudulent if it is sold with the promise of having natural properties. Chaucer similarly explores alchemical fraudulence in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

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<sup>103</sup> Ogrinc cites the *Aurora consurgens*, which is comprised of quotes from various alchemical authors and Biblical quotes interpreted alchemically, as the most important of the alchemical treatises attributed to him. See Ogrinc, 'Western Society and Alchemy from 1200 to 1500', p. 105.

<sup>104</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, ed. C.J. Drioux et al., 8 vols. (Barri-Ducis, Ludovicus Gueri, 1869), IV, Q.77, Art. 2, Pt. II-II, pp. 528-9.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947-8), vol. 2, Q.77 Art. 2, Pt. II-II, p. 1515. See also Ogrinc, 'Western Society and Alchemy from 1200 to 1500', p. 105, and Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint*, p. 106.

## Alchemy and Christianity

While the majority of the alchemical poems and texts looked at in this dissertation are secular, it is important to briefly discuss the relationship between Christianity and alchemy, particularly how the goals of alchemy were interpreted in religious terms. While Matus argues that the ‘religious turn’ of alchemy did not occur until the fourteenth century, with the influx of alchemical writers such as John of Rupescissa, pseudo-Ramon Llull, and Petrus Bonus, other writers such as the English Franciscan friar Roger Bacon were writing about alchemy in religious terms in the thirteenth century.<sup>106</sup>

Roger Bacon compares the Christian notion of the resurrected body to the alchemical *elixir vitae* in his *Opus minus*, *Opus tertium*, and *Liber sex scientiarum*.<sup>107</sup> True to his Spiritualist Franciscan perspective (alongside John of Rupescissa), he believed that the Church needed scientific and technological knowledge to help to fight the coming Antichrist.<sup>108</sup> I suggest that Bacon’s alchemy reveals the growing interest in alchemical practice and its potential for allegory in medieval England.<sup>109</sup> In the *Opus tertium*, he argues that alchemy teaches men

facere metalla nobilea, et colores, et alia multa melius et copiosius per artificium, quam per naturam fiant. Et hujusmodi scientia est major omnibus praecedentibus, quia majores utilitates producit. Nam non solum expensas et alia infinita reipublicae potest dare, sunt prolongare in multa tempora, ad quae per naturam produci potest.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Zachary A. Matus, ‘Resurrected Bodies and Roger Bacon’s Elixir’, *Ambix*, 60.4 (2013), 323-40, at p. 324m and more recently Matus, *Franciscans and the Elixir of Life: Religion and Science in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Cf. Andrea de Pascalis, *Alchemy: The Golden Art*, pp. 57-9. Moreover, the ancients that the alchemists refer to were often biblical figures, particularly Adam or Moses. Vincent of Beauvais, for example, views Adam as the first teacher of alchemy, and the longevity of Adam and other characters in the Bible as due to the Philosopher’s Stone. See Raphael Patai, ‘Biblical Figures as Alchemists’, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 54 (1983), 195-229, at pp. 197-8; and Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). Obrist comments that the alchemical figure of Adam has the role of ‘ensuring unity, in this case of knowledge, while the relationship between this figure and its offspring, or disciples, is one of genus and species’. See Obrist, ‘Views on History in Medieval Alchemical Writings’, pp. 230-1.

<sup>107</sup> Matus, ‘Resurrected Bodies and Roger Bacon’s Elixir’, pp. 324-5.

<sup>108</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 63-4. The Spiritualist Franciscans emerged as a response to what they saw as the increasing institutionalisation of the Franciscan Order and embraced extreme poverty. They also believed that the Antichrist would soon appear and that the Apocalypse was coming.

<sup>109</sup> For an alternate view of Bacon’s alchemy, see Edmund Brehm, ‘Roger Bacon’s Place in the History of Alchemy’, *Ambix*, 23.1 (1976), 53-8, at p. 53.

<sup>110</sup> Roger Bacon, *Opus tertium*, in *Opera quaedam hactenus inedita*, ed. J.S. Brewer (London, 1859), I.xii, p. 40.

[how to make noble metals, and colours, and many other things better and more copiously by art than by nature. And this science is more important than all that have preceded it because it is productive of more advantage. It not only provides money and infinite other things for the State, but teaches the discovery of such things as how to prolong human life as far as nature allows it to be prolonged.]<sup>111</sup>

Bacon connects alchemy to natural philosophy, presenting it as a licit science which operates within the range of nature and benefits the State. In the *Opus minus*, he describes his recipe for the *elixir vitae*:

Prius est pulverisatio cum congelatione, et incarceratione, et mixtione. Et postea est sublimatio cum attritione et mortificatione, deinde sequitur corruptio olei, vel separatur a spiritu, ut post intendatur virtus ignea. Nam post haec intendimus calcis propositionem, et olei distillationem, et aquae exaltationem, ut ultimo quaeramus resolutionem a primo in septimum, et contentionem cum febre acuta. Qui vero haec sciret adimplere haberet medicinam perfectam, quam philosophi vocant *Elixir*, quae immergit se in liquefacto, ut consumeretur ab igne, nec fugeret.<sup>112</sup>

[First there is pulverization, then solidification, then solution with ascension and depression [distillation], and a melting and mixing together. And afterwards there is sublimation with attrition and mortification; then follows the corruption of the oil, that is, it is separated from spirit so that afterwards the fiery power may be increased. After this, we consider the ‘proposition of lime’, the distillation of oil, and the evaporation of water, so that we may finally obtain the solution from the first [metal] into the seventh, and a contention with acute fever. Truly, whoever knows how to do these things would have the perfect medicine, which the philosophers call the Elixir, which immerses itself in the liquifaction as it is consumed by the fire and does not flee [evaporate].]<sup>113</sup>

While Bacon does use generic alchemical processes to describe his recipe, it is representative of the theoretical aspects of alchemy of the time rather than practical alchemy, or as Read notes, ‘redolent of the lamp rather than the laboratory’.<sup>114</sup> Bacon further distinguished alchemy as either speculative or practical in order to differentiate theory and practice.<sup>115</sup> In his view, speculative alchemy focussed on the breakdown of substances into elements and how the combination of elements formed substances, whereas practical alchemy was concerned with the practical operations of transmuting base metals into gold and prolonging life by means of the *elixir vitae*.<sup>116</sup> Bacon’s writing reveals the English attempts to interpret alchemy as licit *scientia* or knowledge, and further recognises alchemy as an integral part of the medieval

<sup>111</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, pp. 97-8.

<sup>112</sup> Roger Bacon, *Opus minus*, in *Opera quaedam hactenus inedita*, p. 314.

<sup>113</sup> Brehm, ‘Roger Bacon’s Place in the History of Alchemy’, pp. 53-4.

<sup>114</sup> Read, *Prelude to Chemistry*, p. 43. See also Brehm, ‘Roger Bacon’s Place in the History of Alchemy’, p. 54.

<sup>115</sup> De Pascalis, *Alchemy: The Golden Art*, p. 67.

<sup>116</sup> Brian Clegg, *The First Scientist: A Life of Roger Bacon* (London: Plantagenet Press, 2001), p. 128.



scientific framework.<sup>117</sup> These views are comparable to the more positive interpretations of alchemy in the fifteenth-century dialogues examined in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Robert Grosseteste, another thirteenth-century English Franciscan and bishop of Lincoln, also provides a more positive depiction of late medieval English alchemy. He suggests an Aristotelian understanding of the alchemical connection between the microcosm and macrocosm, with the Stone representing both terrestrial and cosmic.<sup>118</sup> He follows the Mercury-Sulphur theory and describes the making of the Philosopher's Stone, which requires eighteen hours to produce, and is capable of transmuting base metals into gold. According to Grosseteste, alchemical gold can be perfected through experimentation to match the perfection of the gold found in mines. This can be accomplished by following the astronomical positions of the seven planets, which correspond to the terrestrial alchemical techniques, and thus purify the substance in preparation of the elixir.<sup>119</sup>

John of Rupescissa (Jean de Roquetaillade), born in 1310 in Toulouse, was another practising Spiritual Franciscan who was interested in alchemy, and moreover continued to characterise the emerging style of linking alchemy with religious imagery.<sup>120</sup> On the value of alchemy, John comments:

Consideravi tribulationes electorum in Sacrosancto Evangelio prophetatas a Christo, maxime tribulationes pre tempore. Antichristi, instare in annis in quibus est unio sub Sacrosancta Romana Ecclesia non dubium plurimum affligenda et ad montes fugienda et certe per tyrannos omnibus diviciis temporalibus expolianda in brevi; sed licet iactetur fluctibus Petri navicula, liberanda tamen est in fine tribulacione dierum et generalis domina remanebit. Quapropter, ad solvendam gravem inopiam et paupertatem futuram populi sancti et electi Dei cui datum est noscere misterium veritatis, sine parabolis Lapidem Philosophorum maxime ad album et ad rubeum volo summatim dicere et impresentiarum clarissime revelabo [...]<sup>121</sup>

[I have considered the tribulations of the elect prophesied by Christ in the Holy Gospel, most of all the tribulations before the time of Antichrist, impending in the years in which the union under the Holy Roman church must no doubt be most afflicted and must flee to the mountains and must certainly be plundered of all

<sup>117</sup> Clegg, *The First Scientist*, p. 129.

<sup>118</sup> Haaning, 'The Philosophical Nature of Early Western Alchemy', p. 31. See also James McEvoy, *The Philosophy of Robert Grosseteste* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 180-88, 15.

<sup>119</sup> See Robert Grosseteste (forthcoming), *On the Liberal Arts*, ed. and trans. Giles Gasper et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), §11-2.

<sup>120</sup> Matus comments that John of Rupescissa exemplifies 'Christian metaphor becoming more than simple analogy'. See Matus, 'Alchemy and Christianity in the Middle Ages', *History Compass*, 10.12 (2012), 934-45, at p. 937.

<sup>121</sup> John of Rupescissa, *Liber lucis*, in *Il libro della luca*, ed. Andrea Aromatico (Marsilio: Editori, 1997), 19r, p. 121.

temporal riches by tyrants in a short time. The little ship of Peter may be rocked by the rivers, but it will nevertheless be freed in the final days of tribulation and remain the general master. Wherefore, to solve the serious need and future poverty of the holy people and elect of God to whom it is given to know the mystery of the truth, without obfuscation, most of all the red and white Philosophers' stone, I wish to say that I will reveal them concisely and clearly at this time.]<sup>122</sup>

John believed that the Antichrist was coming, and that alchemy was the means to redeeming humankind after the Apocalypse.<sup>123</sup> From 1344, he was repeatedly sent to prison for his unorthodox beliefs and practices.<sup>124</sup> John of Rupescissa identifies the 'quintessence', an alcohol-based remedy, as the alchemical source for prolonging life, and moreover equates it with Aristotle's fifth element, that is ether.<sup>125</sup> This fifth element is naturally incorruptible and passes on its incorruptibility to anything it touches.<sup>126</sup> He further comments on this mysterious substance (the quintessence): 'how þat olde euangelik men, and feble in kynde, myzte be restorid, and haue azen her firste strenkþis of zongþe in þe same degree þat is in al kynde, and be mad hool parfiztly' before describing how to make it.<sup>127</sup> Alchemy is believed to solve the fundamental human problems of decay and death, functioning as a remedy to natural problems. Like Roger Bacon's elixir, John's quintessence also has medicinal properties, with the ability to cure human disease and counteract aging.<sup>128</sup> While John of Rupescissa did not practice alchemy, his aim was to determine philosophical truth for his readers, and this alchemical view, particularly joined with Christian understanding, was widely circulated among late medieval

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<sup>122</sup> John of Rupescissa, in Leah DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. DeVun (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 57-8. See also John of Rupescissa, *The Booke of Quinte Essence*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, OS 16 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1866).

<sup>123</sup> DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, p. 10. For more on his apocalyptic views, see Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, pp. 63ff.

<sup>124</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 63.

<sup>125</sup> DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, p. 64. For more on the quintessence, see Newman, 'Medieval Alchemy', pp. 399-400.

<sup>126</sup> DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, p. 66.

<sup>127</sup> John of Rupescissa, *The Booke of Quinte Essence*, I, p. 1. Cf. John of Rupescissa, *Liber de consideratione quinte essentie omnium rerum* (Basel, 1561), p. 14, quoted in DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, p. 65

<sup>128</sup> DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, p. 66.

alchemists.<sup>129</sup> John of Rupescissa's approach also extended alchemy into medicinal territory as well.<sup>130</sup>

Petrus Bonus also recognises the theme of alchemy in the history of salvation. In arguably his most famous alchemical treatise *Margarita pretiosa novella* (*The New Pearl of Great Price*), which he wrote in 1330, where he argues that the ancient knowledge of alchemy and use of the Philosopher's Stone enabled the prediction of the virgin birth of Christ.<sup>131</sup> He compares the *elixir vitae* to

things heavenly, earthly, and infernal [...] to things corruptible and incorruptible [...] 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 male and female, to the vigorous and weak, to peace and war, white and red and all colours, to the beauty of Paradise, to the terrors of the infernal abyss.<sup>132</sup>

Petrus interprets the elixir as being part of God's creation, and while its dualities defy its specific meaning, its role is fundamental in nature and Christian thought.<sup>133</sup> Petrus also shows how alchemy can be viewed as one of the sciences and as a branch of natural philosophy since it involves 'things composed of matter and undergoing change'.<sup>134</sup> The alchemical views of John of Rupescissa and Petrus Bonus are greatly influential for reading the *Argument between Morien and Merlin* in Chapter 6.

Arnald of Villanova and Ramon Lull also emerged in the fourteenth century as two influential alchemical figures who had numerous alchemical treatises to them, although it is unlikely that either of them practised alchemy.<sup>135</sup> Lull was born in Majorca between 1232 and 1236, and devoted his life to theology, philosophy, and the conversion of the Muslims.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, p. 62. Michela Pereira further comments that the *Booke of Quinte Essence* was a medieval bestseller, and it was attributed to Hermes. See Pereira, 'Alchemy and the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 74.2 (1999), 336-56, at p. 343.

<sup>130</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 69.

<sup>131</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 68

<sup>132</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, p. 194, quoted in Laurinda S. Dixon, 'Bosch's *Garden of Delights* Triptych: Remnants of a "Fossil" Science', *The Art Bulletin*, 63.1 (1981), 96-113, at p. 113.

<sup>133</sup> See also Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, pp. 83-7.

<sup>134</sup> Chiara Crisciani, 'The Conception of Alchemy as Expressed in the *Pretiosa Margarita Novella* of Petrus Bonus of Ferrara', *Ambix*, 20.3 (1977), 165-73, at pp. 167-8.

<sup>135</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, pp. 109-110

<sup>136</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 110.

Although Lull died in 1315, several alchemical treatises were attributed to him as early as 1330.<sup>137</sup> Pseudo-Lull established the doctrine of the ‘argent vive’ (philosophical Mercury) giving rising to all other things.<sup>138</sup> He also argued for the Aristotelian fifth element (the ether or quintessence), which is also reflected in John of Rupescissa’s work. For pseudo-Lull, alchemy involved the multiplication of the quintessence, and his influential doctrines appear in numerous fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English alchemical treatises.<sup>139</sup>

Pseudo-Arnald of Villanova also follows the tradition of using alchemy and religious allegory. The real Arnald of Villanova was a Catalan physician who was born in 1240 (possibly in Valencia) and died in 1311 in Genova, and as with Lull, alchemical treatises were attributed to him after his death, appearing through the fourteenth century.<sup>140</sup> John of Rupescissa acknowledges pseudo-Arnald in his treatise *De confectione lapidis philosophorum*, in which he compares the purification of alchemical substances to raising Christ upon the cross.<sup>141</sup> Like Roger Bacon and John of Rupescissa, the real Arnald was also connected to the Spiritual Franciscans, and his 1290 treatise on the coming of the Antichrist landed him in trouble with the University of Paris.<sup>142</sup> Like pseudo-Lull, pseudo-Arnald was also widely influential for English alchemists, and receives an honourable mention in Chaucer’s *Canon’s Yeoman’s*

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<sup>137</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor argues that pseudo-Lull’s most important alchemical treatise is the *Testament of Lullius*, which is divided into theoretical and practical applications of alchemy. See F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, pp. 110-2. For more on the pseudo-Lull alchemical tradition, see Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 4, pp. 1-64, and more recently Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull* (London: Warburg Institute, 1989). Thorndike devotes an entire chapter to (pseudo) Lullian alchemy.

<sup>138</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, pp. 111-2

<sup>139</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor suggests that the pseudo-Lullian works were particularly important for English alchemy because they are the ‘chief source of the school of English alchemists’. See Taylor, *The Alchemists*, pp. 112, 127.

<sup>140</sup> Principe argues that pseudo-Arnald’s treatise *Tractatus parabolicus (Metaphorical Treatise)* was the earliest alchemical treatise to link alchemy to theology. See Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 66.

<sup>141</sup> John of Rupescissa, *De confectione veri lapidis philosophorum*, in *Bibliotheca chemica curiosa*, ed. and trans. J.J. Manget, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1702), quoted in Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 68. Alexander N. Gabrovsky comments that his allegorical language greatly influenced John de Rupescissa’s own writing. See Gabrovsky, *Chaucer the Alchemist: Physics, Mutability, and the Medieval Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 73.

<sup>142</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 67

*Tale*.<sup>143</sup> Pseudo-Arnald's writing also follows the religious allegorical and alchemical tradition, comparing philosophical Mercury to the life of Christ, with the passion of the Christ analogous to the acquisition of the Stone.<sup>144</sup> In his *Tractatus*, he writes that 'Christ was the example of all things, and our elixir can be understood according to the conception, generation, and nativity of the passion of the Christ, and can be compared to Christ in regard to the sayings of the prophets'.<sup>145</sup> He further compares Christ's healing of the fallen world with the Philosopher's Stone's 'healing' of the base metals by transmuting them into gold.<sup>146</sup>

While the alchemical poems discussed in this dissertation are predominantly secular, they were also influenced by alchemical ecclesiastical writings, which were also widely read. English alchemical writers drew from continental writers such as pseudo-Arnald and pseudo-Lull for the allegorical tradition but were also influenced from alchemical writers who were closer to home, such as Roger Bacon, who not only recognised alchemy as a legitimate science, but also provided a theoretical framework for its study. The exemplary nature of these religious writings also influences the exemplary frameworks that, as I discuss, take hold in alchemical poetry in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.

### **Jean de Meun, Dante, and Early Vernacular Alchemical Poetry**

Although religious alchemical allegory exerted a great influence upon English alchemical practice, the dissemination of secular alchemy in medieval England was integral to the fourteenth-century poets that I will be discussing, particularly Chaucer and Gower. Alchemical secular writings in medieval England stemmed from the scholastic culture established by the

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<sup>143</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L.D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), VIII.1428. All references to *The Canterbury Tales* refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.

<sup>144</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 67.

<sup>145</sup> Pseudo-Arnald of Villanova, *Tractatus parabolicus*, ed. and trans. Antoine Calvet, *Chrysopoeia*, 5 (1992-6), 145-71, at p. 160, quoted in Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 67.

<sup>146</sup> Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 67.

friars, who had control of the universities. As I have previously discussed, their alchemical writings were greatly influential for the English alchemists and alchemical writers.<sup>147</sup> Gabrovsky suggests that the universities were often connected to the administrative role of the English courtly poets and that Chaucer may have learned the latest mathematical and scientific advancements from Oxford scholars such as Ralph Strode, his friend and one of the Fellows.<sup>148</sup> Lydgate studied at Oxford and spent time abroad in London, and was also probably well acquainted with the science of his day, although to what extent the Harley MS 2407 poet, who wrote an alchemical version of Lydgate's poem *The Churl and the Bird* and possibly various alchemical treatises, knew alchemy remains uncertain.<sup>149</sup>

The growth of alchemy and secular interest in fourteenth-century England is also due in part to the vernacularisation of poetry and the written word, which Robert Halleux argues links to practitioners and natural philosophers and the more widespread diffusion of alchemical practices in society.<sup>150</sup> While the English vernacular tradition of alchemical poetry generally started in the fourteenth century, there are traces of it happening earlier on the continent.<sup>151</sup> In Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, which he completed in 1277 nearly forty years after the death of the poem's original author Guillaume de Lorris, he includes 84 lines which comprise an early example of vernacular alchemical poetry, and its form would intersect with fourteenth-century English alchemical writings such as those of Chaucer and Gower.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Gabrovsky, *Chaucer the Alchemist*, p. 13.

<sup>148</sup> Gabrovsky, *Chaucer the Alchemist*, pp. 15-6.

<sup>149</sup> Mitchell, in John Lydgate, *The Temple of Glas*, ed. J. Allan Mitchell, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), pp. 1-2.

<sup>150</sup> Robert Halleux, 'L'alchimie', in *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, 8.1, *La Littérature Française au XIVe et XVe siècles*, 16.3 (1988), pp. 336-45, at p. 343, quoted in Didier Kahn, 'The *Turba philosophorum* and its French Version (15<sup>th</sup> C.)', in *Chymia: Science and Nature in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Miguel López-Pérez, Didier Kahn, and Mar Ray Bueno (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 70-114, at p. 110n34. Pereira argues, however, that the alchemical audience was more diverse, and the vernacularisation of alchemical poetry, as seen in Chaucer and Gower in particular, responded to different audiences, not necessarily scholars or the clergy. Cf. Pereira, 'Alchemy and the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Middle Ages', p. 338.

<sup>151</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 17.

<sup>152</sup> Frederic Walker, 'Jean de Meun and Alchemy', *Journal of Chemical Education*, 7.12 (1930), p. 2863, at p. 2863. Kahn identifies Jean de Meun's alchemical verses as the earliest example of the vernacular alchemical

Jean's poem was a medieval bestseller, and moreover the success of his alchemical passage spawned several alchemical treatises which were attributed to him as early as the fifteenth century.<sup>153</sup> Jean de Meun presents a generally positive view of alchemy, although it has its limitations.<sup>154</sup>

Like Gower's alchemical exegesis in Book IV of the *Confessio amantis* and Chaucer's *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Jean de Meun's alchemical section in the *Roman de la Rose* is part of a wider narrative concerning the relationship between art and nature. Unlike Gower, however, Jean does not expound upon specific alchemical operations in the alchemical passages, however, but instead examines the principles of alchemy.<sup>155</sup> The alchemical section begins when the poet describes Art's relationship with Nature, engaging with the art versus nature debate of the Middle Ages in which for Jean alchemy was at the centre. Jean describes Art as a beggar who lacks Nature's strength and knowledge and kneels before her.<sup>156</sup> In this unfavourable depiction, Art is subservient to the perfection of Nature, and 'si garde comment Nature euvre, / car mout voudrait fere autele euvre, / et la contrefet conme singes' ('Like an ape, she mimics Nature, but her understanding is so weak and bare that she cannot make living things, however natural they seem') (15999-16001) compared to the genuine replications of Nature. Art remains a copier of Nature, unable to genuinely create or make things that seem natural (16005-34), and despite the richness of his attempts to make 'choses vives' ('living things') (16003), she will '[...] ne por traiz / ne les fera par eus aler, / vivre, mouvoir, sentir,

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tradition in the medieval Western world. See Kahn, 'Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I', p. 252.

<sup>153</sup> Kahn, 'Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I', pp. 250-3.

<sup>154</sup> Newman suggests that the alchemical verse in the poem also draws from pseudo-Bacon's alchemical treatise *Breve breviarium*, or another similar treatise. See Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 78.

<sup>155</sup> Pierres-Yves Badel, 'Alchemical Readings of the *Romance of the Rose*', in *Rethinking the Romance of the Rose*, ed. Sylvia Huot and Kevin Brownlee (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 262-286, at p. 264.

<sup>156</sup> Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1965-70), vol. 2, 16019-23, p. 129. All subsequent quotes refer to this edition unless otherwise stated. See also Guillaume and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press), XIX.15980-2, p. 248. All translations refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.

paler' ('never make them walk on their own accord, nor live, move, feel, or speak') (16032-4).

Art's imitations may appear genuine, but they are devoid of life, unlike Nature's creations. Jean compares Art's failings to her learning alchemy:

Ou d'alkemie tant apreigne  
 que touz metauz en couleur teigne,  
 qu'el se pourrait anceis tuer  
 que les especes transmuer,  
 se tant ne fait qu'el les rameine  
 a leur matire prumeraine [...] (16035-40)

[From alchemy, she may learn enough to tint all metals in colour, yet she could kill herself before she could transmute the species, even if she did not reduce them to their prime matter.]<sup>157</sup>

According to Newman, Jean critiques Art's attempts to transmute species *before* reducing the metals to their *prima materia* (primary matter), and moreover the alchemists are successful where the artists are not in their genuine replications of nature.<sup>158</sup> Despite this, Jean's reading of alchemy remains ambivalent. I suggest that Jean's comments on wasted and misspent labour are also reminiscent of Chaucer's and Gower's similar critique in their alchemical writings. As Newman writes, Jean employs Art here as the 'ape of Nature'.<sup>159</sup> Art is neither morally blind, fraudulent, nor covetous, yet she is seemingly inferior in her attempt to imitate Nature.

In a surprising twist, Jean then writes that 'Alkimie est art veritable: / Qui sagement en ouvrerait / Granz merveilles i trouverrait' ('alchemy is a true art, and that anyone who worked at it seriously would discover great marvels') (16084-6). For Jean, alchemy *can* work and in fact *does* work, but he stipulates that individuals

En sensibles euvres soumises  
 sunt muables en tant de guises  
 qu'el peuvent leur complexions  
 par diverses digestions  
 si changier antr'eus que cist changes  
 les met souz especes estranges,  
 et leur tost l'espiece prumiere. (16058-65)

<sup>157</sup> See Ziolkowski's translation in *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 25. Cf. Newman's alteration of Harry W. Robbins's translation of *The Romance of the Rose* in *Promethean Ambitions*, pp. 79-80. Robbins's original translation of this passage appears in *The Romance of the Rose* (New York: Dutton, 1962), 78.49-54, p. 343.

<sup>158</sup> Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 80.

<sup>159</sup> Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 78.



[when subjected to the operations of the intellect, can be changed into so many different forms, and their complexion so altered by various transformations, that this change can rob them of their original species and put them in a different one.]

Art lacks this wisdom, and she is at fault for failing to comprehend these substantial differences, which lead to her failings. The poet uses the analogy of burning ferns into ash before creating glass from them to indicate that, despite ferns being different in form from glass, they can be altered and transmuted through different processes in order to become glass (16066-71). In short, the alchemist should transmute the individuals that belong to the species rather than the species itself.<sup>160</sup> Jean further praises alchemical mastery:

Car argent fin fin or font naistre  
 cil qui d'alkimie sunt mestre,  
 et pois e couleur li adjoustant  
 par choses qui guieres ne coustent;  
 et d'or fin pierres precieuses  
 font il, cleres et anvieuses;  
 et les autres metauz desnent  
 de leur fourmes, si qu'il les muent  
 en fin argent, par medecines  
 blanches et tresperçanz et fines. (16105-14)

[The masters of alchemy produce pure gold from pure silver, using things that cost nothing to add weight and colour to them; with pure gold they make precious stones, bright and desirable, and they strip other metals of their forms, using potions that are white and penetrating and pure to transform them into pure silver.]

Again, this mastery of alchemical art is distinguished from Art's failed alchemical experimentation, and Jean's ideal alchemy produces genuine and natural reproductions of Nature by reproducing matter in the same way as Nature.<sup>161</sup> Jean stresses, however, that '[...] ce ne feroient cil mie / qui euvrent de sophisterie' ('such things will never be achieved by those who indulge in trickery') (16115-6).<sup>162</sup> It is likely that the sophistic alchemists are doomed to fail due to the obscurity of their logic. Nature's complaint, which is a response to humankind's post-lapsarian state, concludes the alchemical section of the poem. The poet cannot describe her beauty, which is greater than the artwork of the greatest sculptors and artists, because it is

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<sup>160</sup> Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 81.

<sup>161</sup> See Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 82.

<sup>162</sup> 'Sophisterie' influenced the modern French verb 'sophistiquer', which can mean to falsify or to corrupt, and thus indicates trickery and deceit. See Centre National des Textuelles et Lexicales <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/sophistiquer>, accessed 19 February 2017>

truly beyond description: ‘Bien la vos vousisse descrire / mes mi sans n’i porroit soffire’ (‘I would have gladly have described her to you, but my wit is not equal to the task’) (16135-6).<sup>163</sup> Jean de Meun’s early example of vernacular alchemical poetry draws together the technical science of the alchemical treatises with the poetry of the court; this will be shown more fully as exemplary readings in the English alchemical tradition in the following chapters. Gower in particular seems to draw from this depiction of alchemy, interpreting it as an ideal model for human labour, which is paradoxically impossible to attain, as I discuss more fully in my third chapter.

Dante Alighieri’s fourteenth-century poem *Inferno*, the first part of the *Divine Comedy*, is another verse work to feature references to alchemy and its technicalities. Dante’s alchemical section is particularly relevant for this study since it appears analogous to the account of the moral blindness of the Canon’s Yeoman in Chaucer’s tale. Dante’s condemned alchemists appear in Canto XXIX, living in the complete darkness of the final Bolgia within the eighth circle of Hell. These alchemists are joined together with perjurers and counterfeiters in their fraudulent practice, and the poet re-iterates the anti-alchemical sentiments of the period. Dante’s views on alchemy are much more condemnatory and unforgiving than Chaucer’s, however, and he draws from the alchemical decretals and actual trials of prosecuted alchemists during this time. For instance, one of the condemned alchemists declares ‘Ma nell’ultima bolgia delle diece / me per alchìmia che nel mondo usai / dannò Minòs, a cui fallar non lece’ (‘But here, to the last *bolgia* of the ten, / for the alchemy I practiced in this world / I was condemned by Minos, who cannot err’).<sup>164</sup> The eighth circle is the second of the innermost circles of Hell,

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<sup>163</sup> Although alchemy is not mentioned in this passage, Newman rightly draws a connection between this passage and the alchemical section since it reiterates the theme of the arts as unable to replicate natural processes. See Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, p. 82.

<sup>164</sup> See Dante Alighieri, *Commedia: Inferno*, ed. Giorgio Inglese, 3 vols. (Roma: Carocci, 2007), vol. 1, XXIX.118-20, p. 332. All subsequent references refer to this edition unless otherwise stated. See also Dante, *The Divine Comedy Vol. I: Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982-6), vol. 1, XXIX.118-20, p. 339. All subsequent English translations refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.

so alchemy is presented as one of the most severe crimes in medieval Christendom. Dante depicts the fate of the alchemists in graphic detail:

Io vidi due sedere a sé poggiate,  
 com' a scaldar si poggia tegghia a tegghia,  
 dal capo al piè di schianze macolati:  
 e non vidi già mai menare stregghia  
 a ragazzo aspettato dal signorso,  
 né a colui che mal volontier vegghia,  
 come ciascun menava spesso il morso  
 dell' unghie sopra sé per la gran rabbia  
 del pizzicor, che non ha più soccorso;  
 e sì traevan giù l' unghie la scabbia  
 come coltel di scardova le scaglie  
 o d' altro pesce che più larghe l' abbia. (XXIX.73-84)

[I saw two sitting, leaning against each other  
 Like pans propped back to back against a fire,  
 And they were blotched from head to foot with scabs.  
 I never saw a curry-comb applied  
 by a stable-boy who is harried by his master,  
 or simply wants to finish and go to bed,  
 the way those two applied their nails and dug  
 and dug into their flesh, crazy to ease  
 the itching that can never find relief.  
 They worked their nails down, scraping off the scabs  
 The way one works a knife to scale a bream  
 or some other fish with larger, tougher scales.]

Sayers suggests that these different types of frauds and imposters are afflicted with 'disease' and infect society.<sup>165</sup> In addition, their scabs and blotchiness indicate disease or sickness. I suggest that Dante's alchemists are mentally diseased as well, picking at their scabs before they can heal. Their eternal scabrous wounds are the physical manifestations of their diseased thoughts of alchemical fraudulence, forever branding them for their crimes. Just as they are driven to their immoral practice by impulse, they are also driven to claw at their scabs. Dante's comparison of their incessant scratching with the preparation of a fish suggests their perversions; they are not crafting anything of value but instead inflicting further harm upon themselves. Like the rushed stable-boy, they do not give time for their wounds to heal, and thus

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<sup>165</sup> Dante, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine*, trans. Dorothy Sayers, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949-62), vol. 1, p. 25. Glending Olson compares their maladies to leprosy and dropsy. See Olson, 'Chaucer, Dante, and the Structure of Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review*, 16.3 (1982), 222-36, at p. 225.

their bodies are doomed to sickness and mutilation. The Canto concludes with the alchemist Capocchio's testimony:

'Ma, perché sappi chi s'è ti seconda  
 contra i sanesi, aguzza vèrme l'occhio  
 sì che la faccia mia ben ti risponda:  
 sì vedrai ch'io son l'ombra di Capocchio,  
 che falsai li metalli con alchìmia;  
 e te dèe ricordar, se ben t'adocchio,  
 com'io fu' di natura buona scimia.' (XXIX.133-9)

['That you may know who this is backing you  
 Against the Sienese, look sharply at me  
 So that my face will give you its own answer,  
 And you will recognise Capocchio's shade,  
 Betrayers of metals with his alchemy;  
 You'll surely recall—if you're the one I think—  
 How fine an ape of nature I once was.']

Dante uses Jean de Meun's 'natura buona scimia' ('ape of nature') (XXIX.139) metaphor in this passage, which again reflects the inability to successfully imitate the replication of noble metals.<sup>166</sup> Like many of Dante's characters in the *Inferno*, his alchemists are based on real life figures from local chronicles.<sup>167</sup> The fate of Dante's alchemists is characterised by their deceit, particularly their manipulation of natural laws for immoral purposes, and thus Hell is their eternal suffering place.<sup>168</sup> For Dante, alchemy apparently has no value; it is a practice for charlatans and deceivers, and they are categorised as such.<sup>169</sup>

Dante's portrait of the swindling alchemist is comparable to Chaucer's immoral canon in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The Yeoman's unnatural leaden colour also suggests sickness and degradation. The false canon in *Secunda pars* 'wolde infecte al a toun' (973), indicating his

<sup>166</sup> As Ziolkowski points out, Dante does not comment on the transmutation of metals or alchemical experimentations, and instead describes the moral consequences of its misuse. See Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 26. Cf. William Anderson, *Dante the Maker* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 352.

<sup>167</sup> Capocchio was a Florentine who was burned at the stake in Siena in 1293 for falsifying metals. The other alchemist that Dante describes is Griffolino of Arezzo, who is condemned by Minos in the poem. In real life, he was burnt at the stake by Alberto of Siena, but for the crime of duping him into believing he could fly rather than alchemy. For more on the identity of Dante's alchemists, see Charles S. Singleton's notes in Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 535-43; Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 26; and Musa's comments in Dante, *Inferno*, pp. 341-2.

<sup>168</sup> See also Olson, 'Chaucer, Dante, and the Structure of Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*'. In his article, Olson draws comparisons between the *Divine Comedy* and the Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*. While his comparisons between the *Inferno* and to some extent *Purgatorio* with the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* are compelling, the comparisons between the *Second Nun's Tale* and *Paradiso* are less convincing.

<sup>169</sup> Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 26.

sinister agency and toxic influence.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, the Yeoman, who is condemned to his laboratory, his body poisoned by his failed experiments, is comparable to Dante's diseased alchemists. In both stories, the authors assert that alchemical practice does not work. Charles Muscatine rightly suggests that Dante's Hell is reserved for those who 'wished to see too far ahead'.<sup>171</sup> Their dwelling in complete darkness reflects the blindness of their alchemical vision, which is analogous to the Yeoman's moral (and possibly literal) blindness. Ironically, these alchemists who 'wished to see too far ahead' cannot metaphorically see at all since they are trapped in an eternal cycle of failure and loss. In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the swindling canon in the Yeoman's story victimises others, namely the gullible chantry priest, but in Dante's *Inferno* the 'victimisers become victims of their own evil'.<sup>172</sup> Glending Olson rightly comments that their punishment alters them as 'they altered, falsified, the things of this world'.<sup>173</sup> In Hell, they are victims of eternal torment of their own doing. Both Chaucer and Dante depict hellish visions of the medieval alchemist that are not moral and philosophical but problematic and ill-fated.

Francesco Petrarca (1304-74) also follows Dante's negative view of alchemy. He comments on alchemy in Chapter 111 (*De alchimia*) in his 1370 text *De remediis utriusque Fortunae* (*Remedies for Fortune both Good and Bad*), in which Hope and Reason discuss alchemy and alchemists. Reason launches a tirade against alchemy, whereas Hope repeatedly expresses his desire for alchemical success. Reason claims that alchemy has never been successful, and further comments that the alchemist will only be successful in producing

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<sup>170</sup> 'Infecte' is defined as 'pollute, contaminate' in Norman Davis et al., *A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 79.

<sup>171</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (London: University of California Press, 1957), p. 221. See also Dante, *Inferno*, XXIX.38.

<sup>172</sup> Peter S. Hawkins, 'Bottom of the Universe: Dante and Evil', in *Dante in Oxford*, ed. Mark McLaughlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 147-59, at p. 151.

<sup>173</sup> Olson, 'Chaucer, Dante, and the Structure of Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*', p. 225. I agree with Olson's comparison of the *Inferno* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, although I am not entirely convinced that Chaucer's intentionally draws from *Purgatorio* for his alchemical tale.

smoke, ashes, sweat, sighs, words, and shame.<sup>174</sup> Hope still longs for and believes in alchemical success, and Reason comments that his actions are ‘shameful and ignorant’.<sup>175</sup> As this section draws to a close, Hope remains hopeful about alchemical success, although Reason has proven otherwise, and responds that “‘something necessary will always be lacking, but never deceit’”.<sup>176</sup> Similarly, Chaucer’s Yeoman is hopeful about alchemical success, but reason proves otherwise, and Gower’s postlapsarian decline rationalises the failure of alchemy in the *Confessio amantis*.

While it is unlikely that other writers in England discussed in this dissertation other than Chaucer drew from Italian sources, this shows that alchemical literature and poetry was further developing in the vernacular tradition as well as becoming a vehicle to express moral concerns about society and human behaviour, as Dante’s and Jean de Meun’s alchemical sections reveal. Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* was widely influential for vernacular poetry, particularly his presentation of alchemy within the art versus nature debate, and as I will show in the following chapters, Chaucer and Gower both draw from this model to some extent. As I will show in the following chapter, however, their fourteenth-century contemporaries also wrote about alchemy in the vernacular, and in the fifteenth century, Thomas Norton and George Ripley further developed the use of alchemy in Middle English poetry.

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<sup>174</sup> Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 27.

<sup>175</sup> Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, p. 27. Cf. Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch’s Remedies for Fortunes Fair and Foul: A Modern English Translation of De Remediis Utriusque Fortune*, ed. Conrad H. Rawski (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991).

<sup>176</sup> Ziolkowski, *The Alchemist in Literature*, pp. 27-8.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE ENGLISH VERNACULAR ALCHEMICAL POETS IN FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

### Fourteenth-Century Middle English Alchemical Poetry

While the alchemical writers of the fourteenth century arguably did not produce nearly as much alchemical poetry and verse as those of the fifteenth century, their literary output still helped to establish the vernacular alchemical tradition.<sup>1</sup> As I will discuss in the following chapters, the influence of Chaucer and Gower was crucial to the development of Middle English alchemical poetry, and moreover their alchemical works can be read as exemplary narratives not only indicating good moral practice, but also conveying themes such as moral blindness and human fallibility. This chapter also discusses other English alchemical sources for the poems examined in this dissertation as well as influences which support reading the poems as exemplary. The emphasis upon the moral alchemist and alchemical allegory in the poetry of Norton and Ripley in particular influences the reading of the poems as exemplary in my final two chapters.

While vernacular alchemical poetry also appears, as I have briefly shown, in other countries and languages, alchemical poetry develops most fully in late medieval England, and arguably into the Renaissance period.<sup>2</sup> Alchemy thus emerges as the ‘largest quantitatively represented subject before and after 1500’.<sup>3</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor argues that there are two main sources of knowledge for medieval alchemy, including public records, namely patent rolls, which discuss the behaviour of the alchemical practitioners (honest or fraudulent), and the writings of the alchemists.<sup>4</sup> While the public records inform one’s knowledge of alchemical

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<sup>1</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 18. Timmermann comments that the fifteenth century produced six times as much alchemical poetry and verse as the fourteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Kahn suggests that this is because of the wealth of English alchemical poems, with over fifty extant alchemical poems written during this time. See Kahn, ‘Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I’, pp. 254-6. Kahn also comments that Germany and France also produced a wealth of alchemical manuscripts, whereas medieval Italy and Catalan produced relatively little.

<sup>3</sup> Kahn, ‘Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I’, pp. 255-6.

<sup>4</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 123.

writings, I will focus upon the alchemical writings themselves in this study, particularly in Middle English alchemical poetry of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that is until the end of the medieval period in England in the late fifteenth century. The fourteenth century establishes this vernacular tradition with Chaucer and Gower's work, and their moral and exemplary ideas further evolve in the fifteenth century, as seen in the alchemical dialogues and the alchemical version of Lydgate's poem. Although the date remains uncertain for some of the anonymously written alchemical poems in the final chapter, they come from the latter half of the fifteenth century. While Middle English alchemical poetry further develops in the Renaissance, particularly with the influence of Paracelsus and John Dee, the focus of this dissertation is on its medieval developments.

Alongside the vernacular alchemical poems written in fourteenth-century England, there were also Latin alchemical poems written by English writers during this time. While the focus of this dissertation is on Middle English alchemical poetry, it is important to discuss this Latin alchemical poetry as well. John Dastin and Walter of Odington were two influential writers who wrote Latin alchemical poetry in the early fourteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Very little is known about the life of either figure. Walter of Odington was a Benedictine monk at Evesham in 1298, who wrote the alchemical treatise *Ycocedron (Twenty Books)*, in which he examines the separation of the four elements using the processes of sublimation, congelation, solution, and calcination.<sup>6</sup> John Dastin also shared his belief in the possibility of alchemical transmutation.

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<sup>5</sup> See F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 127. For more on the influence of John Dastin, see also Kahn, 'Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I', p. 268. Dastin's alchemical writing was well-received in early modern England. Dastin's dream vision features in Ashmole's compendium as *Dastin's Dreame*, in which the Latin verse is loosely adapted into Middle English rhyming octets and the planetary metals are changed to the gods of Olympus. Kahn suggests that it was likely translated in either the sixteenth or seventeenth century and exemplifies the Renaissance allegorical genre. See Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, pp. 257-68.

<sup>6</sup> R.J. Forbes, *A Short History of the Art of Distillation: From the Beginnings Up to the Death of Cellier Blumenthal* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), p. 64. See also *Cambridge Music Manuscripts, 900-1700*, ed. Iain Fenlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 109; Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 2, p. 449; Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Digby 119; and Dublin, Trinity College MS 1122. The *Ycocedron* exists in five manuscript sources. See Frederick Hammond, 'Walter of Odington', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)



Dastin was an English monk whose alchemical writings include *Epistola ad episcopum Iohannem xxii, de Alchimia, Libellum Aureus, Visio super artem alchimiae*, and possibly the *Rosarium philosophorum*, which is also attributed to pseudo-Arnald.<sup>7</sup> His arguably most popular and best-known work is the *Visio*, an alchemical and allegorical dream vision, in which the planetary metals (silver/Moon, iron/Mars, etc.) have been afflicted with leprosy, and the healthy king (gold/Sun) tries to cure them.<sup>8</sup> It is in his letter on the Philosopher's Stone, however, that his favourable views on alchemy and transmutation are most lucid: 'Of these arts, alchemy, established indeed by all the philosophers, strives to bring to perfection what is incomplete in the metals, and to preserve their perfection undiminished'.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he writes that 'I know that the work and skill [of alchemy] is possible; by following nature bodies may be produced from natural beginnings and imperfect ones may be perfected'.<sup>10</sup> Not only does Dastin validate alchemical experimentation, but he encourages its aim to perfect the imperfect. His validation also provides a more positive depiction of the art, which can also be seen in the dialogues between Morienus and Merlin as well as Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves in Chapter 6.

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<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28631>, accessed 1 Feb 2017>. Thorndike reprints Chapter XVI of the Latin transcript in *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 3, pp. 683-4. Despite its Greek name, the content is Latin. Thorndike further suggests that the similar content to Robert of York's early alchemical treatise *Exfrenon pronosticorum temporis* indicates that it may have also been written by Walter of Odington. See also Thorndike, vol. 3, pp. 128-9.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England*, p. 33. Hughes's points on Dastin are intriguing, although there is not enough evidence provided to support an alchemical connection between Dastin and Edward III. Dastin's name appear in an abundance of English manuscripts dating from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, and the Middle English translation appears in sixteenth and seventeenth-century manuscripts. Dastin's works appear most prominently in Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ashmole MS 1416, and British Library, Sloane MS 2476. See J.M.M.H. Thijssen, 'John Dastin', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7184>, accessed 1 Feb 2017>.

<sup>8</sup> Theisen, 'John Dastin's Alchemical Vision', *Ambix*, 46.2 (1999), pp. 65-72, at p. 65. Theisen also attributes the *Rosarius*, the *Mirror*, and a series of alchemical letters to him. All Dastin translations are Theisen's unless otherwise stated. Thorndike compares the alchemical imagery to the crucifixion, following pseudo-Arnald's alchemical analogy. See Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 3, pp. 100-1.

<sup>9</sup> Theisen, 'John Dastin's Letter on the Philosopher's Stone', *Ambix*, 33.2-3 (1986), pp. 78-87, at p. 82. For more articles on Dastin, see Theisen, 'John Dastin: The Alchemist as Co-Creator', *Ambix*, 38.2 (1991), pp. 73-78; Theisen, 'The Letters of John Dastin', *Ambix*, 55.2 (2008), pp. 153-68; Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 3, pp. 85-102; and C.H. Josten, 'The Text of John Dastin's *Letter to Pope John XXII*', *Ambix*, 4.1-2 (1949), pp. 34-51. Theisen rightly doubts the veracity of the letter to the pope. See Theisen, 'The Letters of John Dastin', p. 153 n.2.

<sup>10</sup> Theisen, 'John Dastin's Letter on the Philosopher's Stone', p. 83.

Chaucer and Gower's contemporary William Langland also wrote about alchemy in the late fourteenth century. This alchemical section appears in the A-text and B-text of his dream poem *Piers Plowman* and is mentioned briefly but memorably. While Langland's anti-alchemical sentiment presents itself as moral, it is mentioned so briefly that I will limit my discussion of it to this chapter. It does, however, present another perspective on the ways in which alchemy is used in fourteenth-century Middle English poetry. Langland's alchemical passage is much more hostile than those of his contemporaries, and he seems less interested in its technicalities and principles, and instead outright condemns it as a practice. Langland's passage responds to Pope John XXII's decretal and the fourteenth-century clerical view of alchemy. It is further interesting to note that this passage is omitted from the C and Z versions. Schmidt suggests that it was omitted in later versions because it digresses from the rest of its context, and moreover 'expresses (inappropriate) reservations about a respectable quadrivium subject [astronomy], while taking ambiguous "credit" for crafts dreamed up positively to mislead'.<sup>11</sup> Schmidt's theory seems likely, especially when compared to the later versions, and if Langland was writing for a literate audience, then it would make sense to remove such digressions, especially if he was making such comments about astronomy, which was one of the seven liberal arts.

In Langland's passage on alchemy, Dame Study responds to moral decline and the misdirection of the sciences ('euil for to knowe') in the world, which oppose the 'virtue' she represents.<sup>12</sup> Her role here is to warn Will against the occult arts, which are obstacles to the virtue of her study.<sup>13</sup> In preparation for extolling the virtuous aspects of study, she lists the types of knowledge which must be avoided:

Ac Astronomye is hard thing, and euil for to knowe;

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<sup>11</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel Text of the A, B, C, and Z Versions*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, 2 vols. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), vol. 2, p. 582. All subsequent references refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, in Langland, *Piers Plowman*, vol. 2, p. 583.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt, in Langland, *Piers Plowman*, vol. 2, p. 583.

Geometrie and Geomesie is gynful of speche;  
 Pat þinketh werche wiþ þo þre þriueh wel late—  
 For sorcerie is þe souerayn bok þat to þat science longiþ.  
 3et arn þere febicchis in forellis of many manis wittes,  
 Experimentis of alkenemye of Albertis makye,  
 [Perimansie and nigromancie] þe þouke to reisen;  
 3if þou þenke to do wel, deile þerewith neuere!  
 Alle þise sciences, sikir, I myseluen  
 Foundit hem formest folk to desceyue.  
 I bekenne þe Crist, quaþ she, I can teche þe no betere.<sup>14</sup>

Langland follows clerical condemnation of magic, sorcery, and alchemy in this passage. In the late Middle Ages, alchemy shared aspects of magical practices, particularly astral magic, through the principles of natural philosophy, and moreover alchemy and magical practices were fundamental in exploring and uncovering the secrets of nature.<sup>15</sup> Natural magic and science intersected in the Middle Ages, and they were not always distinct.<sup>16</sup> Like magic, alchemy could also be used to immoral ends.<sup>17</sup> Langland's alchemical passage represents the negative aspects of this interconnectedness between alchemy and magic.

Langland does, however, generalise many of the terms here, and his condemnation can be read as anti-scientific. 'Astronomie' and 'Geometrie', for example, are two of the seven liberal arts, and are not inherently evil, although they can be misused. 'Astronomie' is not the same as astrology, although Langland seems to treat them interchangeably and inherently

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<sup>14</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, vol. 1, A.XI.155-65, pp. 416-7. The B-text contains a slightly different version which omits the alchemical section. See *Piers Plowman*, B.X.212-21, pp. 416-8.

<sup>15</sup> Saunders comments that when alchemy is misused, it 'may blur into "nigromancy", becoming demonic magic, and making demons of men'. See Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, pp. 107-9. For more on the relationship between medieval alchemy, natural philosophy, and magic, see also Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 133-49; Valerie I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Edward Peters, *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), especially pp. 139-81; and more recently Page, *Magic in the Cloister*; and Frank Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 1. See also William Eamon, 'Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance', *Janus*, 70.3-4 (1983), pp. 171-212.

<sup>17</sup> Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, p. 178. For more on connections between alchemy and 'nigromancy', see also Klaassen, 'English Manuscripts of Magic, 1300-1500: A Preliminary Survey', in *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 3-31, at pp. 21-4.

dangerous.<sup>18</sup> Dame Study also condemns alchemy as a practice.<sup>19</sup> Albertus Magnus is depicted as a magician of the dark arts rather than a respectable scientist, practising his ‘Experimentis of alkenemye’ (160). Langland’s connection between Albertus and alchemy does suggest, however, that he was familiar with the pseudo-Albertan alchemical tradition. Dame Study does not distinguish the occult arts from immoral practice, linking alchemy to pyromancy and necromancy. According to Dame Study, these arts blind and ‘desceyue’ (164) their practitioners, and thus affect their moral well-being. Langland advises the listener to ‘deile þerewith neuere’ (163) to avoid their deceit.

Langland does not express either Chaucer’s or Gower’s subtle interpretation of alchemy. Like those of his contemporaries, however, his depiction of alchemy reveals a populist response to the fourteenth-century alchemical tradition, and the development of Middle English poetry as a means of expressing alchemical ideas or, in this case, condemnations. Chaucer also responds to this alchemical tradition, yet his literary response is much more complex. In Langland’s case, he is not as interested as Chaucer or Gower in the details of alchemical practice, but rather the implications of the practice itself, which he sees as immoral.

As I have shown, medieval alchemical poetry produced in England was not limited to Middle English; it also appeared in Latin and sometimes French.<sup>20</sup> While Chaucer, Gower, and Langland were clearly influenced by vernacular alchemical poetry such as the *Roman de la*

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<sup>18</sup> Schmidt further comments that the use of ‘Astronomye’ reflects the medieval distinction between the academic discipline ‘natural astronomy’ and ‘judicial astronomy’, that is astrology, or the influence of the heavenly bodies on human affairs. See Schmidt, *Piers Plowman*, vol. 2, p. 582. See also Linden’s commentary in *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Linden interprets the phrase ‘febicchis of Forellis’ (154) as ‘alchemical manipulation or tricks’, and thus explains the ‘souerayn bok’ (154) as a book of tricks and deceit. Schmidt comments that the ‘souerayn bok’ she refers to is dark magic, ‘subject-matter of the most advanced textbook in a notional academy of the occult’. He also suggests that the term ‘febicchis’ is a term derived from Pebichios, an early alchemist. See Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 55, and Schmidt, in Langland, *Piers Plowman*, vol. 2, p. 583.

<sup>20</sup> Schuler comments that Latin alchemical poems were in ‘abundance’ in the Middle Ages in the British Isles, totalling forty-eight, and were widely disseminated. See Schuler, *Alchemical Poetry*, xxvi-vii. Cf. Kahn, ‘Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I’, p. 252, and Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 2, pp. 511-85.

*Rose*, the extent of the influence of Latin alchemical poetry is less certain.<sup>21</sup> It appears that Chaucer was much more indebted to Latin alchemical treatises than Latin alchemical poetry. It is impossible to know the full range of Latin alchemical sources Chaucer and his contemporaries were drawing from, but as I will discuss in my third chapter, Chaucer used numerous Latin alchemical treatises, including texts attributed to pseudo-Arnald of Villanova and pseudo-Geber.<sup>22</sup>

This dissertation focusses upon Middle English poetry, however. The vernacularisation of English alchemy is integral to its circulation and dissemination, and in the fifteenth century, the Middle English alchemical poem continues to develop. Yet these fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Middle English poets were not only interested in alchemy; they were interested in using alchemy as a vehicle for moral ideas and exemplary purposes. Even if alchemical practice did not work, it could serve as a useful exemplary tool for examining moral behaviour and practice.

### **Thomas Norton, George Ripley, and Middle English Alchemical Poetry in the Fifteenth Century**

The fifteenth century saw increased demand for scientific information in Middle English, particularly on alchemy.<sup>23</sup> Alchemy was not limited to laboratory bookshelves, but also extended to the court.<sup>24</sup> Middle English verse and poetry also provided a further means to circulate information, and many of these texts, as I argue, can be read as exemplary narratives for moral and didactic purposes. Some Middle English alchemical poems were written by known authors, such as Lydgate and Benedict de Burgh's *Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, which I

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<sup>21</sup> Collette and DiMarco, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', pp. 715-47.

<sup>22</sup> Collette and DiMarco, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', p. 722.

<sup>23</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 18. Pereira argues that Middle English alchemical poetry really kicks off in the fifteenth century. See Pereira, 'Alchemy and the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Middle Ages', p. 345, and John Block Friedman, 'The *Merda Philosophorum*: An English Problem', in *Tributes to Kathleen L. Scott: English Medieval Manuscripts: Readers, Makers, and Illuminators*, ed. Marlene Villalobos Hennessy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 83-100, at pp. 83-4.

<sup>24</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 19. Timmerman further comments that fifteenth-century alchemical texts were physicians, goldsmiths, and miners.

will discuss in further detail in Chapter 4. Many of these fifteenth-century alchemical texts written in Middle English, however, were circulated anonymously.<sup>25</sup>

While Thorndike's scholarship on late medieval alchemical literature is invaluable to this dissertation, I do not agree with his comment that fifteenth-century alchemical literature is 'poor in alchemical composition' compared to the fourteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Thorndike comes to this conclusion based on the lack of key figures and notable written works in fifteenth-century alchemical literature, but there is a rich if quirky diversity of alchemical poems in the fifteenth century, and particularly in the English tradition; alchemical recipes and dialogues become more prominent and widespread. In fact, there are two English alchemists who emerge during the latter fifteenth century who are arguably the two most famous fifteenth-century English alchemists and two highly influential figures for alchemy until the seventeenth century: Thomas Norton and George Ripley.<sup>27</sup> Their alchemical works were immensely popular, with 32 extant manuscripts of Norton's *Ordinal* and 24 of Ripley's *Compound of Alchemy*.<sup>28</sup> Both alchemical writers also present favourable views of alchemy, which may explain their enduring popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Norton stresses the importance of the moral alchemist in his *Ordinal of Alchemy*, which earns him first place in the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. Norton (1433-1513/14) was a bailiff of Bristol, sheriff, a member of Parliament, a member of Edward IV's privy chamber,

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<sup>25</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 4, p. 332.

<sup>27</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Schuler, 'The Renaissance Chaucer as Alchemist', *Viator*, 15 (1984), 305-34, at p. 305. Kahn suggests that these works achieved such popularity since they encompass all aspects of the Great Work, including theory and practice, instructions on how to utilise the furnace and alchemical vessels, substances to avoid, and their use of allegories to reveal hidden secrets. See Kahn, 'Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I', p. 257.

and alchemist.<sup>29</sup> He wrote the *Ordinal of Alchemy* in 1477, which Ashmole includes in the *Theatrum* in its entirety.<sup>30</sup> Norton interprets alchemy as a practice with moral values:

Good Men and Bad, even Numberlesse,  
 (The latter, but without successe)  
 Desire the Art: But still (Alas!)  
 They are so given to Avarice  
 That of a Million, hardly three  
 Were ere Ordaind for Alchimy.<sup>31</sup>

Although he does not see alchemy as impossible, Norton laments its low success rate, blaming Avarice for its wrong motives. As the title of his text suggests, he argues that the ordinal of alchemy is a holy ritual, with its practitioners devoting their services to the craft ('Ordained for Alchimy,' which is analogous to a priest ordained for service), and he cites his unsettling statistic of successful alchemists to indicate the constant threat of sin.<sup>32</sup> Avarice is a hurdle that the alchemist must overcome, and the ordinal of alchemy is a commitment to the art. The successful alchemist must also be worthy of ordination, demonstrating self-worth through virtuous action. The aspiring adepts want to succeed with alchemy and live wealthily, but only the select few can truly appreciate its spiritual gifts, and only those who desire the virtuous aspects of alchemy and are not misled by Avarice will stand to profit in moral terms. Those who practice with immoral intentions and desire to misuse the craft will fail. Not everyone is

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<sup>29</sup> See Reidy, *Thomas Norton's Ordinal of Alchemy*, xxxviii. For more on Norton, see also xxxvii-iii; Reidy, 'Thomas Norton and the *Ordinal of Alchemy*', *Ambix*, 6.2 (1957), pp. 59-85; Holmyard, 'Thomas Norton, an Alchemist of Bristol', *Journal of Chemical Technology and Biotechnology* 42.24 (1923), 574-7; and more recently Cynthia Masson, 'Text as Stone: Desire, Sex, and the Figurative Hermaphrodite in the *Ordinal* and *Compound of Alchemy*', in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse, and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 112-26; Masson, 'Intention to Write, Intention to Teach: Vernacular Poetry and Pedagogy in Thomas Norton's *Ordinal of Alchemy*', *Florilegium*, 17 (2000), pp. 45-58; and Masson, 'Queer Copulation and the Pursuit of Divine Conjunction in Two Middle English Alchemical Poems', in *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh*, ed. Susannah Mary Chewning (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 37-48.

<sup>30</sup> See Masson, 'Text as Stone', p. 112 n.1, and Norton, *The Ordinal of Alchemy*, in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, pp. 1-106.

<sup>31</sup> Norton, 'Preface', in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, trans. Elias Ashmole, 13-18, p. 3. Norton further states that 'only vertue wyynyth this holi arte', suggesting that virtuous behaviour is the key to alchemical success. See also Reidy, in *Thomas Norton's Ordinal of Alchemy*, I.228, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> The *MED* defines 'ordinal' as a 'book setting forth the order of divine serves and other ecclesiastical rules' and 'rules for the ordination of clergy'. Reidy further compares the ordinal of alchemy to the Church's ordinal for saints' days for the liturgy, which Norton most likely intended. See Reidy, *Thomas Norton's Ordinal of Alchemy*, lxviii.

suiting for alchemy, however; in fact, only the most moral and rational candidates will be eligible. In Chapter 3, I compare Norton's depiction of the moral alchemist with Gower's.

Ripley (ca. 1415-1490) was an alchemist, author, and canon of an Augustinian priory at Bridlington.<sup>33</sup> He was believed to have travelled to Louvain and Italy to study alchemy with the masters, and reputedly conducted alchemical experiments in 1470.<sup>34</sup> His most famous work is *The Compound of Alchemy*, which he dedicated to Edward IV in 1471 (the year of his restoration to the English throne).<sup>35</sup> In the *Compound*, he describes twelve 'gates' or chemical processes that the aspiring adept must master in order to access the alchemical 'castle' of wisdom (analogous to the Philosopher's Stone). Rampling astutely argues that while Ripley is much more interested in the alchemical processes than the architectural allegory itself, he does not lose sight of the castle allegory:<sup>36</sup>

Now hast thou conquered these gates twelve,  
And all the Castle thou holdest at thy will,  
Keepe thy secreats in store to thy selfe,  
And the commaundements of God looke thou fulfil,  
In fire see thou continue thy glasses still,  
And multiply thy medicines aye more and more,  
For wise men doe say, that store is no sore.<sup>37</sup>

Ripley also reiterates the value of keeping alchemical secrets to oneself, and the Stone is suggested to have medicinal value ('multiply thy medicines'). The allegory of the gates

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<sup>33</sup> For more on the topic of Ripley's alchemy, see notably Linden, 'Expounding George Ripley: A Huntington Alchemical Manuscript', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 61.3-4 (1998), 411-28, at p. 411. For more recent articles on Ripley, see R. Ian McCallum, 'Alchemical Scrolls Associated with George Ripley', in *Mystical Metal of Gold*, pp. 161-88; Rampling, 'Establishing the Canon: George Ripley and His Alchemical Sources', *Ambix*, 55.3 (2008), 189-208; Rampling, 'Depicting the Medieval Cosmos: George Ripley's *Wheel of Inferior Astronomy*', *Early Science and Medicine*, 18.1-2 (2013), 45-86; Rampling, 'The Catalogue of the Ripley Corpus: Alchemical Writings Attributed to George Ripley (d. ca. 1490)', *Ambix*, 57.2 (2010), 125-201; and Principe, 'Ripley, George', in *Alchimie, lexicon einer hermetischen Wissenschaft*, ed. Claus Priesner and Karin Figala (Verlag C.H. Beck: Munich, 1998), pp. 305-6.

<sup>34</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 21. See also Linden, 'Expounding George Ripley', p. 412. Rampling notes that this depiction of Ripley is largely the product of sixteenth-century thinking. See Rampling, 'The Catalogue of the Ripley Corpus', p. 126.

<sup>35</sup> Rampling, 'Depicting the Medieval Cosmos', p. 49.

<sup>36</sup> Rampling, 'Depicting the Medieval Cosmos', p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> George Ripley, *George Ripley's The Compound of Alchymy (1591)*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 81. Linden argues that the 1591 edition is more representative of Ripley's work than Ashmole's edition not only because it is the first printed copy, but also because of apparent 'substantive changes' in the editions. I agree that the earlier edition is best for this study since it is also a closer collation from the manuscripts. See also Linden, xxxix.



functions as a conquest, enabling mastery of each of the gates to learn the innermost secrets. Each chapter of the *Compound* represents an alchemical process or 'gate', including calcination, dissolution, separation, conjunction, putrefaction, congelation, cibation, sublimation, fermentation, exaltation, multiplication, and finally projection.<sup>38</sup> Ripley was also responsible for other alchemical works and attributed to numerous others after his death. In addition to these, he was associated with a series of alchemical scrolls known as the Ripley Scrolls, which will be further discussed in Chapter 4. His use of alchemical allegory in the *Compound* is also helpful for considering the dialogues discussed in the final chapter of the dissertation.

## Conclusion

Drawing from Arabic and continental sources, Middle English alchemical poetry and the use of alchemy as a literary motif develop as part of the vernacular tradition in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. The classical practitioners of Greco-Roman Egypt established the early alchemical tradition, which was then filtered through the Arabic world in the early Middle Ages before entering the Western Christendom as *alchimia*, a controversial branch of natural philosophy which sought to uncover the secrets of nature using metallurgical and philosophical techniques. Beginning with Jean de Meun's alchemical passage in *Roman de la Rose* in the thirteenth century, Latin alchemical texts and ideas begin to enter the vernacular, reaching wider audiences. This literature also responds to public literature, particularly in the exemplary tradition, and proves useful for exemplary teaching. Alchemy in Middle English poetry arises most prominently from this late medieval interest in vernacular alchemical literature. Chaucer, Langland, Lydgate, and Gower all write on alchemy in Middle English, although their

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<sup>38</sup> See Ripley, *George Ripley's The Compound of Alchymy (1591)*, p. 65. Ripley defines alchemical cibation as 'a feeding of our matter drie, / With milke and meate, which moderately thou doe'.

intentions, purposes, and audiences are diverse and different. Norton and Ripley's contribution to English alchemical literature in the fifteenth century solidifies its importance in the vernacular tradition and moreover the value of the moral alchemist, although these latter authors are more interested in actual alchemical transmutation.

Middle English alchemy poetry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also appears in different forms such as the dialogue and the recipe, or synthesised together as one, presenting audiences with alchemical information as well as *exempla* to draw moral points about human fallibility and achievement. I agree with Kahn that alchemical poetry does not appear as monolithic, but rather as diverse and multifaceted.<sup>39</sup> The focus of this study supports that notion, and moreover reading these poems as exemplary narratives helps to understand how these writers are using alchemy in literature.

As I have discussed, Gower and Chaucer's alchemical sections establish and reveal the ways in which Middle English writers used alchemy to make moral points about human fallibility and moral blindness, and moreover these passages can be read as exemplary for good moral behaviour. As I have shown, Langland also discusses alchemy, albeit in a far different light than either Chaucer or Gower. Since he only briefly mentions alchemy, however, I have limited my focus on his alchemy to this chapter. In Gower's case, which will be the topic of the following chapter, he praises alchemy as the highest form of labour, being the antithesis of Sloth. Despite the notion of perfect transmutation through labour, however, he considers it unattainable. Both Chaucer and Gower reveal exciting ways in which alchemical narratives can be read as *exempla* in Middle English poetry, which continue to distill and transmute in the fifteenth century with Lydgate's poem and two alchemical dialogues.

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<sup>39</sup> Kahn, 'Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part I', pp. 249-50.

### CHAPTER THREE: ALCHEMY AND EXEMPLARY NARRATIVE IN JOHN GOWER'S *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

#### Introduction

In Book IV of the *Confessio amantis*, Gower presents a 175-line section on alchemy and alchemical practice, with a more positive image of fourteenth-century alchemy compared to Chaucer and Langland. Gower examines both its economic and moral aspects, interpreting it as an ideal model for virtuous labour, the remedy for Sloth. Moreover, alchemy provides solutions to poverty and economic issues, offering wealth and economic gain. While Gower presents alchemy as a positive model for good moral behaviour and practice, however, he also views it as a lost art, and unattainable for contemporary alchemists. For Gower, alchemy is the gateway to perfection, yet in the post-lapsarian state of his world, it is paradoxically unattainable through conventional labour practices.

In this chapter, I examine the role of alchemy in Gower's *Confessio amantis*, arguing that Gower's alchemical section can be read as what Yeager calls his 'new *exemplum*', and that it forms the 'centre of Gower's poetic'.<sup>1</sup> Genius presents alchemy to Amans as an *exemplum* for good, albeit unattainable, labour practice. Genius's discussion of alchemy arises in part from his exposition on the use and forms of labour, particularly the importance of good work to combat Sloth: upon mentioning discoverers and inventors, he devotes a section to alchemy and alchemical practice.

Yet Gower's alchemical section is unusual as an *exemplum* in that it does not use the classical examples featured in the other books. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine how Gower presents this alchemical exegesis as exemplary following Mitchell's analysis on reading Gower for the moral; in the second part of this chapter, I will look at Gower's

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<sup>1</sup> Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, p. 165. See also Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form'. Cf. Brian Gastle, 'Gower and Chaucer', in *The Routledge Research Companion to John Gower*, ed. Ana Saez-Hidalgo, Brian Gastle, and R.F. Yeager (Abington: Routledge, 2017), pp. 296-311.

discussion of alchemy and how he presents it as a virtuous, albeit impossible, ideal model for perfect labour.<sup>2</sup> In the latter section of this chapter, I draw upon Dean's analysis of the medieval trope of *senectus mundi*, or 'the world grown old', as well as Clare Fletcher's recent criticism on the post-lapsarian aspects of Gower's alchemical passage.<sup>3</sup> I also argue that Gower's role for alchemy in Book IV gives it moral purpose in the narrative by contrasting it with the avaricious pursuit of gold and material wealth in Book V. I will also compare Gower's ideal alchemist to Norton's ideal moral alchemist. Although Norton believes contemporary alchemy is still possible whereas Gower believes it is not, they share affinities with positive portrayals of alchemy, the possibility of alchemical transmutation, and the importance of the moral alchemist.

While previous scholarship on Gower's comments on alchemy has often been dismissive, other recent scholarship presents this section more positively.<sup>4</sup> While the alchemical passage may initially appear digressive, it actually explores the fundamental themes of the *Confessio amantis*.<sup>5</sup> Yeager argues that the alchemical section forms the 'center of Gower's poetic',

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<sup>2</sup> See Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, pp. 36-60. His reading of Gower's *exempla* also appears in an earlier form in Mitchell, 'Gower for Example: Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Ethics of Exemplarity', *Exemplaria*, 16.1 (2004), 203-34. Cf. Mitchell, 'Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Natural Morality, and Vernacular Ethics', in *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts*, ed. Malte Urban (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp. 135-53.

<sup>3</sup> In the medieval alchemical world, the classical world and the wisdom of the ancients represented an idealised past, but their ideals could no longer be attained because of post-lapsarian faults. James M. Dean suggests that the topos of the *senectus mundi* ('world grown old') 'includes the fall of Adam and Eve as a *terminus a quo*'. These medieval authors who wrote about alchemy expressed nostalgia for classical and biblical alchemical figures because they represented a more virtuous image of what alchemy should be, rather than their current society, which was seen as in decay. See Dean, *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1997), pp. 1-2, and Clare Fletcher, "'The Science of Himself is Trewe": Alchemy in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *South Atlantic Review*, 79.3-4 (2015), 118-31, at p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> See notably Fletcher's recent comments on this scholarship in 'Alchemy in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', p. 118

<sup>5</sup> For more on the topic of especially critical readings of Gower's alchemical section, see notably George G. Fox, *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower* (New York: Haskell House, 1966), p. 113. More recently, Linden's study, which posits that Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's* begins a satirical tradition that continues into early modern England, does mention Gower's alchemical section, albeit briefly. Linden comments that Gower only describes 'what is generally known about the subject', and that his alchemical passage is 'matter-of-fact, non-humorous, and non-satirical'. Russell A. Peck is also critical of this alchemical section, suggesting that it is 'ironic that the discussion of Somnolence should follow so tedious a section of the poem'. See Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 57, and Russell A. Peck, in Gower, *Confessio amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck and trans. Andrew Galloway, 3 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004-2013), vol. 2, p. 36. All *Confessio amantis* references are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

offering a cohesive and unifying vision of alchemy and labour.<sup>67</sup> While I agree that the contemporary alchemists fail because of their lack of insight, Gower argues that it is more generally their lack of knowledge rather than simply the misuse of language. Stephanie L. Batkie argues that Gower's alchemical passage functions as a 'model of transformational textual labour in order to show how the form of the poem works to create various reading subjects'.<sup>8</sup> She rightly suggests that perfection is achieved through the textual and material labour of alchemy, although Gower wants his readers to *act* on what they read in the text rather than simply reading it.<sup>9</sup> Gower does, however, recognise the possibility of transmutation among the ancients, although he is concerned with the futile attempts of contemporary alchemists, which again reiterates the paradoxical aspects of his model for perfect labour. I agree with Matthew W. Irvin's reading of alchemy in the *Confessio amantis* as a form of intellectual and physical labour, although I suggest that the failure of alchemy is due to post-lapsarian decline and lack of knowledge rather than a lack of 'gentillesse'.

Epstein also provides a more positive reading of Gower's alchemical section, arguing for an economic reading of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and Books IV and V of the *Confessio amantis*, and he examines and contrasts their views on alchemy and economics. While this reading is convincing, particularly with regards to the monetary aspects of the poem (coinage

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<sup>6</sup> He also suggests that the failure of the contemporary alchemists is due to a 'lack of insight', specifically their improper use of language. See Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, pp. 165-7.

<sup>7</sup> Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, pp. 166-7.

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie L. Batkie, "'Of the parfite medicine'": *Merita Perpetuata* in Gower's Vernacular Poetry', in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Tradition, and Translation*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and R.F. Yeager (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 157-68, at p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Batkie, 'Merita Perpetuata in Gower's Vernacular Poetry', p. 158. As Mitchell rightly comments, the 'moral meaning finally rests as much on what readers *do* as on what the text *means*'. See Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, p. 66. For more readings on exemplarity and Gower's alchemical section, see notably Matthew W. Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 195-7; Karla Taylor, 'Inside and Out in Gower's Republic of Letters', in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet*, pp. 169-81, at pp. 170, 173; and Allen, 'Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble with Reading', *ELH*, 64.3 (1997), 627-55. Karla Taylor similarly writes that alchemy is a model for 'plain, truthful transformation', although she suggests that Gower's model is 'entirely textual'. She connects his alchemical model to ethical and political reform, and further links it to the notion of kingship and governance in Book VII of the *Confessio amantis*. Irvin also follows Batkie's notion of 'textual labour' in the alchemical section, arguing that alchemy is both art and virtue-ethic, revealing its values for intellectual and physical labour, and likening the failure of alchemy to the failure of 'gentillesse'.

and value) as well as the poem's cohesiveness (connecting Books IV and V), I suggest that Gower is more interested in ethics and the potential for good moral behaviour and improvement by using alchemy as a moral model for labour. In her article, Fletcher demonstrates that this alchemical section forms the centre of the *Confessio amantis*, developing the role of labour by using alchemy as a model for human achievement. She also argues that this section reveals two key fundamental themes in the *Confessio amantis*, including moral decay and the decline of language, and provides further insight into the role of alchemy in the poem. She also rightly connects alchemy with moral development and recognises the 'morally instructive paradigm of human labour and diligence' in Gower's alchemical exegesis, which I will expand upon in this chapter.

While 'moral Gower's' depiction of alchemy in the *Confessio amantis* is starting to receive more positive attention, the exemplary aspects of the narrative, particularly how it can be read as an *exemplum* and how he uses alchemy as a vehicle to explore these moral points, have not been fully explored.<sup>10</sup> I will look at his often underexamined treatment of alchemy in the *Mirour de l'Omme* (which pre-dates the *Confessio amantis*), where he interprets alchemy as a fraudulent craft, before turning to alchemy in the *Confessio amantis*, where, following the more positive critical response to Gower's alchemy, I will explore how Gower presents his alchemical passage as exemplary and how it can be read for the moral. As I will show, Gower's exemplary reading of alchemy and alchemical practice provides new ways to think about alchemical poetry and morality in the emerging vernacular tradition in late medieval England.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on Gower's infamous epithet, see notably Yeager, "O Moral Gower": Chaucer's Dedication of *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984), 87-99; and A.J. Minnis "Moral Gower" and Medieval Literary Theory', in *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A.J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), pp. 50-78.

### Alchemy and Gower's 'New *Exemplum*'

It is important to first clarify how Gower employs this particular *exemplum* in his poetry, and its implications for Book IV and alchemical practice. Batkie comments on reading the alchemical section as exemplary, and initially she notes that there is no narrative *exemplum* accompanying this passage.<sup>11</sup> Yet she does not negate reading this section as exemplary; she does, however, suggest that it does not fit Larry Scanlon's definition of the *exemplum* as a 'narrative enactment of cultural authority'.<sup>12</sup> Batkie argues instead that the alchemical digression can be read as an *exemplum* for textual labour, and in order to read the passage as exemplary, one must 'accept a form of reading that moves through readers who, in turn, deploy the effects of that reading'.<sup>13</sup> I agree with Batkie that it does not follow Scanlon and it can be read as an *exemplum*, but there is more to the *exemplum* here than just textual labour.<sup>14</sup> Peter Nicholson describes the alchemical passage as a 'lecture rather than an *exemplum*, or rather, it contains dozens of very brief *exempla* rather than a single long tale'.<sup>15</sup> While there is an absence of the long tales featured in other sections of the *Confessio amantis*, I suggest that these 'brief *exempla*' form a cohesive *exemplum* not only for ideal labour, but also human fallibility and moral blindness. Moreover, when the alchemical section is read in a wider context concerning Genius's argument, the section itself does form a narrative.

Charles Runacres's definition of the *exemplum* in the *Confessio amantis* also supports the reading of the alchemical passage as exemplary. He writes that the *exemplum* is a 'passage

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<sup>11</sup> Batkie, 'Merita Perpetuata in Gower's Vernacular Poetry', p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> See Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, and Batkie, 'Merita Perpetuata in Gower's Vernacular Poetry', p. 167. Batkie suggests the possibility of the alchemical section as exemplary since it is part of a much larger framework (Amans's confession and Genius's teaching), yet that aspect should be sufficient in itself for reading it as an *exemplum*. See Batkie, 'Merita Perpetuata in Gower's Vernacular Poetry', p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Batkie defines 'textual labour' in Gower as contemplative study wherein 'readers must work to distance themselves from the text in order to construct meaningful interpretations'. See Batkie, 'Merita Perpetuata in Gower's Vernacular Poetry', p. 167.

<sup>14</sup> She further compares the alchemical section to the exemplary tale of Adrian and Bardus in Book V of the *Confessio amantis*, in which the Stone signifies the value of Bardus's labour and which continues the theme of 'contagious goodness'. See Batkie, 'Merita Perpetuata in Gower's Vernacular Poetry', pp. 159-60.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Nicholson, *Love & Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 237-8.

of narrative or descriptive material, a moral or religious lesson, and an explicit link between the two'.<sup>16</sup> Gower's alchemical section follows this pattern as it is also seemingly an encyclopaedic section on alchemy and alchemical practice, presenting alchemy as the ideal form of labour against Sloth, and illustrating the themes of human fallibility and moral blindness. Runacres also points out that ethics are central to the *Confessio amantis*.<sup>17</sup> Gower is particularly interested in Aristotelian ethics and the potential for improving moral behaviour; Aristotle writes that ethics is achieving absolute happiness through good moral practice.<sup>18</sup> Since Gower writes the poem with the intention of analysing human behaviour and values and presenting his *exempla* as moral instructions for attaining the highest possible good, his alchemy as the means of ideal productivity and moral work is thus central to this notion. Gower's alchemy in the *Confessio amantis* epitomises the ideal human behaviour that he is trying to promote.

Not only is Gower's alchemical exegesis in the *Confessio amantis* exemplary, I suggest, but it also follows Yeager's notion of the 'new *exemplum*', which drew from late medieval sermons in the exemplary tradition.<sup>19</sup> Despite its link with religious didactic practices, however, Gower's *exemplum* is written in the vernacular tradition, and as Yeager comments, it is in the *Confessio amantis* that Gower demonstrates the 'new *exemplum*' most effectively.<sup>20</sup> As this dissertation shows, this 'new *exemplum*' is also used effectively in Chaucer, Lydgate, and two anonymous alchemical dialogues, but as Yeager suggests, Gower uses the vernacular *exemplum* most effectively, and thus Gower is the first Middle English author that I will analyse.

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Runacres, 'Art and Ethics in the *Exempla* in the *Confessio Amantis*', in *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A.J. Minnis (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. 106-34, at p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Runacres, 'Art and Ethics in the *Confessio Amantis*', p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. W.D. Ross, vol. 2, 1094a1.1-3, 1729-1867, at p. 1729. Gower would not have known the 1995 edition, however, but rather Nicolas Oresme's French translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. See Aristotle, *Le livre de éthiques d'Aristote*, ed. Albert Douglas Menut and trans. Nicolas Oresme (New York: G.E. Stechert and Co., 1940).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gerald Kinneavy, 'Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Penitentials', *Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984), 144-61.

<sup>20</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 307.



In this chapter, I extend this reading of Gower's 'new *exemplum*' to Genius's alchemical passage in Book IV, which may initially seem problematic. As I have discussed, Gower scholars have not only critiqued the 'digressiveness' of this passage, but they have also questioned whether or not it is an *exemplum*. I argue that it is in fact an *exemplum*, although perhaps not necessarily a straightforward one, and reading this passage within a wider context helps to establish its exemplary function. Yeager characterises this 'new *exemplum*' as one that 'recognisably originates in that centre of moral instruction'.<sup>21</sup> As I will show, not only does Gower's alchemical passage concern moral instruction, using alchemy as a form of labour, but it also establishes this idea of alchemical narratives as exemplary in the Middle English literary tradition.

Alchemy thus becomes an unusually positive and exemplary model for labour in Gower's discussion, and further demonstrates the effectiveness of Gower's 'new *exemplum*'. Gower uses the secular content of the alchemical section content to form a new type of *exemplum* that is consistent with his ethical framework and moral approach to labour and productivity.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, he also presents alchemy in a much more positive light than his contemporaries, particularly Chaucer and Langland. Gower's use of alchemy in his literature is not limited to the *Confessio amantis*, however. As I will show, he also discusses alchemy in the *Mirour de l'Omme*, where he interprets it as synonymous with fraud. While I am more interested in the exemplary aspects of alchemy that he presents in Middle English, the use of alchemy in the *Mirour* presents the themes of human fallibility and moral decay that are consistent with his use of alchemy in the *Confessio Amantis*, albeit considerably less positive and idealised.

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<sup>21</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower and the *Exemplum* Form', p. 308.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Christopher Dyer, 'Work Ethics in the Fourteenth Century', in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. James Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg, and W.M. Ormond (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2000), pp. 21-42, and Annika Farber, 'Genius and the Practice of Ethical Reading', *ES: Revista de Filología Inglesa*, 33.1 (2012), pp. 137-53.

### Alchemy and Fraud in the *Mirour de l'Omme*

While Gower's depiction of alchemy in the *Confessio amantis* is generally much more positive than that of his contemporaries, it contrasts with his depiction of alchemy in the *Mirour de l'Omme*, which he wrote prior to the *Confessio amantis*.<sup>23</sup> Like the *Confessio*, the *Mirour* was also written in the late fourteenth century; however, it was lost for several centuries before G.C. Macaulay rediscovered it in a Cambridge University Library manuscript (Additional MS 3505) in 1895.<sup>24</sup>

The *Mirour*, which is also known as the *Speculum Meditantis* or the *Speculum Hominis*, explores the theme of man's salvation, and is comprised of three sections: cause, condition, and remedy.<sup>25</sup> Gower believed it was necessary to examine contemporary life to prove humanity's post-lapsarian decline, and thus the alchemical section in the *Mirour* appears in the condition section, which treats and criticises the estates of the merchants, artisans, and victuallers.<sup>26</sup> These trades are considered honourable as long as they are not morally misleading. Fraud, however, dwells among them and constantly threatens to lead them astray:

Triche est Orfevere au plus sovent,  
 Mais lors ne tient il pas covent,  
 Quant il d'alconomie allie,  
 Le fin orr et le fin argent;  
 Si fait quider a l'autre gent  
 Qe sa falsine soit verraie;  
 Dont le vessell, ainz q'om l'essaie,

<sup>23</sup> Mosher suggests that the *Mirour* prepared Gower for his exploration of the vices and virtues in love in the *Confessio amantis*. See Mosher, *The Exemplum in England*, p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> The *Mirour de l'Omme* only survives in the one manuscript. For more on this manuscript, see notably Yeager, 'John Gower's French', in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), pp. 137-51, at pp. 138-9, 145. The *Confessio amantis*, by contrast, survives in numerous manuscripts. Yeager attributes the manuscript to the growing interest in English rather than French poetry in Richard II's court. The exact date of the *Mirour* has been subject to debate. G.C. Macaulay suggests that it was written during the final years of Edward III (1376-79), while Fisher argues that it was completed in 1377. In either case, what is clear is that it was written during Edward III's reign and before the 'Ricardian poetry' of Chaucer and Gower was written. Yeager also suggests that Gower may have started writing the poem before 1360. See Yeager, 'Gower's French Audience: The *Mirour de l'Omme*', *The Chaucer Review*, 41.2 (2006), 111-37, at pp. 111-2, and William Burton Wilson's comments in Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme*, trans. William Burton Wilson (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992), xv-xvi. All subsequent *Mirour de l'Omme* translations refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.

<sup>25</sup> Burton, in Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme*, xvii. See also Yeager, 'John Gower's French', p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Yeager, 'John Gower's French', p. 140. See also Craig E. Bertolet, 'Gower and the *Canterbury Tales*: The Enticement to Fraud', in *Approaches to Teaching the Poetry of John Gower*, ed. Brian W. Gastle and R.F. Yeager (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2011), pp. 136-42, at pp. 138-9, and Bertolet, 'The French Works: *Mirour de l'Omme*', in *The Routledge Research Companion to John Gower*, pp. 321-7.

Vent le reçoit la bonne paie  
 De l'esterling, et tielement  
 Del argent q'il corrompt et plaie  
 Sa pompe et son orguil desplaie,  
 Et se contient trop richement.  
 Je ne say point d'especial  
 Tout dire et nomer le metal  
 Que Triche ove l'argent fait meller;  
 Mais bien sai q'il fait trop de mal,  
 Q'ensi l'argent fin et loyal  
 De sa mixture fait falser.  
 Cil q'au buillon voldra bailer  
 Vessell d'argent pour monoier,  
 Lors puet il savoir au final  
 Qe triche ad esté vesseller;  
 Car son vessell et le denier  
 Ne sont pas d'une touche egal.<sup>27</sup>

[Fraud is often a goldsmith, but then he keeps not his agreement when, by alchemy, he alloys fine gold with fine silver. Thus he makes people believe that his adulteration is pure gold. So before someone can test the vessel, he sells it and receives a good price paid in sterling silver. And thus, corrupted by silver, he displays his pomp and pride and lives on a very rich scale. I know not, and cannot name, the metal which Fraud alloys with silver. But I know well that he commits much evil by adulterating fine honest silver in his mixture. He who tries later to convert his silver vessel at the Mint into coin will find out that Fraud has been the silversmith; for his vessel does not have the same feel as a silver coin.]

Citing Fraud's corrupting influence, Gower associates alchemy with moral decay. While the alchemy in *Confessio Amantis* is used as a model for ideal labour, in the *Mirour* its similar metallurgical processes are portrayed as inherently dangerous; the act of merely alloying metals is considered evil since Fraud has permeated it. Fraud eludes discovery and is not genuine, producing poor imitations of metals. In this regard, goldsmithing is seen as inferior to genuine coinage, and this practice is reminiscent of the swindling canon who uses a clever trick and silver filings to dupe the chantry priest and take his money in Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Like the swindling canon, the fraudulent goldsmith in the *Mirour* is also shamelessly corrupt and driven by monetary gain. He intentionally presents his inferior coins as genuine gold and silver when they are inferior in quality and make and thus knowingly misleads his buyers, and therein lies his evil. Gower also stresses the fact that the fraudulent goldsmith breaks his agreement or contract, which goes against the honour of his profession, and leads to

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<sup>27</sup> Gower, *Mirour de l'omme*, *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1902), vol. 1, II.25513-36, p. 282.

more sinful consequences.<sup>28</sup> The lesson drawn is that sellers with dubious practices (such as practising alchemy) should be avoided since they are fraudulent and morally corrupt.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the implications of this passage, there is little scholarly exploration of this passage in the *Mirour de l'Omme*.<sup>30</sup> It is unclear why Gower's attitude to alchemy changes in the *Confessio amantis*. His alchemical section in the *Mirour* is much more limited and less encyclopaedic than in the *Confessio*. Perhaps he was responding to the decretals and public outcry against alchemical practice with his passage in the *Mirour*. Perhaps Gower endured his own 'textual transformation' before he wrote the *Confessio amantis* and recognised that he could use alchemy as a model for labour within an exemplary framework since 'This ston hath pouer to profite' (IV.2572). In either case, Gower's reading of metallurgical techniques in the *Mirour* presents a much less positive view of goldsmithing than in the *Confessio*, although the themes of moral decay and human fallibility remain constant.

### **Alchemy, Morality, and Labour in the *Confessio Amantis***

Under the editorial heading 'Discoverers and Inventors' and after the section 'On the Uses of Labour', Genius begins his account of alchemy to Amans. Genius is careful to avoid using alchemical jargon and technical detail in his alchemical exegesis.<sup>31</sup> Before analysing the alchemical section in Book IV, it is also important to understand the theme of the book, and particularly why alchemical practice falls under Sloth rather than Avarice.<sup>32</sup> In the opening

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<sup>28</sup> Craig E. Bertolet rightly comments that Gower's reading of alchemy as fraudulent is consistent with his broader argument that trade is so corrupt that everyone cheats and remains unpunished. See Bertolet, 'Gower and the *Canterbury Tales*', p. 137.

<sup>29</sup> Bertolet, 'Gower and the *Canterbury Tales*' p. 142.

<sup>30</sup> Kimberly Zarins briefly comments on Gower's treatment, pointing out that he does not describe the alchemical process and instead he criticises its sham practises. See Zarins, 'Writing the Literary Zodiac: Division, Unity, and Power in John Gower's Poetics', Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2009, pp. 158-9.

<sup>31</sup> Fox rightly suggests that if Gower had known more about alchemy, he would not be as easy to understand. See Fox, *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower*, p. 135.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Shaw, 'The Influence of Canonical and Episcopal Reform on Popular Books of Instruction', in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 44-60, at p. 56. See also Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*

Latin passage to Book IV, Gower notes that ‘Que fieri possent hodie transfert piger in cras’ (‘What might be done today it transfers, indolent, to tomorrow’) (IV.1ff), suggesting that the procrastination of Sloth prevents work from being accomplished and hinders achieving good.<sup>33</sup> Gower also emphasises the value of positive labour for spiritual and physical self-improvement in Book IV.<sup>34</sup> The other *exempla* in Book IV further explore Sloth in its different forms, drawing from predominantly Ovidian material. The *exemplum* of Pygmalion notably illustrates Gower’s interest in maintaining an active lifestyle or working actively to produce common profit while also linking to the alchemical passage. In both the alchemical section and Pygmalion’s tale, the artist attempts to equate their art with nature, with Pygmalion working devotedly to bring his statue to life while the alchemist toils in the laboratory to successfully acquire the Philosopher’s Stone. Yet while Pygmalion’s devotion to his art merits the statue becoming real, the contemporary alchemists continue to toil with no physical results, attempting to draw from nature what they cannot hope to attain.<sup>35</sup>

Gower’s alchemical passage appears discursive in nature, expounding upon the workings of alchemy and its practitioners, and recognising its scientific aspects.<sup>36</sup> In the Latin verses which open the section ‘On the Uses of Labour’, Gower writes ‘Set qui doctrine causa fert

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(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), and Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept* (Michigan: Michigan State College Press, 1952).

<sup>33</sup> See Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, trans. Galloway, p. 237 n.1.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory M. Sadlek suggests that Gower draws from *acedia* (Greek for ‘lack of care’) from medieval penitential manuals for Book IV, and that Labour provides an antidote to this idleness. See Sadlek, *Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love’s Labour from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), pp. 171, 188. Yeager rightly suggests that the alchemists’s ‘lack of sight’ is a ‘concomitant of intellectual sloth’, which also helps to understand its placement in Book IV rather than Book V. See also Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic*, p. 167.

<sup>35</sup> Irvin also compares the tale of Pygmalion to the alchemical discussion, suggesting that in both sections ‘the art promises to gain a profit from nature that is otherwise unavailable’. See Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*, pp. 201-2.

<sup>36</sup> Genius discusses science more widely in Book VII, in which Kurt Olsson notes that Gower organises it into a programme of study. Irvin also suggests that the issue of labour in Book IV indicates an ‘inherent crisis of governance’, which is fully addressed in Book VII. See Olsson, *John Gower and the Structure of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1992), p. 121, and Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*, p. 199. On the topic of science and Book VII, see also Tamara O’Callaghan, ‘Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis* and Its Afterlife’, in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet*, pp. 139-56, at p. 145. Alchemy is only mentioned in Book IV, however.

mente labores, / Preualet et merita perpetuata parat' ('But he who for the sake of wisdom bears labour in the mind prevails further and obtains perpetual merit') (IV.2363ff) indicates the value of intellectual and physical labour, which Genius discusses in the alchemical passage.<sup>37</sup> In other words, he who constantly labours in his mind will be much more successful than the physical labourer. This notion of 'merita perpetuata' is important for understanding the alchemical exegesis, particularly since Genius recognises the ancient alchemists for achieving such merit.<sup>38</sup> It does, however, prompt action for contemplation and mental labour, which leads to better work ethic and productivity.<sup>39</sup>

Genius begins the alchemical section by providing an overview of alchemy's key themes and describes its aim to transmute base metals into gold or silver:

[...] thurghe kinde resemblant  
 That what man couthe aweie take  
 The rust, of which thei waxen blake,  
 And the savour and the hardnesse,  
 Thei scholden take the liknesse  
 Of gold or Selver parfitly. (IV.2492-7)

Here Genius follows Empedocles's theory of the four colour stages (blackening, whitening, yellowing, and reddening), with the resulting gold or silver as perfection. These incorruptible substances can be improved and bettered through the perfect balance of elements, and thus become the transmuted perfection that is gold and silver. The word 'savour' here indicates 'sweetness' or an agreeable smell, revealing its virtue. Genius's point here is that the alchemical matter must be transmuted to reach a certain 'savour' and 'hardnesse' which will indicate its perfection. The 'waxen blake' refers to the putrefaction stage, which removes the corruption of the metals ('That what man couthe aweie take / The rust of which thei waxen blake'). The resulting product and the practising alchemist are purified from their earthly

<sup>37</sup> See Gower, trans. Galloway, *Confessio Amantis*, p. 288 n.1.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gower, *The Latin Verses in the Confessio Amantis: An Annotated Translation*, trans. Siân Echard and Claire Fanger (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1991), p. 53 n.77. Echard and Fanger interpret 'merita perpetuata' as writing books to gain fame, but I suggest that it does not necessarily apply to writing.

<sup>39</sup> Yeager further suggests that the alchemical section reveals that that the contemplative life is more important than the active one. See Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, p. 167.

corruption ('waxen blake') during this process. The verb 'waxen' here indicates growth and the development of form, suggesting the familiar theme of the multiplication of gold as part of an organic process (that is, gold 'seeds').<sup>40</sup> In other words, the alchemist 'grows' their substance into perfect forms, demonstrating an ideal and moral form of work.

Gower's ideal alchemist also connects to the exemplarity of the section and resembles Norton's ideal moral alchemist, whom I discussed in the previous chapter. To reiterate, Norton laments the low success rate of contemporary alchemists, which he attributes to their human fallibility and susceptibility to sin. His treatise provides an ethical foundation to become 'ordained' in alchemy; the successful alchemical adept must be of moral excellence *and* have a masterful understanding of the alchemical practice. Gower uses similar terminology to describe successful alchemy in the *Confessio amantis*: 'For thei be whom this art was founde / To every point a certain bounde / Ordeignen, that a man mai finde' (IV.2505-7). Like Norton, Gower identifies alchemy on clerical terms as a priestly service. The *MED* lists several definitions for the verb 'Ordeignen', notably 'to choose or appoint to an office or position', but it can also mean 'to create or construct' or 'to make ready', which identify it with the business or active labour that is remedial to Sloth. Gower suggests that the ancient alchemists function as alchemical authorities through their mastery of alchemical knowledge and constant physical and intellectual labour. This alchemical appointment reveals their achievement of labour and thus grants them 'merita perpetuata'. The ordinance of alchemy in the *Confessio amantis* is also emphasised through moral intention and virtue; if used properly, alchemy can achieve the highest possible good. Gower also writes that 'These Philosophres wyse, / Be weie of kinde in sondri wise / These Stones maden thurgh clergie' (IV.2531-3). Fletcher comments that Gower's use of 'clergie' means both learning and cleric; moreover, I suggest that this is

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<sup>40</sup> See the *MED* entry for 'waxen'.

consistent with Norton's notion of the ordinal of alchemy and the moral alchemist.<sup>41</sup> These ancient alchemists are learned and philosophical exemplary figures, not bumbling charlatans or frauds like the ones portrayed in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* or the foolish alchemist in the alchemical version of *The Churl and the Bird*.

While Norton believes in the possibility of alchemical transmutation in the current age despite its shortcomings, however, Gower recognises its impossibility. But he does cite the wisdom of the ancient alchemists, particularly Hermes Trismegistus, as authoritative and exemplary, and moreover praises the success of their alchemical knowledge and success:

Hermes was on the ferste of alle,  
 To whom this art is most applied;  
 Geber therof was magnefied,  
 And Ortolan and Morien,  
 Among the which is Avicen,  
 Which fond and wrot a gret partie  
 The practique of Alconomie;  
 Whos bokes, pleinli as they stonde  
 Upon this crafte, few understonde;  
 Bot yit to put them in assai  
 Ther ben full manye now aday,  
 That knowen litel what thei meene. (IV.2606-17)

Gower cites Hermes, pseudo-Geber, Ortolanus (or John Garland) and Morienus, who was the alchemical instructor of an Omniad prince, as the ancient authorities on alchemy ('Alconomie').<sup>42</sup> He also mentions Avicenna as an authority even though he did not believe in or support alchemical transmutation.<sup>43</sup> Yeager attributes the failure of the contemporary

<sup>41</sup> Fletcher, 'Alchemy in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', p. 120.

<sup>42</sup> See Fox, *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower*, p. 134. I will further discuss Morienus, the 'flagbearer for alchemy' in the medieval Latin West, and his alchemical role in my fifth chapter on alchemical dialogues in the fifteenth century. See also Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, p. 52. Thorndike also devotes a chapter to Ortolanus in *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 3, pp. 176-90. It is also important to note Gower's use of the term 'Alconomie' in the *Confessio amantis*. The *MED* entry for 'Alconomie' suggests that this particular spelling places it alongside other medieval sciences such as 'astronomie', indicating that Gower recognises it as a licit and learned science. Singer also notes an entry in the Close Rolls for Richard II in 1393 for a monk in Bristol named Johannes Pygas who allegedly produced 60 groats of silver using 'alconomye'. See Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 3, pp. 781-2, and Karla Taylor, 'Inside and Out', p. 171 n.11.

<sup>43</sup> Fox observes that none are direct sources for Gower, but they would have been familiar alchemical authors in literature of his day. See Fox, *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower*, pp. 134-5. Steele Nowlin comments that Gower praises these authors because they write 'pleinli' and thus preserve the alchemical form, yet they are still incomprehensible to modern practising alchemists. See also Nowlin, 'Gower's Chronicles of Invention: Historiography and Productive Poetry in Book 4 of the *Confessio Amantis*', *Modern Philology*, 110 (2012), 182-201, at p. 197.



alchemists to the decline of language, noting that they are unsuccessful because they cannot understand the writings of the ancients.<sup>44</sup> In short, these contemporary alchemists have lost their way, and the post-lapsarian decline through history has led to this.<sup>45</sup> These alchemists ‘folwe nocht the lyne’ (IV.2623) of successful alchemical practice, suggesting that they have strayed from the exemplary model that alchemy presents. Gower clearly divides the alchemy of the past from the alchemy of the present:

He doth the werk to be parfit  
Of thilke elixir which men calle  
Alconomie, as it befalle,  
To hem that whilom weren wise.  
Bot now it stant al otherwise [...] (IV.2576-80)

The word ‘whilom’ here means ‘formerly’ or in times past, which again reflects the familiar theme of post-lapsarian decline.<sup>46</sup> The ancient alchemical books hold a certain niche in Genius’s repertoire, and Gower likely had access to, or at least knew of, Greek, Roman, Arabic, and contemporary alchemical writers.<sup>47</sup> He further praises the success of these ancient alchemical authorities:

Of Grek, Arabe and of Caldee,  
Thei were of such Auctorite  
That thei ferst founden out the weie  
Of al that thou hast herd me seie. (IV.2627-30)

Gower celebrates the ‘Auctorite’ of these early figures because they established the virtuous aspects and wisdom of alchemy. For Gower, contemporary alchemists lose sight of alchemy’s ethical basis for spiritual well-being and development (the ‘ordinance’ of alchemy), and Genius thus turns to the founders of the art to remind Amans of its values and importance as well as the post-lapsarian decline of labour and work ethic. Yet this passage also illustrates the indecipherability of these ancient alchemical texts, linking it to a loss of knowledge in contemporary times. While the virtues of alchemical practice are attainable, Gower’s

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<sup>44</sup> Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic*, p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Nowlin, ‘Gower’s Chronicles of Invention’, p. 197.

<sup>46</sup> See the *MED* entry for ‘whilom’.

<sup>47</sup> See Peck, in Gower, *Confessio amantis*, pp. 401-2.

contemporary alchemists are unable to successfully transmute base metals into gold in the current age. The ancients, on the other hand, who possessed wisdom and authority, were successful with alchemical transmutations and as such established ‘such Auctorite’ upon the art. Unfortunately, however, these ways have been lost. Gower’s numerous sources indicate that he was familiar with a vast *corpus* of alchemical works of the time. He is less technical with his alchemical knowledge than Chaucer, but he has a clear idea of alchemical theory and its goals:

Bot hou that metal cam a place  
 Thurgh mannes wit and goddes grace  
 The route of Philosophres wise,  
 Ferst forto gete out of Myne,  
 And after forto trie and fine.  
 And also with gret diligence  
 Thei founden thilke experience,  
 Which cleped Alconomie,  
 Whereof the Selver mutiplier  
 Thei made and ek the gold also. (IV.2451-61)

Genius makes clear in this passage that alchemy is more than simply a practical science, such as extracting metals from a mine and transmuting them into gold; it is also a philosophy that requires extreme diligence through ‘mannes wit and goddes grace’ (IV.2452). The great mystery of alchemy, at least for Gower’s contemporary alchemists, is *how* the ancient practitioners achieved success. Despite its shortcomings, however, Gower recognises it as a genuine science. The search for the Philosopher’s Stone, however, is not an idle one; in fact, its preparatory processes demand great attention and intensive labour, requiring distillation, congelation, calcination, fixation, and more (IV.2313-21). In describing the making of the Stone, he writes that it must be thoroughly prepared through a series of chemical processes ‘Til he the parfit Elixir / Of thilke philosophres Ston, / Mai gete [...]’ (IV.2222-4).

Yet it is not only their human fallibility that sets these alchemists back; they are also hindered by their uneconomic spending:

Thei speken faste of thilke Ston,  
 Bot hou to make it, nou wot non  
 After the sothe experience.  
 And natheles gret diligence

Thei setten upon thilke dede,  
 And spille more than thei spede;  
 For allewey thei finde a lette,  
 Which bringeth in poverte and dette  
 To hem that riche were afore:  
 The lost is had, the lucre is lore  
 To gete a pound thei spenden five;  
 I not hou such a craft schal thryve  
 In the manere as it is used:  
 It were betre be refused  
 Than forto worchen upon weene  
 In thing which stant nocht as thei weene. (IV.2581-93)

For Gower, contemporary alchemical practice is much more trouble and expense than it is worth. They know about the Stone, but they lack the knowledge to create it.<sup>48</sup> The alchemists also spend more than they make, and thus introduce ‘poverte and dette’ (IV.2578) rather than wealth and riches or moral benefits. Not even ‘gret diligence’ can promise them results, and even men who ‘riche were afore’ (IV.2589) become impoverished. Like the Canon’s Yeoman, contemporary alchemy is associated with loss and failure. The contemporary alchemists lack the virtue, wisdom, and insight of the ancient practitioners, and thus they have nothing to show for all their hard work. Genius admits it would be better to refuse alchemy as a practice rather than pursue its unattainable ends (‘In thing which stant nocht as thei weene’). Moreover, he interprets alchemy as having the wrong approach. The alchemist is expected to know everything about his craft, and yet he is given no prior knowledge to work with; it is the great paradox that Gower presents in the alchemical section. Instead, the alchemist is left to his wits and the testimony of the supposedly successful ancient alchemists, yet it is unclear how to get there. Gower further admits that no one knows how to make the Philosopher’s Stone, which is the transmuting agent intended to unlock the secrets of alchemy. Without a knowledge of what they are doing, the contemporary alchemists are doomed to fail in their trade before they even begin.<sup>49</sup> While this may be true for contemporary alchemists, particularly their lack of

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<sup>48</sup> As Irvin points out, the ‘artistic mean is not the same as the natural mean’, suggesting their shortcomings since they cannot equate them. See Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*, p. 201.

<sup>49</sup> Irvin suggests that it is better to read about alchemy than to perform it. He also comments that the failures of alchemy reveal the ‘impassible distance between the language of that art and the truth of nature’. See Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*, pp. 197, 200-1.

knowledge needed to unify art and nature in alchemical experiment, Genius comments that the ancient alchemists were apparently successful in their trade. The problem runs deeper than the contemporary disparity between art and nature; it is attributable to their inability to inherit and understand the practices of the ancient adepts.

The beginning of the alchemical section alludes to the superiority of the ancients. Genius comments that Saturn ‘coigne the moneie / Of sondri metal, as it is, / He was the ferste man of this’ (IV.2448-50).<sup>50</sup> While this comment supports Fletcher’s reading of the post-lapsarian decline, Saturn is not mentioned among the other alchemists in the section. Following the traditional medieval alchemical theory of the macrocosm being reflected in the microcosm, Gower’s terrestrial alchemy connects to medieval astronomy and astrology; each metal has a planetary correspondent. Gower describes each metal and joins it with a celestial counterpart:

Of bodies sevene in special  
 With foure spiritz joynt withal  
 Stant the substance of this matiere.  
 The bodies whiche I speke of hier  
 Of the Planetes ben begonne:  
 The gold is titled to the Stonne,  
 The mone of Selver hath his part  
 And Iren that stant upon Mart,  
 The Led after Satorne growth,  
 And Jupiter the Bras bestoweth,  
 The Coper set is to Venus  
 And to his part Mercurius  
 Hath the quickselver, as it falleth [...] (IV.2463-75)

Each metal shares properties with its corresponding planet: gold with the Sun, silver to the Moon, iron to Mars, lead to Saturn, brass to Jupiter, copper to Venus, and quicksilver to Mercury; this reveals the interconnectedness of the planetary spheres and the sublunary world.<sup>51</sup> The seven planets and metals are joined by ‘foure spiritz’, which Fox identifies as

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<sup>50</sup> Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, p. 119. Fletcher suggests that the invocation of Saturn places alchemy within the Saturnian Golden Age. See Peck, in Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, p. 400. Peck further comments that Saturn is typically depicted as ‘cold, cruel, and malicious’, yet under the governance of Jupiter, he can also be benevolent.

<sup>51</sup> Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, p. 119. Fletcher points out that while it is nearly identical to Chaucer’s description of the metals and their corresponding planets in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, Gower unusually links brass to Jupiter. Unlike the other metals, brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. Fox observes that this is an error since Jupiter is usually connected to tin in medieval alchemy. Peck suggests that this unusual

things which fly from the fire, or volatile substances, and include quicksilver, mercury, sal ammoniac, and orpiment (arsenic).<sup>52</sup> Gower's exposition of the metals and their planetary correspondents (the celestial configurations of the macrocosm reflected in the terrestrial microcosm) is consistent with conventions of medieval alchemy at the time, presenting a more encyclopaedic portrait of alchemy compared to his contemporaries, but his moral argument for alchemy as the virtuous opposite of Sloth gives fresh meaning to his exemplary narrative.<sup>53</sup>

Citing the knowledge of the ancients, Genius also describes the three alchemical Stones in the alchemical section of the *Confessio amantis* (*lapis vegetabilis*, *lapis animalis*, and the third stone which is the 'Minerall Stone' or Philosopher's Stone) which are 'maden thurgh clergie' (IV.2533). The 'Minerall Stone', however, is the most important and highly sought after:

Which the metals of every Mine  
 Attempreth, til that thei ben fine,  
 And pureth hem be such a weie,  
 That al the vice goth aweie  
 Of rust, of stink, and of hardnesse.  
 And whanne thei ben of such clennesses,  
 This Mineral, so as I finde,  
 Transformeth al the ferste kynde  
 And make hem able to conceive  
 Thurgh his vertu, and to receive  
 Both in substance and in figure  
 Of gold and selver in nature [...]  
 For to the rede and to the whyte  
 This Ston hath pouer to profite. (IV.2259-72)<sup>54</sup>

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allocation indicates that Jupiter is in an amorous mood. See also Fox, *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower*, p. 121, and Peck, in Gower, *Confessio amantis*, p. 401.

<sup>52</sup> Fox, *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower*, p. 118. Compare with Chaucer, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, VIII.820ff.

<sup>53</sup> For a different view, see Jonathan Hughes, *The Rise of Fourteenth-Century England*, p. 176. Hughes suggests that Gower's employs 'alchemical imagery to convey the triumph of the golden sun reigning in the heavens like a bejeweled golden monarch ruling the leaden Saturn'.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Steele points out that the notion of three alchemical stones instead of one is paralleled in the *Rosarium philosophorum*. See Steele, in John Lydgate and Benedict de Burgh, *Lydgate and Burgh's Secrees of Old Philosoffres: A Version of the Secreta Secretorum*, ed. Steele, EETS ES 66 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1894), p. 93. See also Peck, in Gower, *Confessio amantis*, p. 73.

The alchemical substance, purified of its ‘rust’ and ‘stink’, indicates the virtuous aspects of alchemical transmutation.<sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> The word ‘vertu’ indicates physical power and strength, but it can also mean moral excellence, indicating its exemplary qualities.<sup>57</sup><sup>58</sup> As the Latin gloss indicates,

[...] primus dicitur lapis vegetabilis, qui sanitatem conseruat, secundus dicitur lapis animalis, qui membra et virtutes sensibiles fortificat, tercius dicitur lapis mineralis, qui omnia metalla purificat et in suum perfectum naturali potencia deducit. (IV.2534ff)

In other words, the *lapis vegetabilis* (vegetable stone) preserves health, the *lapis animalis* (animal stone) ‘fortifies the limbs and the senses’, and the third Stone purifies all metals and leads them to a perfect state.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the Philosopher’s Stone enables transformation and conception through virtuous practice.<sup>60</sup> The Stone is perfection, the ideal result of diligent labour in a post-lapsarian world, and self-replicating in its capacity for virtue.<sup>61</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, ‘the rede and to the whyte’ (IV.2571) refers to the final stages of alchemical transmutation; yet as Peck notes, however, Gower’s syntax indicates that ‘rede’ is gold and ‘whyte’ is silver, indicating the profitable results of alchemical practice.<sup>62</sup> The Stone indeed ‘hath pouer to profite’ (IV.2572) and can ideally make the perfect (and wealthy) man. As I have already discussed, however, the paradox of the perfect Stone is that it is unattainable. Ideally, the user conceives the Stone through his practical labour and virtuous behaviour, and he is rewarded morally and financially for his efforts with gold and silver.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, p. 120. Fletcher points out that ‘stink’ and ‘rust’ refer to sin and corruption, and ‘vice’ refers to moral error. She also notes the contrast between ‘stink’, which indicates the stench of vice and moral decay, and ‘clennesse’, which means ‘moral purity or innocence’.

<sup>56</sup> Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, p. 120.

<sup>57</sup> See the *MED* entry for ‘vertu’. Cf. Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, p. 120. Fletcher rightly suggests that these particulars indicate the alchemical section’s moral and philosophical foundation rather than simply an encyclopaedic one.

<sup>58</sup> Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, p. 120.

<sup>59</sup> See Gower, *Confessio amantis*, p. 402.

<sup>60</sup> Batkie, ‘*Merita Perpetuata* in Gower’s Vernacular Poetry’, p. 161. The Philosopher’s Stone is the ‘reward for labour and a continual reproduction of labour itself’.

<sup>61</sup> Jehane Ragai further comments on the Stone’s potential to ‘strengthen man’s moral nature, secure him wisdom and give him increased understanding and heightened faculties’. See Ragai and بيغ, ‘The Philosopher’s Stone: Alchemy and Chemistry’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 12 (1992), 58-77, at p. 61.

<sup>62</sup> Peck, in Gower, *Confessio amantis*, p. 402.

In its current state, alchemy will not work, and this passage reveals the need for a ‘language of reformation’ to address the post-lapsarian decline and the failure of the alchemists.<sup>63</sup> Gower writes that the ‘science of himself is trewe’ (IV.2598), indicating that alchemy as a theoretical practice and virtuous model for labour is genuine. Yet even the most virtuous alchemists will not succeed in Gower’s post-lapsarian world; the moral alchemists in the past knew best, but there are no winners in the current age, and their efforts are wasteful and uneconomic.

This brings into question the very value of alchemy for the contemporary worker. If the alchemical elixir indeed ‘hath pouer to profite’ (IV.2572), what value does it have for the practitioner and moreover the reader? While alchemical perfection is unattainable, the virtues and morals of this alchemy present an exemplary model to aspire to. This is further illustrated when considered in the wider framework of the *Confessio amantis*. In Book V of the *Confessio amantis*, for example, Genius presents the antithesis of the alchemical exemplary model with the temptation of Avarice:

Both Avarice natheles,  
 If he mai geten his ences  
 Of gold, that wole he serve and kepe,  
 For he takth of noght ells kepe,  
 Bot forto fille his bagges large;  
 And al is to him bot a charge,  
 For he ne parteth noght withal,  
 Bot kepth it, as a servant schal. (V.125-32)

While Gower does not draw explicit comparisons between these two sections, there are implicit parallels in terms of moral practice and gold production. Genius’s alchemical model promotes the ‘contagious good’ or good moral behaviour with the Philosopher’s Stone, which imparts virtue to its users. Hoarding gold, however, is a form of Avarice, keeping it to oneself ‘as a servant schal’ (V.132). Moreover, it lacks the ethical multiplication of gold found in alchemy since the hoarder ‘ne parteth noght withal’ (V.131); his material wealth is devoid of any moral

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<sup>63</sup> Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, p. 120.

meaning and he selfishly keeps it to himself. Gower further expounds on the value of avaricious gold accumulation:

And thus, thogh that he multeplie  
 His gold, withoute tresorie  
 He is, for man is noght amended  
 With gold, bot if it be despended  
 To mannes us [...] (V.133-7)

Whereas Book IV focusses on the vice of Sloth, in Book V Genius describes the vice of Greed to Amans, and the first *exemplum* provided in this book is the tale of Midas. This passage refers to immoral conduct of gold multiplication, which contrasts the alchemical wisdom of the ancients. A man can multiply as much gold as he wants, but without the virtues imparted by the Stone or a means to convert his wealth into meaningful ends, it is worthless and in vain ('withoute tresorie').<sup>64</sup> The tale of Midas reveals the negation of the multiplication of gold, with Midas nearly starving as the result of his golden touch.<sup>65</sup> This passage further informs Amans to consider and exercise the moral basis for his labour. For Gower, the incentive of gold is not the answer for labour or for alchemical practice for 'man is noght amended / With gold' (V.135-6). For Gower, sin arises from money *itself* since it embodies material interests and worldly consumption.<sup>66</sup> The virtuous practices and moral values of good labour help to amend human frailty and corruption and improve one's well-being. With good moral intention, these virtues can be practised and shared with society for the greater good. Alchemists in Gower's society, however, are so impoverished and debt-ridden that successfully multiplying alchemical gold remains a dream or lost art for them.

Although alchemical practice was debated, challenged, and often condemned in fourteenth-century England, Gower found moral meaning and value in it, presenting it as a model for perfect labour in Book IV of the *Confessio amantis*. Moreover, as I have argued, his

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<sup>64</sup> See also Epstein, 'Dismal Science', p. 225. Epstein also observes that this critique draws from Aristotle's *Politics* as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, XI.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Epstein, 'Dismal Science', pp. 225-6. See also Gower, *Confessio amantis*, V.280-9.

<sup>66</sup> Epstein, 'Dismal Science', pp. 226-7.



‘new *exemplum*’ establishes a new way of using alchemy to express moral points about human fallibility and moral blindness in Middle English poetry. While Chaucer and Gower both employ the ‘new *exemplum*’ in their alchemical sections, however, Gower’s alchemical section notably differs; his passage is part of a wider framework on the value of labour and good ‘werk’ within the Book of Sloth, and his *exemplum* is less personalised than the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*. I also argue that Gower’s alchemical exegesis does follow an exemplary narrative, especially within the wider ethical framework and narrative of the *Confessio amantis*. His alchemical section presents itself as exemplary; while it is an unusual *exemplum*, it can be read as one on its own and understood within the broader framework of the *Confessio amantis*. Gower’s description of alchemy is consistent with Fraud in the *Mirour de l’Omme*; while very different from his reading of alchemy in the *Confessio*, it also explores the theme of moral decay and post-lapsarian decline. These themes are particularly helpful in not identifying the section’s value to Gower’s work in its entirety but also help to read it as an *exemplum* for self-improvement and good work ethic. While Gower’s alchemical section is less about alchemy and more about *using* alchemy for exemplary ends, it shows the ways in which the art of alchemy can be a useful exemplary and moral vehicle. The science of alchemy is true, and the alchemical purging of vices and embracing of the virtues provide what Fletcher calls ‘transmuting the microcosm of the self’.<sup>67</sup> Gower was much more interested in the alchemical theory of transmutation, albeit not in a very technical way, than practising the art itself.<sup>68</sup> Gower’s use of alchemy and the ‘new *exemplum*’ help to establish the notion of alchemical narratives as exemplary in Middle English poetry.

As I will show in the following chapter, Chaucer also uses alchemy within an exemplary framework in Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s*

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<sup>67</sup> Fletcher, ‘Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio amantis*’, p. 129.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Fox, *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower*, p. 135.

*Tale*. Chaucer presents a much less positive image of alchemy than the one in the *Confessio amantis*, yet the themes of human fallibility and moral blindness remain consistent in his work. Chaucer's alchemical *exemplum* is much less clear-cut than Gower's, particularly since he subverts the exemplary narrative with his unreliable narrator, but in the next chapter I will interrogate his approach to alchemy in literature and following Mitchell's reading of 'moral Chaucer', show how this alchemical tale presents itself as an exemplary narrative.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CHAUCER AND THE ALCHEMISTS: EXEMPLARY NARRATIVE IN THE *CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE*

### Introduction

When Elias Ashmole introduces Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* to his seventeenth-century audience, he champions Chaucer's narrative authority and impact upon Renaissance alchemy: 'Now as Concerning Chaucer (the Author of this Tale) he is ranked amongst Heremetick Philosophers'.<sup>1</sup> Not only is Chaucer's alchemical *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* recognised in *Theatricum Chemicum Britanniae* (Ashmole's compendium of alchemical treatises and literature), but it is also included in all its parts (*Prologue, Pars Prima, Pars Secunda*, as well as a special introduction from Ashmole), suggesting the significance of Chaucer's legacy in the alchemical tradition.<sup>2</sup> Ashmole equates Chaucer with the Hermetic philosophers, the great Sages who founded alchemy, placing him alongside Gower, Norton, and George Ripley as key alchemists of the medieval period.<sup>3</sup>

While his *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* and *Tale* were hugely influential in both the medieval and Renaissance periods, the debate concerning Chaucer's actual involvement with alchemy continues today.<sup>4</sup> Critics remain divided, however, over their interpretation of the Yeoman character in the tale. He is as slippery and elusive as the alchemy that he practices; some scholars feel sympathy for him and others ruthlessly indict him. Yet these scholars often overlook the exemplary function of the poem, particularly its connection to Gower's 'new

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<sup>1</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (London, 1652), p. 470. Joseph E. Grennen identifies Ashmole as the 'first to evidence Chaucer's alchemy as profound knowledge'. See Grennen, 'Jargon Transmuted: Alchemy in Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*', Fordham University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1960, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> See Schuler, 'The Renaissance Chaucer as Alchemist', pp. 305-34, and Noel L. Brann, 'Alchemy and Melancholy in Medieval and Renaissance Thought: A Query into the Mystical Basis of their Relationship', *Ambix*, 32.3 (1985), 127-48.

<sup>3</sup> Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, p. 470.

<sup>4</sup> For example, S. Foster Damon argues that Chaucer knew the secrets of alchemy, whereas Edgar Hill Duncan and Pauline Aiken point out what they believe to be mistakes in the narrative, which no adept alchemist would make. Linden observes, however, that scholars agree that Chaucer possessed an adept knowledge of alchemy. See Damon, 'Chaucer and Alchemy', *PMLA*, 39 (1924), 782-8, at p. 782; Duncan, 'The Yeoman's Canon's "Silver Citrinacioun"', *Modern Philology*, 37.3 (1940), 241-62; Aiken, 'Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Knowledge of Alchemy', in *Studies in Philology*, 41.3 (1944), 371-89; and Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 43.

*exemplum*'. Reading the story as an *exemplum* helps to clarify Chaucer's own moral arguments about alchemy and its practice. Chaucer specifically uses the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as a negative *exemplum*, describing (pseudo)scientific practice in the form of alchemy.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the contrasts between labour and idleness in Books IV and V of the *Confessio amantis*, where Gower uses alchemy as a model for the highest form of human labour and presents an *exemplum* for human fallibility and failed experimentation. In this chapter, I will examine how Chaucer uses alchemy within an exemplary framework in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, following Gower's use of the 'new *exemplum*' in the *Confessio amantis*. Chaucer's tale reflects fourteenth-century scientific issues concerning alchemy, maintaining an ambiguous position, and he weaves them together to create a realistic, albeit satirical, portrait of the Canon and his Yeoman. In this chapter, I argue that Chaucer's use of the alchemical *exemplum* in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* demonstrates the moral blindness of contemporary alchemists as well as their fallible nature. Chaucer further draws from both the moral and practical tradition of alchemy in order to examine social concerns about misuse of human intellect and lack of metaphorical sight. The Canon's Yeoman is unable to succeed with alchemy. For Chaucer, alchemy offers valuable ethical truths, but human corruption and fallibility, particularly in the form of immoral practice and greed, hinders alchemical success. As Joseph E. Grennen writes, the Yeoman's interpretation addresses the 'pretentiousness, perverseness, and confusion which he found in alchemy', but also its seeds of moral and spiritual truths.<sup>5</sup> Like Gower, Chaucer identifies the realities of alchemical practice, but he creates the characters of the Yeoman and the Canons as part of the narrative in order to further explore his *exemplum*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Grennen, 'Jargon Transmuted', p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> In order to distinguish the two Canons of the prologue and tale, I will refer to the pilgrim as the 'Canon', and I the character in *Pars Secunda* as the 'canon', which is standard critical practice.

In the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*, the Canon and his Yeoman, who are absent in the *General Prologue*, join the pilgrims as they near Canterbury (VIII.555-7). The Canon departs in haste after the Yeoman discloses too much information about their alchemical experimentation, leaving the Yeoman in the spotlight to tell his tale. Most manuscripts of the tale feature the prologue and the tale in two parts.<sup>7</sup> In the first part of the tale, the Yeoman tells the audience of his alchemical failures and exploitation at the hands of the Canon. Like the Wife of Bath, the Yeoman is so immersed in the story of his life that his actual tale does not start until later (the Wife of Bath has an extended prologue, however, whereas the Yeoman's tale has two parts). The second part, or *Pars Secunda*, tells of an unscrupulous canon-chemist who swindles a chantry priest for a large sum of money.

This chapter will also examine the role of sight in the context of transmutation and the Canon's Yeoman. The Yeoman has all the tools he needs for transmutation (or so it would seem), but he doubts the success of alchemy, and moreover finds it confusing. He recognises the limitations of alchemy and its physical impossibility, but his lack of insight into its virtuous ideals results in failure. The Yeoman does not possess the spiritual purity that is required for an alchemical marriage between Sulphur and Mercury; he is analogous to inferior base metals in alchemical experimentation and appears leaden in colour and physically unhealthy. I will examine the themes of blindness, sight, and human greed that appear in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, where alchemy is most explicitly explored within a moral context. As I will discuss, analysing the misuse of knowledge and alchemical jargon in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* helps to explore more complex moral ideas about human fallibility and sight. The tale is less about the science of alchemy and more about human greed and reassessing proper moral values.

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<sup>7</sup> Helen Cooper notably refers to these parts as *Life* and *Tricks*. See Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 368.

The placement of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* near the end of the *Canterbury Tales* also reflects Chaucer's interest in exploring moral blindness and sight. Modern scholarship on Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales* focusses exhaustively on the contrast between the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale*, specifically the moral contrast between the selflessness of St Cecilia and the fruitless practices and the selfish greed of the Yeoman.<sup>8</sup> St Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale* is spiritually and physically pure, refraining from bodily pleasure and revealing her devotion to God. Like Gower, however, Chaucer crafts these two tales to reflect the use and misuse of moral practice.<sup>9</sup> The Parson also makes general comments about vices and virtues, summing up the interest in morality which Chaucer has maintained throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. Some scholars, such as R.G. Baldwin, interpret the Parson's moral commentary as applying to specific pilgrims. The Parson's recognition of the values of the virtues reveals his moral sight.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the Yeoman, the Parson is successful with his practices, and his preaching effectively 'encapsulates the various *moralitees* of the whole work

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<sup>8</sup> Muscatine launched this theory, contrasting St Cecilia's 'bath of flames, conquering fire through faith, and the blackened, sweating believers in earth, whose fires blows up in their faces' and linking the Canon's Yeoman's naïveté to a 'failure of vision'. Grennen further developed the unity of Fragment VIII, revealing the structural connection between the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Cecilia's successful Christian life, which culminates in her martyrdom, opposes the 'duplicity, avarice, and the sulphurous fume of the alchemists' laboratories'. Bruce A. Rosenberg examines the theme of sight in the two tales, arguing that the Yeoman's sight is distorted, whereas St Cecilia's piety and chastity allow her to see clearly. Robert M. Longworth links the two tales through the theme of transformation. Both Cecilia and the Yeoman transform other people and other things, but the nature of their changes are completely different. St Cecilia's story emphasises charity over selfishness, whereas the Yeoman's tale is the polar opposite. Whereas St Cecilia successfully transmutes herself from bodily to spiritual and influences the lives of those around her for the better, the Yeoman can neither transmute nor transform anything, and he lives in an unfulfilled state of misery. Longworth further argues that the duped victims of the false canon's swindling experience a transformation in their minds since they suppose that one substance is changing into another. The Yeoman informs the reader, however, that this is all a trick, and the transformation itself is an illusion. See Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, pp. 216, 219; Grennen, 'Saint Cecilia's "Chemical Wedding": The Unity of the *Canterbury Tales* Fragment VIII', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 65.3 (1966), 466-81, at p. 466; Rosenberg, 'The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman', *The Chaucer Review*, 2.4 (1968), pp. 278-91; and Longworth, 'Privileged Knowledge: St. Cecilia and the Alchemist in the *Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review*, 27.1 (1992), 87-96, at pp. 87-9.

<sup>9</sup> Richard M. Trask interprets the *Manciple's Tale* as one of moral blindness, referring to the Manciple and Phoebus. This metaphorical blindness continues the Yeoman's blindness and is juxtaposed with the Parson's clarity and enlightenment in the final tale. See Trask, 'The Manciple's Problems', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 14 (1977), pp. 109-16.

<sup>10</sup> Cooper argues that his Tale stresses 'teaching by example' as well as by precept, revealing Chaucer's exploration of moral issues as an *exemplum*. Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 403.

into a single treatise'.<sup>11</sup> The Parson's sermon ends the *Canterbury Tales* on a hopeful note; despite the fallibility of the Canon's Yeoman and the two canons, they can still improve their moral well-being through practising the virtues, although alchemical practice is not the right approach.

### Reading Chaucer and Alchemy for the Morals

Despite the evidence for moral readings of Chaucer's alchemical section, Chaucer's reputation as a moral poet has not always been popular in recent scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Chaucer's apparent misnomer as 'kindly Chaucer' stems from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's epithet in the nineteenth century, which led to disagreement over Chaucer's possible moral authority in twentieth-century scholarship.<sup>13</sup> Yet these scholars overlook the fact that Chaucer's early readers recognised him as a morally serious poet. Henry Scogan, for example, read him as a moral philosopher, and in recent scholarship Mitchell argues that Chaucer is as 'frequently morally serious as Gower', and arguably more so in some of the examples he provides.<sup>14</sup> Chaucer and Gower specifically use the *exemplum* for didactic purposes, to raise points about moral

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<sup>11</sup> Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 405.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, numerous twentieth-century scholars argue against Chaucer's moral authority, notably Derek Pearsall, Alfred David, and Andrew Walsh. See Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 48; David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 6; and Walsh, 'Story and Wisdom in Chaucer: *The Physician's Tale* and *The Summoner's Tale*', in *Manuscript, Narrative, Lexicon: Essays on Literary and Cultural Transmission in Honour of Whitney F. Bolton*, ed. Robert Boenig and Kathleen Davis (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), p. 89. Cf. Michaela Gruden, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> See Woolf's article 'Moral Chaucer and Kindly Gower', pp. 221-45. Woolf argues that the traditional epithets 'moral Gower' and 'kindly Chaucer' should be inverted. She also suggests that Coleridge misunderstood Chaucer's irony when he termed him 'kindly Chaucer'. While I address the issue of 'moral Chaucer' in this dissertation, however, I also examine 'moral Gower', as the previous chapter indicates.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, p. 7. J.A. Burrow also argues for Chaucer's moral authority in the *Canterbury Tales*, suggesting that 'the exemplary mode is present everywhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, but everywhere subverted'. Minnis argues that Chaucer uses *exempla*, although Chaucer was not interested in doing so to assert his own moral authority. Elizabeth Allen also discusses Chaucer's use of the *exemplum* in the sacrifice of Virginia in Gower and Chaucer. More recently, Brian Gastle comments on the *exemplum* as a shared literary device used by both authors: 'the *exemplum* serves as an intellectual model for an interrogation of past, present, and future'. Cf. Alistair J. Minnis, 'De *Vulgari Auctoritate*: Chaucer, Gower and Men of Great Authority', in *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. R.F. Yeager (Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1991); Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the Gawain Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 90; and Gastle, 'Gower and Chaucer', p. 56.

practices and behaviour. Like Gower, Chaucer configures the *exemplum* for his secular audience in new ways, although his *exempla* are arguably more complex and often difficult to interpret.

In this chapter, I examine Chaucer's exemplary rhetoric in connection to his alchemical poetry and explore the implications of such moral readings. I discuss how Chaucer uses alchemy as a vehicle for his exemplary narrative in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and to some extent in the *Second Nun's Tale*. Despite its presentation of an exemplary reading, little critical attention has been paid to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as an *exemplum*.<sup>15</sup> According to Lawrence V. Ryan, the Canon's Yeoman tells his exemplary tale to 'show how the devil can see the sinner and have dominion over him only through his sins'.<sup>16</sup> The tale is less about the devil, however, and more about the Canon's Yeoman's lack of sight and failure to produce anything spiritually or materially rewarding.<sup>17</sup> A.C. Spearing suggests that the tale's overarching *exemplum* can be determined from its final lines, writing that 'God's enemies never prosper', which is a convincing reading but as I suggest, there is more to this *exemplum* than simply this message.<sup>18</sup> Since it is impossible to discern whether the Canon's Yeoman or Chaucer speaks the final verses of the tale, this remains ambivalent; however, the reader can draw exemplary lessons from the Canon's Yeoman's narrative through their awareness of his mishaps and failures, particularly his moral blindness.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Grennen suggests that Chaucer may have adapted the tale from an *exemplum* on alchemical fraud, although there is no immediate evidence for this. See Grennen, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Alchemical "Mass"', *Studies in Philology*, 62.4 (1965), 546-60, at p. 554.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence V. Ryan, 'The Canon Yeoman's Desperate Confession', *The Chaucer Review*, 8.4 (1974), 297-310, at p. 299. Cf. Donald R. Dickson, 'The "Slidyng" Yeoman: The Real Drama in the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*', *South Central Review*, 2.2 (1985), 10-22, at p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Lee Patterson comments that the first part of the tale is exemplary, with the Canon's Yeoman serving himself up as a 'simple if extravagant *exemplum* of the wasted life'. Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances*, p. 166. Alistair Bennett also comments that the tale examines the extent to which the Canon's Yeoman can 'draw exemplary lessons from his own experience'. See also Bennett, 'Covetousness, "Unkyndenesse", and the "Blered" Eye in *Piers Plowman* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 28 (2014), 29-64, at p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> A.C. Spearing, 'The *Canterbury Tales* IV: *Exemplum* and Fable', in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 195-213, at p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> See also Mann's chapter on clerical greed and anti-clerical satire in Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales** (Cambridge: Cambridge



Chaucer's presentation of alchemy as an *exemplum* in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* appears less straightforward than Gower's in the *Confessio amantis*. Chaucer complicates the reading of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as an exemplary narrative due to the unreliability of his narrator, who presents an *exemplum* within an *exemplum* with the second part of the tale. Chaucer reveals the Canon's Yeoman's narrative as an *exemplum* for failed labour and human fallibility. The irony, however, of the Canon's Yeoman as narrator is that he is the least authoritative person, since he is prone to failure and mishap, and his ethical stance is questionable at best. Following Mitchell's reading of Chaucer and Gower and the 'ethics of exemplarity', I suggest an exemplary reading of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* which connects to Gower's 'new *exemplum*' as shown in the previous chapter, focussing particularly on how Chaucer uses alchemy within an exemplary framework to ground his moral points.

### **Chaucer Introduces the Canon and His Yeoman**

Before examining the poem's exemplarity, I will firstly discuss its characters and the context of alchemy. The Canon and Yeoman are absent from the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*, and do not appear until the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*. Critics have speculated that Chaucer was possibly the victim of alchemical fraud, and thus added the tale at a later date, but there is no circumstantial evidence to support this claim.<sup>20</sup> The Canon arrives with his Yeoman abruptly (562-3).<sup>21</sup> The sweat suggests haste: he is possibly fleeing from one crime scene to the next. These implications are reinforced by his physical appearance: 'A clote-leef he hadde

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University Press, 1973), pp. 17-37. Cf. J. Beall, 'Verbal and Spiritual Alchemy in *The Pardoner's Tale* and *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*', *Medieval Perspectives*, 15.1 (2000), 35-41, at p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Reidy's notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 20, 946. Cf. Brown, 'Is the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* Apocryphal?', *English Studies*, 64.6 (1983), 481-90, at p. 481. See also Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. N.F. Blake (London: Arnold, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Muscatine convincingly argues that the abrupt entrance of the Canon and his Yeoman in the poem is reactionary and analogous to a chemical process. See Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 221.

under his hood / For swoote and for to keep his heed from heete' (VIII.578-9).<sup>22</sup> The Canon's and his Yeoman's unexpected arrival brings attention to themselves. Harry Bailly and the audience are naturally attracted (VIII.629) to the Yeoman's tales of the Canon's workings, and his promise that 'He koude al clene turnen up-so-down, / And pave it al of silver and of gold' (VIII.625-6). Yet there is no multiplied silver and gold to be found, and neither the Canon nor his Yeoman can keep their promises. Harry Bailly further observes and comments on the dishevelled appearance of the Canon:

'His overslope nys nat worth a myte,  
As in effect, to hym, so moot I go,  
It is al bauty and tofore also.  
Why is thy lord so sluttissh, I the preye,  
And is of power bettre clooth to beye,  
If that his dede accorde with thy speche?' (VIII.633-8)

The answer, of course, is that the Canon and his Yeoman cannot keep their promises. The Canon has no 'bettre clooth to beye' (VIII.637) because his alchemy does not work and it has left him impoverished. The Yeoman does not fare much better. While they devote themselves to alchemical practice (or so it seems), they do not practise virtuously, using alchemy for material and exploitative ends. This is apparent not only in their suspicious appearance, but also in their work ethic. Chaucer does not use productive words to describe their activities and workmanship; instead, as I will show, much of his wording signifies their wastefulness and short-sightedness. Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale*, on the other hand, succeeds at being 'besy' because she devotes herself to attainable ends, that is the love of Christ, and lives virtuously.

The Canon's Yeoman is not only materially impoverished after years of unsuccessful alchemical practice, but he is also spiritually impoverished, lacking spiritual devotion as well as any sense of moral direction. His lack of success brings him frustration and misery. The Yeoman also fails himself, since he does not live up to his expectations or achieve any of his

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<sup>22</sup> Rosenberg compares the Canon's sweat to 'an alembic distilling the devil's vegetables', suggesting his suspicious and potentially sinister nature. See Rosenberg, 'Reason and Revelation in the *Canterbury Tales*', Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1965, p. 113.

alchemical goals. His goals are as obscure and murky as his vision since he does not have the knowledge or skills to reach them: 'And of my swink yet blered is min eye' (VIII.730). He cannot work because of his poor eyesight, thus metaphorically indicating his obscure goals. His impurity and corruption are not confined to his physical appearance, however. The Yeoman's *confessio* is a testament to the Canon's false teachings. The Yeoman tries to justify their sudden arrival amongst the pilgrims, but it comes across as sycophantic:

'Oute of youre hostelrie I saugh you ryde,  
And warned heer my lord and my sovereyn,  
Which that to ryden with you is ful fayn  
For his desport, he loveth daliaunce.' (VIII.589-92)

He portrays himself in a favourable light here, warning 'my lord and my sovereyn' (590) and claiming responsibility for joining the others. The reader of the tale cannot verify this story since only the Yeoman's version is presented. He is an insincere flatterer, praising the Canon before giving the audience a totally different impression moments later. He acts for selfish reasons, not seeking to improve the well-being of others around him, but rather to improve his own image. The Yeoman also loves to talk, and he is a teller of tales.<sup>23</sup> It is impossible to know what the reality of the situation is, particularly since these characters appear theatrical and behave paradoxically in the tale. Moreover, the performance of these characters makes it difficult to distinguish the truth of their stories from their fabrications.<sup>24</sup> The Canon's Yeoman wants to be heard, and with the Canon gone, he can tell his own tale of deceit and falsehood as well as explain his reasoning for the Canon's flight.

The Canon's Yeoman tells an *exemplum* in the poem as a means of satisfying his need for attention as well as appeasing the curiosity of his audience.<sup>25</sup> While the Yeoman presents it as an *exemplum*, Chaucer presents it as an ironic inversion of an *exemplum*, in which the teller

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<sup>23</sup> Benson and Patricia J. Eberle, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1234. John Reidy defines 'daliaunce' as 'sociable conversation, sociability', although it seems to be used ironically here. Perhaps the above use of the term refers to the Canon's next swindle.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Dickson, 'The "Slidyng" Yeoman', p. 14.

presents a tale which does not do what he claims it will. It also questions whether a corrupt teller can be telling a moral tale. The audience, having heard the *Second Nun's Tale* beforehand, knows that St Cecilia exemplifies sainthood and good moral living. The Yeoman's story of the alchemical swindler, however, has no traces of sainthood, and simply tells us what *not* to do rather than providing a model for exemplary living. The Yeoman tells his audience that 'heere shal arise game' (VIII.703), implying that his narrative is a sport or performance. His storytelling thus emerges as entertainment rather than education. He then criticises the Canon for bringing him 'first unto that game' (VIII.708) that is alchemy, implying that both the Canon and himself are playing games of their own. The Canon manipulates the Yeoman for his own dubious ends, yet the Yeoman manipulates his audience to fulfil his own needs.<sup>26</sup> There is nothing well-meaning about the Yeoman. While the Yeoman has indeed been trumped by the Canon, there is no concrete evidence that he is the victim of the second canon that he refers to. The Yeoman wants his audience to believe that he is a victim, yet he is in full control of his actions.<sup>27</sup> I suggest that he puts on his performance to gain sympathy and attention from the audience. He also wants the audience to think that he is a good person and a victim, but the reader knows better.<sup>28</sup>

Like the Yeoman, the Canon should also not be read as a sympathetic figure and is the opposite of exemplary. His elusiveness and hasty departure raise suspicion, and the Yeoman's

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Hughes, however, interprets the Yeoman as a sympathetic character, describing him as the 'well-meaning canon's yeoman'. Peggy Ann Knapp argues that the Yeoman is 'the victim of a schizophrenic period of transformation', yet she overlooks his immoral aspects. Ryan also sympathises with the Yeoman, arguing that 'he has himself been a victim of the Canon's trumpery'. See Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England*, p. 76; Peggy Ann Knapp, 'The Work of Alchemy', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30.3 (2000), 575-99, at p. 593; and Ryan, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Desperate Confession', p. 304.

<sup>27</sup> Grennen posits that 'His description is highly artificial and peripheral; he has no tale to tell; and his performance consists solely of his jovial entrance, followed quickly by his violent outburst and departure', thus suggesting that the Canon is a volatile, mercurial figure. Knapp connects the Yeoman's performance to alchemical experimentation in general, commenting that his performance 'allows the view that many alchemical endeavours are scams, but it is possible that some are not, that there is, somewhere, a secret that will help Nature perfect herself more efficiently'. See Grennen, 'Chaucer's Characterization of the Canon and His Yeoman', p. 282, and Knapp, 'The Work of Alchemy', p. 580. Cf. Samuel McCracken, 'Confessional Prologue and the Topography of the Canon's Yeoman', *Modern Philology*, 68 (1971), 289-91.

<sup>28</sup> See also Jackson J. Campbell, 'The Canon's Yeoman as Imperfect Paradigm', *The Chaucer Review*, 17.2 (1982), 171-81, at p. 179.

account of him raises even more questions.<sup>29</sup> I suggest that the appearance of the Canon and the Yeoman (their clothes, their faces, and their behaviour) are part of their performance. The Canon and his Yeoman wish to appear as sympathetic, likeable figures, but the realities of their characters become apparent through their interactions with the pilgrims. In short, the Yeoman and Canon are not as they seem.<sup>30</sup> The Canon's implicit lack of moral restraint and misuse of knowledge are paradigmatic of the unscrupulous alchemists and corrupt churchmen whose immoral practices led to Pope John XXII banning alchemy.<sup>31</sup> Thomas Tyrwhitt, a famous Chaucerian scholar of the eighteenth century, comments on the 'evils' of these late medieval alchemists:

That their pretended science was much cultivated about this time, and produced its usual evils, may fairly be inferred from the Act, which was passed soon after, to make it Felony to multiplie gold or silver, or to use the art of multiplication.<sup>32</sup>

The Act that Tyrwhitt mentions is most likely Pope John XXII's decretal against alchemy, suggesting the influence of alchemical decretals in the tale.

The Yeoman's failures and poverty also reflect fourteenth-century clerical and literary views on alchemy, which informs the context of reading the poem as exemplary. During the fourteenth century, religious organisations continued to challenge alchemical practice and stereotyped it:

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<sup>29</sup> Marie P. Hamilton identifies the Yeoman's master as an Augustinian Canon with his white surplice, black clothes, and hood (VIII.558-9), whereas the Yeoman has a secular role. See Hamilton, 'The Clerical Status of Chaucer's Alchemist', *Speculum*, 16.1 (1941), 103-8, at p. 103. Cf. Rosenberg, 'Swindling Alchemist, Antichrist', *Centennial Review*, 6.4 (1962), 566-80, at pp. 175-80. On the topic of the Canon's appearance, see also Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 49, and Bruce L. Grenberg, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale: Boethian Wisdom and the Ancients', *The Chaucer Review*, 1.1 (1966), 37-54, at p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> With regards to the Canon's appearance, Patterson rightly argues that the Canon's religious identity is a 'public phenomenon manipulable for private purposes'. See Patterson, 'Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 15 (1993), 25-57, at p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> Ann W. Astell argues that both the Yeoman and the Canon embody the charges against alchemy. See Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*, p. 134.

<sup>32</sup> Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Thomas Tyrwhitt, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1798), vol. 1, pp. 110-1. Tyrwhitt's use of the term 'usual evils' refers to human fallibility. He seems to assert that it is the subject itself that is culpable for human error (that is, the allure of gold and monetary gain), whereas it is actually the user whose moral judgement determines its use. It is worth mentioning, however, that the immoral Canon and his Yeoman seem to personify these 'usual evils'.

Alchemy in practice always fails and may be impossible. It both deludes its practitioners, whose motivating force is avarice, by wasting their goods and making them into deceivers, and is also the cause of scandalous dangers to others who are drawn into its sphere of activity.<sup>33</sup>

As I have discussed in the first and second chapters, this view seems to overlook the thirteenth-century contributions of alchemists such as Albertus Magnus, whose scholastic intentions were not to delude, but to discover God's mysteries in nature through alchemy. Echoes of these condemnatory writings on alchemy appear in the work of Chaucer's literary contemporaries as well, notably in *Piers Plowman*, which I have discussed in Chapter 2. Chaucer also responds to this alchemical tradition, yet his literary response is much more complex.<sup>34</sup> As mentioned previously, alchemy as a science is not inherently bad, but the misuse of such knowledge, as indicated by the Canon's exploitation of his staff and the Yeoman's alchemical failure, serves as an *exemplum* of immoral behaviour in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. While the Canon and Yeoman as literary figures respond to the developing fourteenth-century alchemical literary tradition, Chaucer weaves his own ambiguous portraits of these alchemical figures, using them to make satirical and moral points. His moral points address the themes of greed for money, moral blindness, as well as the misuse of knowledge and the deceiver deceived.

Chaucer presents his alchemist characters as over-the-top and larger than life figures, sweating and clad in rags, which connects to the notion of the poem as satirical. The Yeoman as a narrator also provides evidence of the satirical mode; he tells his tale as an *exemplum* yet the reader is aware of his failings and misgivings as both alchemist and human being, indicating his own corruption and vices. As with most of the pilgrims, the Canon's comical implications are also complicated by his dubious nature, particularly his hasty departure from the scene and his silencing of the Yeoman (at least temporarily):

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<sup>33</sup> Duncan, 'Jonson's Alchemist and the Literature of Alchemy', *PMLA*, 61.3 (1946), 699-710, at p. 638.

<sup>34</sup> Linden rightly argues that Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* begins a tradition of alchemical satire 'in which a negative attitude towards the art and its practitioners is assumed and the reasons for this attitude explored', which extends into the early modern period. According to Cooper, alchemy is a 'science that blinds its practitioners', but I disagree. It is not alchemy that blinds its practitioners, but rather the practitioners that blind themselves with their immoral beliefs and practices, although it is true that alchemy will never work. See Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 44, and Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 373.

‘Hoold thow thy pees, and spek no words mo.  
Thow sclaudrest me here in this compaignye,  
And eek discoverest what thou sholdest hide.’ (VIII.693-5)

Not only does the Yeoman talk too much, but he also threatens the Canon’s livelihood with his disclosures. The Yeoman’s *confessio* exposes the truths about the Canon (that is, his alleged fraudulence) as well as the Yeoman’s own inadequacies. Patterson points out that the Yeoman’s excessive chatter violates two key protocols of the medieval alchemist: firstly, one should not slander a superior, and secondly, the apprentice should not disclose the secrets of alchemy to others.<sup>35</sup> The Yeoman is guilty of slandering his superior, the Canon, and he cannot keep a secret, as his *confessio* to the pilgrims reveals.

Despite the seriousness of the Yeoman’s violations, Harry Bailly tells the Yeoman to “‘telle on, what so bityde’”, thereby encouraging him to reveal all his secrets. The Yeoman’s violations break down the professional relationship between Canon and Yeoman. Failure, it seems, is constant with the Yeoman (their practice similarly fails, as I will later explain). The Yeoman’s loose tongue leads to consequences, and the Canon physically reacts to his outbursts. On account of the Yeoman’s revelations of ‘[...] pryvetee, / He fledde away for verray sorwe and shame’ (VIII.701-2). The use of ‘pryvetee’ in this passage means secrets or concealment, implying that the Canon, whose secrets have been revealed to the pilgrims, fears for the loss of his livelihood and professional status.<sup>36</sup> The Canon departs as suddenly as he arrives, and he does not appear again in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>37</sup> The Yeoman’s narrative exposes the truths of the Canon’s secrets (‘pryvetee’), and his lack of alchemical success, which is both humiliating and embarrassing for the Canon.

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<sup>35</sup> Patterson, ‘Perpetual Motion’, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> See the *MED* entry for ‘pryvetee’.

<sup>37</sup> Reidy attributes his haste to a fear of ridicule, arguing that since the Canon is guilty of hubris, he must leave due to his ‘high standard of conduct’. Damon comments that the Canon ‘flees in despair’, although Reidy’s explanation seems more reasonable considering the circumstances. Rosenberg argues that his departure is a result of the Canon’s paranoia since he ‘suspects that everyone is talking about him’. I suggest, however, that the Canon’s hastiness points to a fear of exposure. See Reidy, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 33; Damon, ‘Chaucer and Alchemy’, p. 783; and Rosenberg, ‘Reason and Revelation’, p. 72.

Chaucer's depiction of the Canon's Yeoman is also noteworthy when considering him as a teller of an *exemplum*. The Yeoman is a complex and often contradictory portrait: sycophantic yet slandering, clever yet foolish, and seemingly adept yet inexperienced. These paradoxes identify him as an unreliable narrator, and the authenticity of his account comes into question. The reader cannot trust the Canon's Yeoman since he cannot be trusted to keep secrets, and thus it is important to critique his speech and not take him for granted. When the Host asks him, "Why artow so discoloured of thy face?" (VIII.664), he triggers the Yeoman's soliloquy about the hardships and poverty he faces.

### **The Canon's Yeoman's Appearance**

The Yeoman's appearance is also crucial when considering the poem's exemplary aspects. Despite his seemingly impressive alchemical lexicon and knowledge, the Yeoman's discolouration indicates that he is damaged and unattractive, which in turn reflects his lack of knowledge and substance. In Aristotle's treatise *De anima (On the Soul)*, he argues that 'it is only in light that the colour of a thing is seen', since light provides visibility.<sup>38</sup> The light highlights the Yeoman's physical atrophying and presents the truths of his failures. Aristotle further explains that colour is the 'proper object of sight'.<sup>39</sup> The Yeoman's loss of colour also signifies his lack of sight, and both reflect his atrophied physical and moral state. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Yeoman's situation, in which he is condemned to his laboratory and his body is poisoned by his failed experiments, is comparable to Dante's depiction of the alchemists in the circles of Hell in *Inferno*. In both stories, the authors assert that alchemical practice does not work. The 'disease' that Dante's alchemists are inflicted with are comparable to the

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<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. J.A. Smith, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), vol. 1, II.418b2-3, 641-92, at p.666.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, II.418b12, p. 666.



Canon's Yeoman's own sickly state.<sup>40</sup> The Canon's Yeoman's unnatural leaden colour is comparable to sickness and degradation.

The Yeoman response to Harry Bailly, in which he metaphorically paints a picture of the alchemical laboratory in which he supposedly practises, reveals his role as a cautionary figure. The Yeoman is “so used in the fyr to blowe / That it hath chaunged my colour, I trowe” (VIII.666-7). He attributes his discolouration to his alchemical experiences in the furnace, yet it is also indicative of his negative alchemical transmutation: ‘And wher my colour was bothe fressh and reed / Now is it wan and of a leden hewe’ (VIII.727-8). The Yeoman endures a reverse transformation, transforming into the base metal of lead rather than becoming a noble metal.<sup>41</sup> The Yeoman further tells the pilgrims that ‘of my swynk yet blered is myn ye’ (VIII.730), indicating that his work in the laboratory has in fact blinded him. Since the Yeoman represents the regression or reversal of successful transmutation, he lacks the catalyst needed for the positive transmutation that Cecilia experiences, that is faith. In contrast, while St Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale* does not possess the Philosopher's Stone, she can be read as possessing the catalyst for spiritual transmutation since she is ‘ful swift and bisy evere in good werkyng’ (VIII.116). Her active devotion to Christian faith and activity keep her busy and enable her to succeed where the Canon's Yeoman fails. The Canon's Yeoman provides an imaginative vision of the laboratory and his involvement, blowing incessantly to keep the fire going, which suggests that his labour is extreme but misguided and wasted. The adept alchemist should be working away in the laboratory rather than attention-seeking and exposing alchemical secrets. The Canon's Yeoman's seemingly contradictory personality questions the boundary between truth and fabrication in the story.

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<sup>40</sup> Dante, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine*, trans. Sayers, vol. 1, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Olson, ‘Chaucer, Dante, and the Structure of Fragment VIII’, pp. 280-1.

### **The Hellish Laboratory**

In addition to the hellish imagery of the laboratory, the Yeoman's role as puffer in the laboratory gives him a taste of hell, further suggesting his cautionary role.<sup>42</sup> The laboratory is not actually hell, however, but rather the hell that the Yeoman creates for himself. The Yeoman, in his repetition of chemical tasks that lack the spiritual rewards of alchemical virtue, lives in his own hell. The hell of the laboratory contrasts to the divine aspects of St Cecilia's story. As his behaviour and instability indicate, the Yeoman has been driven to despair by his fruitless quest, and the nothingness that results from his labour creates a hellish environment for him, both literally (in terms of his mental and physical health) and figuratively (his spiritual well-being). The Yeoman does not use the word 'hell' in his description of the alchemical laboratory, and instead reserves it for the canon's ill-doing (VIII.918, 1238). The fiery imagery and darkness of the laboratory, however, where the Yeoman has to 'blowe the fir til that myn herte feynte' (VIII.753), implies a hellish workplace. The Yeoman lives in an eternal cycle of alchemical failure, repeating himself, and unable to pass the citrination stage. He tells the pilgrims that 'With this Chanoun I dwelt have seven yeer, / And of his science am I never the neer' (VIII.720-1). The failures of the Yeoman reflect the Canon's own failures as a teacher, since he does not effectively transmit his knowledge from master to apprentice despite seven years of service, and thus his 'science' remains elusive and 'slidyng'.

The Yeoman's description of the acrid smell of the alchemists also suggests their cautionary aspects. The Yeoman claims that 'Men may hem knowe by smel of brymston / For al the world they stynken as a goot' (VIII.885-6). He characterises alchemists by their excessively sulphurous smell, which is comparable to a goat's, and further characterises the Yeoman's imagery as devilish. The stench of alchemists is both literal and figurative, revealing the toxicity of their bodies and soul. On a literal level, they have a pungent, unpleasant odour,

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Ryan, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Desperate Confession', p. 307.

the result of foul chemical reactions and experiments. The acidity of the smell indicates the imperfection and failure of their experiments, and thus functions as an *exemplum* for immoral behaviour.<sup>43</sup> Their use of faeces in chemical experimentation also contributes to their goatish smell, which also signifies the figurative stench of corruption.<sup>44</sup> The irony here, of course, is that the Canon's Yeoman as a practising alchemist stinks as well both metaphorically (since he cannot succeed) and literally.

The Canon's Yeoman's sulphurous odour and his own leaden qualities also exemplify his bodily corruption. Furthermore, the Yeoman states that 'fumes diverse / Of metals, whiche ye han herd me reherce, / Consumed and wasted han my reednesse' (VIII.1097-9). Grennen argues that the Canon's Yeoman's facial colour 'begins with a *rubedo* and ends with a *nigredo*...a wry comment on the perverted nature of the alchemical quest'.<sup>45</sup> *Rubedo* and *nigredo* are part of the ideal alchemical processes required for transmutation (referring to the fourth and final stage and the first stage respectively). That he begins with a human colour and ends with the *nigredo* stage suggests reverse transformation or regression rather than successful transmutation.

### **'Elvysshe' Alchemy and the Failure of Language**

The role of 'elvysshe' knowledge in the poem also helps to understand alchemy's failings and supports the cautionary reading of practising alchemy. For the Canon's Yeoman, 'Though he sitte at his book bothe day and nyght / In lernyng of this elvysshe nyce lore, / Al is in veyn, and parde, muchel I moore' (VIII.841-3), suggesting the impossibility of his task and his wasted time and labour. The meaning of 'elvysshe' here is hotly debated among Chaucerian scholars.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Duncan points out that alchemists used horse dung to keep the fire burning slowly during the first stage of alchemy. See Duncan, 'Jonson's Alchemist and the Literature of Alchemy', p. 701.

<sup>44</sup> Epstein also suggests a connection between the stink to the moral of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, that 'unrequested favours stink'. See Epstein, 'Dismal Science', pp. 245-6.

<sup>45</sup> Grennen, 'Jargon Transmuted', p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Reidy defines 'elvysshe' as 'strange, mysterious'. See Reidy, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 274

Elvish knowledge is alien to humans, and unattainable due to the inferior nature of humans.<sup>47</sup> The word also appears earlier in the tale, where it is used to describe the elusive science of alchemy: ‘Our elvysshe craft, we semen wonder wise’ (VIII.751). The term can be both positive and negative here, perhaps relating to the supernatural aspects of the craft, but also linking to the theme of blindness since the Canon’s Yeoman is trying to practice an elusive art that is unclear to him. Richard Firth Green argues that the term means elvish, commenting that ‘alchemy is an elvish calling and the alchemist’s expertise is elvish’.<sup>48</sup> I agree with Green that it means ‘elvish’, or associated with elves, but more specifically Chaucer’s usage here emphasises its foreignness to humans. Elves are supernatural creatures, and by their very nature humans cannot access ‘elvish’ knowledge, which suggests the Canon’s Yeoman’s human failings.<sup>49</sup> Yet it is not only alchemy’s ‘elvysshe’ nature that causes problems for the Yeoman.

The Yeoman’s alchemical language, while seemingly persuasive, also highlights how his lack of understanding exemplifies its failures. The Yeoman talks excessively, but paradoxically he has nothing important to say. Similarly, he presents apparent knowledge of alchemical terms and procedures, yet lacks knowledge of himself, which is perhaps his most fundamental flaw. The Yeoman lists his alchemical knowledge as a means of showing off, yet there is a sense of disconnectedness to it. Despite the intellectual implications of these terms, they are presented arbitrarily and without depth. Chaucer articulates the Yeoman’s jargon to indicate the fallacies

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Brown argues that ‘elvysshe’ is not necessarily hellish, but certainly unknown to us. Richard Firth Green suggests that the use of the term here refers to the problematic status of alchemy. See Brown, ‘Is the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* Apocryphal?’, p. 481, and Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 197. I am very grateful to Professor Green for our discussion of ‘elvysshe’ and medieval elves at the John Gower Society International Congress in Durham in July 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Green draws parallels between the medieval notion of the elf and alchemy through their marginality, particularly their ‘obsession with secrecy, and the nature of the rewards they dangle before their initiates’. Green, ‘Changing Chaucer’, in *Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 179-202, at pp. 180, 190.

<sup>49</sup> The alchemical dialogue between Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves, which I discuss in my sixth chapter, also explores the relationship between human and ‘elvysshe’, albeit to potentially collaborative ends.

of his scientific knowledge. For example, he lists some of his alchemical knowledge in the following passage:

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;  
 Sal tartre, alkaly, and sal preparat,  
 And combust materes coagulat;  
 Cley maad with hors or mannes heer, and oille  
 Of tartre, alum glas, berme, wort, and argoille [...] (VIII.806-13)

Chaucer, it seems, also enjoys showing off his knowledge and technical language.<sup>50</sup> Yet the Yeoman's alchemical knowledge is lacking.<sup>51</sup> The Yeoman's description initially suggests an adept knowledge of the craft, but upon further inspection, his words are arbitrary and gibberish since he cannot make it work.<sup>52</sup> Earlier in the poem, he admits that 'This multiplying blent so many oon / That in good feith I trowe that it bee / The cause grettest of swich scarsetee' (VIII.1391-3). The Yeoman's words further reveal his falseness and incompetence. His lack of metaphorical sight and understanding of the science is also due to 'his lack of order and by the mention of many other things, not useful in the present experiment', and attests to Chaucer's use of his narrative as a subversive *exemplum*.<sup>53</sup> The Canon's Yeoman names these ingredients, but does not expound on the practical theory, that is how they unite, and they remain disparate in his language. The Yeoman identifies different stages of alchemy, namely 'Watres rubifying' (VIII.797), 'watres albificacioun' (VIII.805), and 'oure silver citrinacioun' (VIII.816), referring to the reddening, the whitening, and the yellowing, which describe the colouring

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<sup>50</sup> Ironically, Albert Hartung suggests that 'Chaucer may have made the Yeoman a "lewed man" for a more selfishly practical reason—to accommodate his own less than profound knowledge of alchemy'. This seems possible, although Chaucer seems to point out the Yeoman's technical mistakes on purpose. See Albert E. Hartung, 'Pars Secunda and the Development of the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 12.2 (1977), 111-28, at p. 125.

<sup>51</sup> The Canon's Yeoman's portrayal also questions Chaucer's own alchemical knowledge, which is subject to debate.

<sup>52</sup> Patterson claims that the term 'gibberish' and 'jargon' comes from Jabir al Hayyan's obscure alchemical language. See Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances*, p. 45.

<sup>53</sup> Duncan, 'The Yeoman's Canon's "Silver Citrinacioun"', p. 255. Walter Clyde Curry is even more critical, writing that the Yeoman has a 'fly-paper mind which collects everything and understands nothing—except that an explosion usually marks the end of the experiment'. Cf. Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, xxiv.

processes which refine the substance to a purer form. The Yeoman describes his failed attempts to citrinate silver (or Luna):

Ther is also ful many another thing  
 That is unto oure craft apertening  
 Thouh I by ordre hem nat reherce kan,  
 Bicause that I am a lewed man.  
 Yet wol I telle hem as they come to minde,  
 Thogh I ne kan nat sette hem in hir kinde:  
 As bole armoniak, vertgrees, boras [...]  
 And eek of our materes encorpyng,  
 And of oure silver citrinacioun,  
 Oure cementyng and fermentacioun,  
 Our ingottes, testes, and many mo. (VIII.784-818)

According to his confession, the Yeoman followed procedures such as the ‘cementyng and fermentacioun’ (VIII.817) for the citrination stage, yet he has not been successful in transmuting it into rubedo for the Stone. The Yeoman has tried all manner of tests and procedures to progress from this stage through ‘ingottes, testes, and many mo’ (VIII.818) to the point of obsession, yet his efforts remain unsuccessful.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Canon’s Yeoman’s Explosive Reactions**

In addition to their failed procedures and recipes, the Canon and his Yeoman are also prone to disaster and a lack of productivity, which further reveals the ineffectivity of alchemy and their failings:

Ful ofte it happeth so  
 The pot tobreketh, and farewel, al is go!  
 Thise metals been of so greet violence  
 Oure walles mowe nat make hem resistence [...]  
 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,

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<sup>54</sup> Duncan argues that the Yeoman has been trying unsuccessfully to citrinate Luna for years. It is worth noting, however, that the Yeoman still has nothing to show for it. See Duncan, ‘The Yeoman’s Canon’s “Silver Citrinacioun”’, p. 255.

But wel I woot greet strif is us among. (VIII.899-931)

The alchemists in the Yeoman's anecdote cannot explain the cause of the explosion, offering excuses instead of results, and contrasting the 'good werkyng' and effective conversions of St Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale*.<sup>55</sup> The explosion also represents the constant danger that the alchemists endure in their practices. The Canon's Yeoman and his fellow alchemists, it seems, have more excuses than results. In this sense, alchemical practice itself is very mercurial and unstable, since it can obliterate one's work and progress at a moment's notice. The explosion could also represent an inversion of successful transmutation since it destroys rather than creates. In addition to the laboratory explosions, the alchemists also fail on a metaphorically sexual level. The alchemists's endeavours are metaphorically masturbatory when compared to the marriage and copulation of Mercury and Sulphur, the metaphorical sexual union between prime substances during successful transmutation.<sup>56</sup> The alchemical spillage and the resulting explosion represent failure on many levels.<sup>57</sup>

Yet the Yeoman is not the only one at fault of misusing this technology. According to the Yeoman's *confessio*, the Canon exploits his alchemists both physically and psychologically, as represented by the Yeoman. The Yeoman's comments on alchemical practice further suggest his addictive personality:

And yet, for al my smert and al my grief,  
For al my sorwe, labour, and meschief,  
I koude nevere leve it in no wise. (VIII.712-4)

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<sup>55</sup> Duncan proposes a fifth theory for the cause of the explosion, which seems much more credible than these alchemists. He suggests that litharge, which is an oxide of lead, was put into contact with nitrate. Instead, the alchemists should have sublimed orpiment and mercury. See Duncan, 'The Yeoman's Canon's "Silver Citrinacioun"', pp. 252-3.

<sup>56</sup> Michael A. Calabrese, 'Meretricious Mixtures: Gold, Dung, and the *Canon Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 27.3 (1993), 277-92, at pp. 285-6. Calabrese interprets the 'pot tobreketh' (VIII.900) in sexual terms, arguing that it symbolises a 'fruitless, sterile orgasm – wasteful, non-productive spilling of false seed' rather than successful multiplication or sexual intercourse. I suggest that it also indicates a failure to learn from one's mistakes.

<sup>57</sup> Calabrese also points out that the Yeoman's alchemical failures reflect the Canon's own 'exploitative, socially destructive behaviour that makes him an adversary to others and to God'. See Calabrese, 'Meretricious Mixtures', p. 286.

The Yeoman behaves like a gambling addict, trying his hand at the same alchemical processes repeatedly with disastrous consequences.<sup>58</sup> Chaucer implies the human fallibility of the alchemists here, as exemplified by the Yeoman. He knows better, or at least he should know better, but in the end, the promises of alchemy's material gain are too much for him to resist. As I have mentioned previously, alchemy also takes a physical toll on the Yeoman's body through the Canon's relentless experiments, with his deteriorating eyesight (VIII.730) and leaden body colour (VIII.727-8), which is probably the result of lead poisoning. The Canon clearly exerts an unhealthy influence with him.

### The Canon's Yeoman's Reflections

Despite the shortcomings of the Yeoman and other alchemists, however, his final words in the first part of the tale promote the moral aspects of his story:

We faille of that which that we wolden have,  
 And in oure madnesse everemoore we rave [...]  
 But al thyng which that shineth as the gold  
 Nis nat gold, as that I have herd 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 schul ye knowe, er that I fro yow wende,  
 By that I of my tale have maad an ende. (VIII.958-71)

Coming from the Yeoman, these words seem uncharacteristic, presenting a rare moment of self-knowledge in him. Perhaps his *confessio* causes him to think straight, if for a moment.<sup>59</sup>

This theory is plausible, although there is no absolute proof to distinguish the author from the narrator in this context. The Yeoman's comment that 'al thyng which that shineth as the gold / Nis nat gold' (VIII.960-1) reflects the nature of the canon in *Pars Secunda*, which supports this

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Cook comments that 'meeting the Yeoman is a bit like listening to a man who has been to Alcoholics Anonymous'. See Cook, 'The Canon and His Yeoman', *The Chaucer Review* (1987), 28-40, at p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> Damon notes that it is Chaucer rather than the Yeoman speaking here, since his thoughts on alchemy here seem inconsistent with his thoughts earlier in the poem. See Damon, 'Chaucer and Alchemy', p. 783.



notion of the deception of appearances and misguided trust. The foolish priest places his trust in the false canon, who dupes him, and the Yeoman places his trust in the Canon, who leads him to ruination. In this passage, the Yeoman metaphorically becomes a vessel (or an alembic, if one will) for Chaucer to elucidate his *exemplum*. The Yeoman observes that ‘we faille of that at which we wolden have’ (VIII.958). The alchemists seek the Stone, but they cannot have it. In their post-lapsarian state, human beings seek the impossible, and they lack both the insight and agency to attain such goals. Similarly, others crave gold for what it appears to be, but ‘al thyng that which shineth [...] is nat gold’ (VIII.959). Humans should seek what they can attain rather than what they cannot and place their faith in someone they can trust.

This passage also questions the value of alchemy. Gold and silver are not what they appear to be either, and perhaps it is better to invest in moral virtues and spiritual devotion rather than the pursuit of wealth. As the performativity of the Canon and Yeoman have also revealed, they are not what they seem. Their surface appearances mask hidden truths. The Yeoman and the Canon hide their own immorality behind their facades. According to his confession (if he can be trusted), the Yeoman lacks insight and depth from his experiences, and has nothing to show for years of alchemical experimentation. The irony of this final verse in *Pars Prima* is that the Yeoman is the ‘moost fool’ (VIII.968) although he wants to be seen as ‘the wiseste’ (VIII.967) by telling his *exemplum*. He is the one who has been practicing the same experiments for years and has learned nothing from them. For instance, the Canon’s Yeoman claims that ‘I am nat wont in no mirour to prie’ (VIII.668), indicating that he is not capable of self-reflection or introspection. In the context of the poem, he explains that he is too busy trying to work hard transmuting metals to look into the mirror, but his methods are flawed and a moment of self-reflection would benefit him. Despite the Canon and the Yeoman’s affinity for selfishness and material ends, they do not know themselves, and this leads to their downfall. The Yeoman’s statement that ‘he that semeth trewest is a theef’ (VIII.969) could

refer to his Canon, since the Canon appears wise and of sound judgement, but his mysterious behaviour and actions imply possible thievery or trickery, especially as the canon in the second part of the tale reveals.

### **Alchemy and *Exemplum* in *Pars Secunda***

The second part of the tale (*Pars Secunda*) further reveals the poem's exemplary framework. While the *Prima Pars* focusses on the Yeoman's own alleged experiences and thoughts as an alchemist, *Pars Secunda* tells the tale of a 'false chanoun' who uses tricks to create the illusion that he is multiplying silver and then dupes a very gullible chantry priest for a considerable sum of money.<sup>60</sup> As I suggest, this part of the tale is an *exemplum* within an *exemplum* since the Canon's Yeoman's confessional paragraph can also be read as exemplary. Yet as I have noted, the Canon's Yeoman telling his exemplary tale is ironic since he is not an ideal figure, and moreover not a reliable or trustworthy narrator, which brings his morality into question.<sup>61</sup>

In terms of the poem's overall moral point, Hartung suggests that the second part is a 'warning against false values' drawing from the moralising conclusion of *Prima Pars*.<sup>62</sup> I suggest that while both parts of the tale can be read as individual *exempla*, the tale can also be

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<sup>60</sup> It is worth mentioning that while the whole tale is included in the Cambridge MS, the scribe classifies *Pars secunda* as the actual tale, whereas *Prima Pars* is described here as the Preamble. See Chaucer, *The Cambridge MS of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. James Frederick Furnivall, 3 vols. (1868-79), vol. 2, and Chaucer, *The Ellesmere MS of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. Furnivall, 2 vols. (1868-79), vol. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Reidy notes that there is no known source for the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, although *Pars Secunda* seems drawn from a story about swindling and gold by Raymond Lull. H.G. Richardson observes in the Plea Rolls for January 1374 that a certain William de Brumley was apprehended with four counterfeit gold pieces that he claimed he acquired through alchemy. He reportedly made them under William Schuchirch, who was the canon of Windsor. Manly adds that if the canon had stayed on at Windsor, he may have encountered Chaucer there in 1390, and perhaps this resulted in a swindle. He supports this notion with the fact that Chaucer was borrowing small sums of money from the Exchequer during this time. This example reveals that there is historical evidence of a fourteenth-century canon as practising alchemist, although whether or not Chaucer was drawing from this particular example seems speculative at best. For more on the topic of similar real-life instances of alchemical counterfeiting and swindling in England, see Reidy, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 947; H.G. Richardson, 'Year Books and Plea Rolls as Sources of Historical Information', *The Royal Historical Society Transactions*, 4.5 (1922), 28-70, at pp. 28-51, 38-40; Mann, in Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 1064; and J.M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer: Lectures Delivered at the Lowell Institute* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926), pp. 224ff.

<sup>62</sup> Hartung, '*Pars Secunda* and the Development of the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*', p. 113.

read as a unified *exemplum* as well, especially in consideration with the rest of Fragment VIII and the final tales in the *Canterbury Tales*, suggesting the poem's unity. In the second part of the tale, the Canon's Yeoman stresses 'it was another chanoun, and nat hee' (VIII.1077), clearly distinguishing the false Canon of his tale from his own Canon, although they bear some similarities. In his argument for the unity of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Reidy comments that

Chaucer intended a connection of some kind to be made, and disregarded a small flaw in the verisimilitude to emphasize the link between the two Canons, a link which the Yeoman's denial rather forces upon our attention than obliterates.<sup>63</sup>

Reidy convincingly argues that these two canons link the two parts of the tale together. Yet while the two canons share affinities through their immoral actions and exploitation, there is no indication here that the Canon, 'having no longer any hope of success in the great art, will sink deeper into debt and poverty until he turns to deliberate swindling, like the second Canon'.<sup>64</sup> The second part of the tale is an *exemplum* against covetousness, that is fraudulence and deceit, as well as avarice. The Canon's Yeoman draws attention to the swindled chantry priest and the deeply flawed canon in his *exemplum*, which is ironic considering how flawed he has shown himself to be earlier in his prologue: 'He that semeth the wisest, by Jesus, / Is moost fool whan it cometh to the preef, / And he that semeth trewest is a theef' (VIII.967-9). In other words, the overarching *exemplum* here is to beware outward appearances since even those who seem true can be guilty of trickery and deceiving others, as the tale illustrates.

The Canon's Yeoman tells the story of the immoral canon as a means of establishing his own *exemplum*. He describes how a 'chanoun of religioun / Amonges us, wolde infecte al a toun' (VIII.972-3), suggesting a poisonous influence, infecting all those he touches and indicating his sinister agency and toxic influence.<sup>65</sup> This canon bears a striking resemblance to the Yeoman's own Canon, especially since the Yeoman draws attention to the closeness of this

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<sup>63</sup> Reidy, 'Chaucer's Canon and the Unity of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*', p. 37.

<sup>64</sup> Reidy, 'Chaucer's Canon and the Unity of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*', p. 37.

<sup>65</sup> 'Infecte' is defined as 'pollute, contaminate' in Norman Davis et al., *A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 79.

character ('Amonges us' implies that they are in constant proximity). I have earlier suggested that the canon has a poisonous influence since he ruins all those around him with his swindling habits and 'infinite falsnesse' (VIII.976).<sup>66</sup> His 'infinite falsnesse' is subversive, blinding those who are too gullible to see the truth and obscuring the virtuous aspects of alchemical practice. In this passage, Chaucer points out the hypocrisy of not only the Yeoman and the Canon, but also immoral alchemists and practitioners in general.<sup>67</sup> Like the Yeoman and his Canon, the false canon seems more interested in reaping material rewards, and as the Yeoman reveals, there is no alchemy involved in his work at all. At the end of the day, the canon's 'alchemy' is all a con's game.

### **Canons Behaving Badly**

It is also important to consider the nature of the two canons in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as part of the poem's exemplary framework. The canons are neither demonic or the anti-Christ, but instead very human figures.<sup>68</sup> The canon in *Pars secunda* particularly possesses deceptive and immoral qualities and is devoid of Christian values. He also opposes all of alchemy's positive aspects, embodying the role of anti-chemist or anti-philosopher and representing the antithesis of Norton's ideal alchemist: 'For it is most profunde philosophie / The subtile science of holi Alchymye' (VIII.53-4). Yet there is nothing scientific or philosophical about the

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<sup>66</sup> Grennen also explains that 'infecte' in this context stems from the Latin *infectere*, which refers to the corruption of metals by inferior substances. See Grennen, 'Chaucer's Characterization of the Canon and His Yeoman', p. 281.

<sup>67</sup> Tyrwhitt raises the possibility that 'some sudden resentment had determined Chaucer to interrupt the regular course of his work, in order to insert a Satire against the Alchemists'. There is, however, no evidence for this. See Tyrwhitt, *The Canterbury Tales*, vol. 2, p. 110. Cf. Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*, p. 134.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Rosenberg, 'Swindling Alchemist, Antichrist', p. 575, and Rosenberg, 'Reason and Revelation', pp. 38, 50, 53. Rosenberg explicates that the canon in *Pars secunda* is comparable to a demon, suggesting the view that he is comparable to a demon rather than the chief devil.

canon's 'alchemy'; it is a scam, pure and simple. The second canon has no love for wisdom or knowledge. He is an opportunist, taking what he can get.<sup>69</sup>

*Pars Secunda* also presents another type of blindness. Whereas the Yeoman is blinded through his misplaced faith in a science that does not work, the victimised priest is blinded by his own niceness. While he initially appears as a generally likeable, generous, moral, and good man, he is also extremely naïve and an easy target for the swindler:

'Certes,' quod he, 'no thyng anoyeth me  
To lene a man a noble, or two, or three,  
Or what thyng were in my possession,  
Whan he so trewe is of condicioun  
That in no wise he breke wole his day;  
To swich a man I kan nevere seye nay.' (VIII.1036-41)

The priest's main problem is that he is extremely gullible, and the swindling canon seizes the opportunity. The priest expects people who seem 'trewe' to act morally. This recalls the naïve and easily deceived husband in the *Shipman's Tale*. While the merchant husband is presented in the fabliau as the butt of the joke, however, the priest is a much more sympathetic character. Cooper rightly comments that the merchant is a fool 'not because he mistrusts his wife, but because he trusts her'.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the priest is a fool because he places so much trust in the canon, claiming 'To swich a man I kan never seye nay' (VIII.1041).<sup>71</sup> While I still maintain a degree of sympathy for the swindled priest, Epstein notably raises interesting points about his flawed character and potentially avaricious nature. Epstein points out that the priest's landlady thinks he is 'so plesaunt and so servysable' (VIII.1014) that she suspends his contract to pay for his board (VIII.1015-17). The priest has no moral obligation to repay the landlady despite her generosity, and instead of reciprocating her kindness he uses her kindness to his

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<sup>69</sup> Longworth convincingly suggests that a transformation still occurs in the mind of the duped. This is not a true, literal transformation, however, but rather the illusion of a transformation or transmutation. This signifies the power of deception and reiterates the theme of moral blindness and corruption discussed in this chapter. See Longworth, 'Privileged Knowledge', pp. 88-9.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 282.

<sup>71</sup> Epstein is notably more critical of the priest, suggesting a more fallible character in the tale.

advantage.<sup>72</sup> Weil also points out that at the end of the tale, the swindling canon leaves the chantry priest to continue practising the recipe in a greedy, endless cycle, reflecting the tale's theme of avarice.<sup>73</sup>

The canon feeds the priest's moral appetite and misled belief that all is good in the world. He knows that if he wins his trust, the priest cannot say no to him, and then the game is his. The canon is blind in his own way as well: to the value of 'good werkyng' and moral behaviour specifically. The foolish priest and the canon's other victims are duped, but at the end of the day, the canon also dupes himself. While he may make a dishonest fortune for himself, he will never have the spiritual success that Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale* has. Unlike Cecilia, whose spiritual devotion and charity benefit all those around her, the canon manipulates religious faith and trust to his advantage:

God thanke I, and in good tyme be it sayd,  
That ther was nevere man yet yvele apayd  
For gold ne silver that he to me lente  
Ne nevere falshede in myn herte I mente. (VIII.1048-51)

As the tale reveals, his seemingly sweet words are outright lies. The canon will say what he needs to say to get away with the crime. For example, he names God ('God thanke I') to seal the deal because he knows it will please the priest, who wants to believe in the potential for goodness in people. Throughout the tale, the Yeoman interjects with his own commentary on the tale:

O sely preest! O sely innocent!  
With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent!  
O gracelees, ful blynd is thy conceite [...] (VIII.1076-8)

The Yeoman is eager to point out the priest's blindness as part of his performance, but the irony of it is that he does not recognise his own blindness.<sup>74</sup> While it is a moral tale, the Yeoman's

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<sup>72</sup> Epstein, 'Dismal Science', p. 244.

<sup>73</sup> Eric Weil, 'An Alchemical Freedom Flight: Linking the *Manciple's Tale* to the *Second Nun's* and *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*', *Medieval Perspectives*, 6 (1991), 162-70, at p. 164.

<sup>74</sup> Robert G. Benson claims that the Yeoman tells the tale with 'moral outrage'. Olson argues that 'telling the tale is itself virtuous [...] The narrator turns himself into an exemplum', yet this seems incongruous with the interpretation of the Yeoman through the rest of the tale. See Benson, '*The Canterbury Tales*: Personal Drama or Experiments in Poetic Variety?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann

awareness and moral emphasis of the tale and its plot twists give the pilgrims the impression that the Yeoman is wise (which he is not), which helps to fulfil his need for attention. This also makes Chaucer's point that tellers may not realise the full impact of their tales, or they may not exemplify what they preach.<sup>75</sup> The Yeoman must put on a performance (that is, calling out the false canon as the swindler he is) to convince the audience that he is not the immoral swindler whom he depicts.<sup>76</sup> His exclamatory remarks also contribute to the dramatic irony of the poem.<sup>77</sup> For example, when the canon tries to assure the chantry priest that 'Trouthe is a thyng that I wol evere kepe / Unto that day in which I shal crepe' (VIII.1044-5), the reader knows that the canon will do just the opposite, since he lives a life of falsehood.

There is also dramatic irony in *Pars Secunda* through the audience's awareness of the canon's trick, and thus the story unfolds as a tragedy while continuing to exemplify the problems with practising alchemy. The Yeoman seems to have genuine sympathy for the duped priest, crying out against his undeserved fate. In this second part of the tale, Chaucer draws upon more explicit moral issues with *Pars Secunda*, examining themes such as deception, the betrayal of the innocent, and the misuse of knowledge and trust, or as Longworth comments, how the 'fundamental premise of alchemy can be misused'.<sup>78</sup> For the canon, alchemy can be exploited and is easy to manipulate for his scam, and therein lies its moral problem.

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 127-42, at p. 133, and Olson, 'Chaucer, Dante, and the Structure of Fragment VIII', p. 231.

<sup>75</sup> Cooper points out that the Yeoman tries to dissociate his Canon from the false canon. See Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 380.

<sup>76</sup> Sheila Marie Fisher argues that 'if the Yeoman downs the trickster, he sympathises and identifies with the tricked'. See Fisher, 'Chaucer's Poetic Alchemy: A Study of Values and Its Transformation in *The Canterbury Tales*', Yale University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1982, p. 89. For more on the performative aspects of the Yeoman and his views on the second canon, see notably Cook, 'The Canon and His Yeoman', p. 36; Knapp, 'The Work of Alchemy', pp. 580-5; David Harrington, 'The Narrator of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*', *Annuaire Medievale*, 9 (1968), p. 86; John Gardner, '*The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*: An Interpretation', *Philological Quarterly*, 46 (1967), 1-17, at p. 2; and Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England*, p. 76.

<sup>77</sup> Germaine Dempster, *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer* (New York: Humanities Press, 1959), p. 87.

<sup>78</sup> Longworth, 'Privileged Knowledge', p. 89.

### The Final Section of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*

The final section of the poem further suggests the moral implications of the poem, continuing the moralising *exemplum* that the Yeoman has sought to establish with his story of the false canon. After telling his tale, the Yeoman summarises his thoughts on alchemy and the nature of renegade alchemists:

If that youre eyen kan nat seen aright,  
 Looke that youre mynde lakke nocht his sight.  
 For though ye 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.  
 And right as swithe I wol yow tellen here  
 What philosophres seyn in this mateere. (VIII.1418-27)

The irony of the Yeoman saying this, of course, is that he himself cannot see with his ‘blered eyen’.<sup>79</sup> For the Yeoman, alchemy is all about profit, and money takes precedence over morals.<sup>80</sup> The Yeoman’s blurred vision obscures his ability to think rationally and form good judgement. He tells the pilgrims ‘Medleth namoore with that art’ (VIII.1424), or give up on alchemy altogether, and yet he is still drawn to the allure of alchemy, as he turns to the philosophers who have supposedly mastered the art.<sup>81</sup>

Since he can no longer believe in his own Canon or the deceitful appearances of false canons, the Yeoman turns to these philosophers, whose words are expressed ‘withouten any lye’ (VIII.1430) and thus hold moral truths for him, even if the alchemy does not work. He cites fourteenth-century alchemist pseudo-Arnald of Villanova’s treatise *Rosarium philosophorum* (*Rosary of the Philosophers*):<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Epstein further comments that ‘this nexus of alchemy, economy, and greed is central to the Yeoman’s own moralization’. See Epstein, ‘Dismal Science’, p. 246. Cf. Britton J. Harwood, ‘Chaucer and the Silence of History: Situating the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*’, *PMLA*, 102.3 (1987), 338-50.

<sup>80</sup> The Yeoman’s ‘desire for “multiplying” is paradoxically the cause of “scarsettee”’. See Epstein, ‘Dismal Science’, p. 247.

<sup>81</sup> As R.G. Baldwin remarks, the Yeoman ‘was, is, and will always be drawn to alchemy’. See Baldwin, ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale: A Conjecture’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 61.2 (1962), 232-43, at p. 242.

<sup>82</sup> John Livingston Lowes identifies this passage as a direct quotation from *De lapide philosophorum* (*On the Stone of the Philosophers*) rather than the *Rosarium philosophorum* (or ‘Rosarie’) as the Yeoman states. See



Lo, thus seith Arnold of the Newe Toun,  
 As his Rosarie maketh mencioun;  
 He seith right thus, withouten any lye:  
 Ther may no man mercurie mortifie  
 But it be with his brother knowlechyng;  
 How [be] that he which that first seyde this thyng  
 Of philosophres fader was, Hermes;  
 He seith how that the dragon, doutelees,  
 Ne dyeth nat but if that he be slayn  
 With his brother; and that is for to sayn,  
 By the dragon, Mercurie, and noon oother  
 He understood, and brymstoon by his brother,  
 That out of Sol and Luna were ydrawe.  
 And therefore, seyde he -- taak heede to my sawe --  
 Lat no man bisye hym this art for to seche,  
 But if that he th'entencioun and speche  
 Of philosophres understonde kan;  
 And if he do, he is a lewed man.  
 For this science and this konnyng, quod he,  
 Is of the secree of the secretes, pardee. (VIII.1428-47)

In this passage, pseudo-Arnald extols the moral values of alchemy, describing the metaphorical union of Dragon and his brother (Mercury and Sulphur). He outlines the basic process in finding the Philosopher's Stone (VIII.1434-9) and emphasises the importance of keeping 'bisye' (VIII.1442), but the alchemist must understand 'th'entencioun and speche' (VIII.1443) of the philosophers if they plan to understand anything, or else it is a waste of time. After having told his tale and confession, the audience is aware that the Yeoman is this 'lewed man' (VIII.1445) that pseudo-Arnald refers to. The Yeoman does not understand the language or the content of the philosophers; instead, he assumes he understands it, and thus in his ignorance he unknowingly becomes pseudo-Arnald's anti-thesis. Unfortunately, the Yeoman does not practice what he preaches, which is ironic given that he provides an *exemplum* in *Pars Secunda*.

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Lowes, 'The Dragon and His Brother', *Modern Language Notes*, 28 (1913), 229, at p. 229. Lowes's article is dated but very helpful in terms of identifying Chaucer's source material. Cf. Duncan, 'Chaucer and "Arnald of the Newe Town": A Reprise', in *Interpretations*, 9.1 (1977), 7-11, at pp. 9-10. Chaucer also adapts pseudo-Arnald's terminology in the tale. For example, pseudo-Arnald also describes the four spirits (Sulphur, Arsenic, Auripigmentum, and Salt Ammoniac), which the Yeoman also cites. For Chaucer's use of the four spirits, see Chaucer, *The Canon Yeoman's Tale*, VIII.798. It is likely that it is the Yeoman's error, which would further indicate his lack of knowledge and constant failure. Cooper adds that in *De secretis* and similar treatises, the authors stress 'the need for the alchemist to have some wealth before he starts, as his first attempts at transmutation are likely to lead to failure'. See Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 371. The irony of this, of course, is that the Yeoman generates no wealth from his enterprises and constantly fails. Chaucer was clearly drawing from several different alchemical treatises in order to write his own tale, and the use of these sources provides moral authority to the tale.

The Yeoman also cites the mysterious alchemist ‘Senior’ and Plato (VIII.1448-71) as a means of asserting his moral authority.<sup>83</sup> Chaucer substitutes Solomon with Plato, who was commonly seen as a teacher figure in alchemical texts at the time.<sup>84</sup> The Canon’s Yeoman also cites Senior’s book to give further reliability to his account, telling the audience that his book ‘wol bere witnesse’ (VIII.1450). Mann and Reidy identify the ‘magnasia’ (VIII.1455, 1458) that Plato mentions refers to as a brilliant white substance that appears during the albedo stage during the alchemical process.<sup>85</sup> Identifying magnesia is ‘*ignotum per ignotius*’ (VIII.1457), which literally means ‘the unknown through the more unknown’.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, this passage suggests the unknowability of alchemy, since it offers obscurity after obscurity.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, Plato’s responses to his student raise more questions than answers:

Telle me the roote, good sire, quod he tho,  
 Of that water, if it be youre wil.  
 Nay, nay, quod Plato, certein, that I nyl.  
 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. (VIII.1461-71)

Chaucer writes about the secrets of alchemy, but he does not reveal them because he recognises that alchemy does not work. Plato’s student wants to understand the secrets of alchemy, but

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<sup>83</sup> John Webster Spargo identifies Senior as the tenth-century Egyptian philosopher Muhammad ibn Umail (al-Hakim). Julius Ruska identifies Senior’s book as the tenth-century alchemical treatise *Epistola solis ad lunam crescentem* (*Epistle of the Sun to the Crescent Moon*). See Spargo, ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue and Tale’, in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 685-98, at p. 688, and Ruska, ‘Chaucer und das Buch Senior’, *Anglia*, 61 (1937), 136-37. For more on the topic of Senior and Plato, see also Ruska and E. Wiedemann ‘Alchemistische Decknamen’, *Sitzungsberichte der Physikalisch-medizinischen Sozietät in Erlangen*, 56 (1924), 17-36.

<sup>84</sup> Dorothee Metlitzki convincingly argues that the original Arabic characters of Qalimus the teacher and his interrogator Runus are ‘transformed into Solomon and a sage (sapiens) in the Latin text’. See Metlitzki, ‘Scientific Imagery in Chaucer [*The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*]’, in *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn L. Lynch (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 135-51, at p. 142.

<sup>85</sup> For more on Chaucer’s use of magnesia, see Mann, in Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 1079, and Reidy, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 951. Cf. Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, p. 121.

<sup>86</sup> The *OED* defines ‘*ignotum per ignotius*’ as ‘an attempt to explain what is obscure by something which is more obscure, leading to “confusion worse confounded.”’

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 377. Mann describes this passage as ‘merely a process of verbal substitution rather than real illumination’, indicating the confusion and obscurity that arises from attempting to understand alchemical jargon. See Mann, in Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 1079.

Plato gives him obscure responses which leave him with nothing. Plato's responses also indicate that while he may be concealing information, he might not in fact have the answers. Although Chaucer is writing these secrets in a book, he seems exempt from Plato's critique of alchemical philosophers since he is supposedly not a practising alchemist. Plato's reputation as a philosopher gives him credibility here. His final words in the tale further identify it as *exemplum*, linking alchemical practice to the divine. Plato anachronistically recognises Christ as the ultimate keeper of secrets, and it is Christ's intention to only give to those men 'where it liketh to his deitee' (VIII.1468). The moral here is that no one knows the secrets of alchemy since they are impossible to understand and attempts to understand them will result in a fate like the Yeoman's.<sup>88</sup> Chaucer does not claim an answer for the secrets of alchemy. Instead, he is more interested in the ways in which his characters use alchemy. Without divine revelation, the Yeoman is left to his obscurities and moral blindness. His alchemy will not work, and like Gower's contemporary alchemists, he has no clear models to draw upon. Since even Plato's teachings are obscure and his Canon's way leads to error, the Yeoman is a victim of his own ignorance, driven by his greedy impulses and held back by his failings.

While the Yeoman will not be successful, alchemical practice is not entirely dismissed, as the final ten lines of the tale suggest:

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! (VIII.1472-81)

The immediate nature of the Yeoman's sudden change of attitude is difficult to explain. It is worth noting that the pilgrims are getting closer and closer to Canterbury (VIII.557), so perhaps

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. Jennifer L. Sisk, 'Religion, Alchemy, and Nostalgic Idealism in Fragment VIII of *The Canterbury Tales*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 32 (2010), 151-77, at p. 166.

this realisation effects a change in him.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps his *confessio* here is just a painful learning experience, or perhaps he has not learned anything at all.<sup>90</sup>

These final lines further reveal the tale's exemplary function. Linden comments on their finds finality and moral value in these final lines:

[...] the Yeoman's final position is, for all practical purposes, clear: because God has ordained that philosophers not reveal the secret of the stone, man should desist from the search or be subject to God's wrath for prying into areas of forbidden knowledge. Thus the ultimate meaning of the *pars secunda* is a warning against dabbling in the two opposing types of alchemy: one the gift of God, the other the product of the devil's treachery.<sup>91</sup>

In short, the *exemplum* here is that only God knows the secrets of alchemy, and they are best left for Him, because contemporary alchemists will only fail in their craft.<sup>92</sup> Alchemy leads to failure because of human imperfection and the impossibility of the task, yet it is still admirable. The Yeoman's story, which presents itself as an *exemplum*, reveals that alchemy does not work, and thus he advises others to 'lete it goon' (VIII.1475). The Yeoman faces a paradox: although he is constantly trying to 'multiplie' (VIII.1479), 'never shal he thryve' (VIII.1480) since he is losing more than he is gaining. God's secrets are best left to God rather than the alchemists, signifying the tale's presentation of exemplary narrative.<sup>93</sup> The Yeoman, having disclosed everything he knows to his audience and fulfilled his literary purpose, is not further mentioned in the text. The Yeoman, representing the misguided, failed alchemists of Chaucer's time, is exactly how one should *not* use science and knowledge.

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<sup>89</sup> For more on the location of the pilgrims at this stage of the *Tales*, see Chaucer, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, VIII.556. Reidy writes that 'Boughtoun under Blee' is about five miles from Canterbury. See Reidy in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 270.

<sup>90</sup> For more scholarly analysis of the final lines of the tale, see notably Damon, 'Chaucer and Alchemy', pp. 783, 788; and Rosenberg, 'Swindling Alchemist, Antichrist', p. 132; Grennen, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Alchemical "Mass"', p. 547; George R. Keiser, 'The Conclusion of the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*: Readings and (Mis)readings', in *The Chaucer Review*, 35.1 (2000), 1-21, at p. 15; Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, xxiv; Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, pp. 215-6; and more recently Mark J. Bruhn, 'Art, Anxiety, and Alchemy in the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 33.3 (1999), 288-315, at p. 313; Weil, 'An Alchemical Freedom Flight', p. 164; and Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances*, p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 33.

<sup>92</sup> Duncan similarly has a more sympathetic view of the conclusion, commenting that the Yeoman chose the losing side of alchemy, yet there is still hope for the scientist and philosopher. I am more aligned with Duncan and Linden's more sympathetic views of the conclusion. Cf. Duncan, 'Jonson's Alchemist and the Literature of Alchemy', p. 655.

<sup>93</sup> Reidy, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 950. He defines 'wende' as 'travel' indicating mobility or going somewhere. See p. 1304.

### **Alchemy and *Exemplum* in the *Second Nun's Tale***

The moral aspects of alchemical transmutation in the *Second Nun's Tale* and its implications for the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, which are not explicit but noted by numerous critics, are also significant.<sup>94</sup> In the *Second Nun's Tale*, the Second Nun recites the life of St Cecilia, a virtuous maiden who will be wedded to a pagan man named Valerian. Cecilia invites him to visit St Urban to learn the truth of Christianity and be baptised. Valerian returns to Cecilia, whom he sees with an angel, and Valerian wishes for his brother Tiburce to be baptised. They are arrested by the local prefect Almachius and executed but become recognised as a company of martyrs. Finally, Almachius sentences Cecilia to death in a scalding hot bath, but due to her devotion to Christ, she miraculously remains alive. She eventually dies but inspires a devoted following.

*The Second Nun's Tale* draws from earlier hagiographic sources, with the story of St Cecilia as an exemplary model for Christian living. Christ's story is the ultimate *exemplum* for divine perfection in human form. The most Christ-like pilgrim in the *Canterbury Tales* is the Parson, who advocates that 'sin is foolish action and virtue is wise action'.<sup>95</sup> The Parson's exemplary sermon, told at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, describes the type of sin and remedial action which are portrayed in the *Second Nun's Tale* and *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. In view of its juxtaposition with the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Cecilia's story can be read as an *exemplum* of positive alchemical transmutation, representing a model for good Christian living and ideal human behaviour, and bridging the link between human fallibility and the divine.<sup>96</sup> Her implicit alchemical transmutation in the tale reveals that it is not impossible, but it is

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<sup>94</sup> Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 340-1.

<sup>95</sup> Darragh Greene, 'Moral Obligations, Virtue Ethics, and Gentil Character in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 50.1-2 (2015), 88-107, at p. 91.

<sup>96</sup> Catherine Cubitt notes that that hagiographical records followed stock patterns and ideas, depicting the saint in idealised terms. See Cubitt, 'Sites and Sanctity: Revisiting the Cult of Murdered and Martyred Anglo-Saxon Royal Saints', *Early Medieval Europe*, 9.1 (2000), 53-83, at p. 60.

beyond human understanding and capabilities since it occurs as a result of her love of God and God's love for her.

It is Cecilia's Christian activity that allows her to flourish and metaphorically transmute, revealing her exemplary role. The Second Nun is particularly interested in moral and physical productivity, telling her audience that 'Wel oghte us werke and ydelnesse withstonde' (VIII.14). Her devotion to work has ethical implications, revealing the strength of her faith. 'Ydelnesse' here is contrasted with the productivity and efficiency of 'werke', which implicitly recalls the virtues of alchemical labour in Book IV of the *Confessio amantis*. By contrast, her positive and unselfish 'werke' is the opposite of the canon's evil work, which only rewards himself.

In terms of the theme of sight and blindness in the tale, Cooper comments that 'spiritual sight can take a literal dimension in the tale'.<sup>97</sup> The Second Nun tells the pilgrims that Cecilia 'nevere cessed, as I write fynde, / Of hir preyere and God to love and drede' (VIII.124-5). From the outset, Cecilia devotes herself to God, which provides her with clarity of moral vision, enabling her and her followers to see angels (VIII.110). In this tale, the clarity of Cecilia's sight has religious connotations, indicating her spiritual insight. Maximus, for instance, sees 'aungels full of cleernesse and of light' (VIII.403). Clarity and light are standard Christian metaphors. Cecilia is praised for her 'cleernesse hool of sapience' (VIII.111), indicating her saintly aspects. In contrast, the Canon's Yeoman has 'blered' vision and has lost sight of what he is trying to accomplish. Moreover, her 'soote savour' (VIII.91) contrasts with the goatish stench of the alchemists (VIII.886-7). The freshness of the flowers that appear repeatedly through the tale (see VIII.27, 220, 244, 248, 254, 279) contrasts with the foul odour and hellish imagery of the laboratory.<sup>98</sup> Her spiritual transformation can thus be read as a kind of alchemical

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<sup>97</sup> Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 362.

<sup>98</sup> Glending Olson, 'Chaucer, Dante, and the Structure of Fragment VIII', *Chaucer Review*, 16.3 (1982), 222-36, at p. 227, and Grennen, 'Chaucer's Characterization of the Canon and His Yeoman', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 25.2 (1964), 279-84, at p. 225.

transmutation. Tiburce states that ‘The sweete smel that in myn herte I fynde / Hath chaunged me al in another kynde’ (VIII.251-2). Unlike the Yeoman, Cecilia has the potential for an equivalent of alchemical transmutation and for positive growth. Cecilia’s husband Valerian seems reluctant about transmutation, stating that ‘Algate ybrend in this world shul we be!’ (VIII.318); this can be read as hesitating to purge his earthly corruption in order to perfect his soul. Ironically, it is this very idea that leads to Cecilia’s apotheosis. In Chaucer’s tale, this ‘burning’ of earthly corruption can be read as paralleling alchemical putrefaction and Christian allegory, enabling one to purge their sins and reach Heaven. Cecilia burns because she is good, revealing her martyrdom, but it also shows the superiority of her spirituality over the corporeal, and the impact of her spirituality is felt after her death with the rise of her cult (VIII.550-3).<sup>99</sup> Cecilia tells Valerian that she has an angel who ‘Is redy ay my body for to kepe’ (VIII.154), describing her readiness and preparation for her alchemical transmutation. Like the successful theoretical alchemical transmutation, Cecilia effectively transcends death, and thus proves her spiritual purity.

Cecilia’s spirituality and good ‘werkynge’ alchemically transmute her to a higher form, unlike the Canon’s Yeoman. The tale’s antagonist Almachius orders her to ‘Brenne...right in a bath of flambes rede’ (VIII.515). What Almachius intends as punishment for Cecilia ironically results in her martyrdom and can be interpreted as her spiritual transformation:

For in a bath they gonne hire faste shetten,  
 And nyght and day greet fyr they under betten.  
 The longe nyght, and eek a day also,  
 For al the fyr and eek the bathes heete  
 It made hire nat a drope for to sweete. (VIII.517-22)

Chaucer juxtaposes Cecilia’s coolness in the *Second Nun’s Tale* with the Canon’s sweatiness.

Cecilia’s faith and sight provide her with spiritual wealth, even if it leads her to a corporeal

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<sup>99</sup> Rosenberg describes the alchemical mortification of Cecilia’s flesh in preparation for her perfection. In alchemical terms, a base metal must be acted upon before it can successfully transmute. The earthly matter must experience a metaphorical ‘death’ before it can proceed to the next stage. See Rosenberg, ‘Contrary Tales’, p. 210.

death. Despite the intensity of St Cecilia's bath, 'it made hire nat a drope for to swete' (VIII.522). Cecilia's coolness further indicates her physical purity. Chaucer probably intended this juxtaposition, yet he does not explicitly describe her transmutation as alchemical. Paul B. Taylor identifies Cecilia's alchemical transmutation as 'white to red in her bath of flame'.<sup>100</sup> While this act tests and ultimately proves her faith, the Yeoman's flames lead to loss of product and destruction. The alchemical aspects in the *Second Nun's Tale* become clearer after reading the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.

### **Alchemical Connections between the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and Other Tales**

Other scholars connect the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and its alchemy to other tales as well, although these connections are not as convincing. Gabrovsky extends his alchemical reading into the *Franklin's Tale*, arguing that 'transformative action in the poem evokes in many ways *transmutation*'.<sup>101</sup> While Gabrovsky provides textual examples for his claim, the connection between the two tales remains unconvincing. Referring to the magician and the moving rocks in the *Franklin's Tale*, however, Mann comments that the two tales share the idea that 'it is hard to tell where advanced technology turns into a magical sleight of hand'.<sup>102</sup> Astell connects Fragments II and VIII through their 'solar alchemy', or the alchemical transmutation of sight through the 'solar cure of blindness'.<sup>103</sup> She argues that the *Man of Law's Tale*, while it does not use the technical alchemical language of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, follows its symbolic patterns, reiterating its themes of transformation and sight.<sup>104</sup> Eric Weil takes the connection between the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* a step further, extending it to

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<sup>100</sup> Paul B. Taylor, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Breath: Emanations of a Metaphor', *English Studies*, 60.4 (1979), 380-8, at p. 385.

<sup>101</sup> Gabrovsky, *Chaucer the Alchemist*, p. 69.

<sup>102</sup> Mann, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 1065.

<sup>103</sup> Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*, p. 119.

<sup>104</sup> Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*, p. 143. Cf. Paul B. Taylor, 'The Alchemy of Spring in Chaucer's *General Prologue*', *Chaucer Review*, 17.1 (1982), 1-4, at p. 3.



the *Manciple's Tale* in Fragment IX as well. Weil compares the discolouration of the Yeoman with Phoebus's transformation from 'red to white to leaden and the crow goes from white to black'.<sup>105</sup> More importantly, however, he raises the theme of sight and vision within the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, which links all the tales together. He concludes that 'it is the goal of riches beyond enlightenment that traps the chanting priest in a failure of vision'.<sup>106</sup> For Weil, the Yeoman demonstrates the 'difficulty of seeing through alchemy', and thus he is left repeating himself over and over, and moreover not learning from his mistakes.<sup>107</sup> As I will discuss, I agree with Weil's connection between the fragments and their themes, but I am not fully persuaded of his reading of the *Manciple's Tale* as alchemical. While some of these authors draw helpful connections between these tales, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* are better linked as exemplary narratives with alchemy as explicit or implicit subject matter, and as I will discuss, they also link to the final tales in the *Canterbury Tales* in Fragments IX and X.

### **Alchemical Connections in Fragments IX and X**

The exemplary narrative of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* also connects to the final fragments of the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>108</sup> Although I am not convinced that the *Manciple's Tale* can be read as alchemical, I agree that there is a connection between the fragments as well as a connection to the *Parson's Tale* in the final fragment of the poem.<sup>109</sup> Weil suggests that the *Manciple's* final speech is ironic, and moreover links to the other tales through its *exemplum*: 'challenge authority and be freed'.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the Yeoman reacts against

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<sup>105</sup> Weil, 'An Alchemical Freedom Flight', p. 163.

<sup>106</sup> Weil, 'An Alchemical Freedom Flight', p. 164.

<sup>107</sup> Weil, 'An Alchemical Freedom Flight', p. 164.

<sup>108</sup> Weil notably links the themes of Fragment VIII with Fragment IX of the *Canterbury Tales*, indicating the continuity between them. Weil, 'An Alchemical Freedom Flight', p. 164.

<sup>109</sup> I also agree with Weil that the themes of sight, labour, idleness, and activity continue into the *Manciple's Tale*.

<sup>110</sup> Weil, 'An Alchemical Freedom Flight', p. 168.

his Canon and spills his secrets in defiance of his authority. The Yeoman risks scorn to tell the truth, yet as I have shown the Yeoman's testimony is slippery at best; still, with no further corroborative evidence to assume otherwise, the reader naturally assumes that his testimony against the Canon is true.

Chaucer's placement of the *Parson's Tale*, which appears as a penitential manual for the pilgrims, at the end of the poem, 'breaks the link between poetry and morality and leaving the cure of souls to the Parson'.<sup>111</sup> The Parson examines sin in all its forms as part of his quest to instil in others 'Moralitee and vertuous matere' (X.38). As I have mentioned, the Parson is interested in bettering human behaviour. The Parson's analysis of avarice implicitly exemplifies the behaviour of the alchemists: 'whan the herte of a man is confounded in itself and troubled, and that the soul hath lost the comfort of God, thane seketh he an ideal solas of worldly thinges' (X.740). Without the comfort and knowledge of God and his alchemical secrets, the Yeoman and the two canons (especially the swindling one) are left with 'worldly thinges'. These alchemists are indeed troubled by their inability to metaphorically see beyond their 'worldly thinges', and in these pursuits, they are lost. Instead of trying to make money, they should be searching for ideals. While the swindling canon may make a profit from deceiving others and taking their money, his success at trickery pales in comparison to spiritual ideals and the comfort of God. The *Second Nun's Tale* exemplifies the success of that connection to God and successful labour, and thus the final fragments of the *Canterbury Tales* are all bound together through their related themes, with the Parson befittingly expounding upon the sin of avarice and remedial action in the concluding fragment.

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<sup>111</sup> Brendan O'Connell, 'Ignotum per ignoticius: Alchemy, Analog, and Poetics in Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*', in *Transmission and Transformation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Kathy Cawsey and Jason Harris (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 131-56, at p. 156.

## Conclusion

In retrospect, Chaucer is probably not the master alchemist that Ashmole credits him as being. His interest in these tales is more philosophical than practical, although he is also interested in the practical applications of alchemy. In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Chaucer examines alchemy within a moral and exemplary framework and portrays alchemy in a similar literary way to Gower's use of the *exemplum*. In this chapter, I have argued that Chaucer uses alchemy as vehicle for his exemplary narrative in the tale, and effectively shows not only the blindness of contemporary alchemists, but also alchemy's moral truths, which are revealed through alchemical allegory. The themes of morality, blindness, and human fallibility unite the tales in Fragment VIII and the final tales in the *Canterbury Tales*. The *Second Nun's Tale* can be read implicitly as a story of positive metaphorical alchemical transmutation, and Chaucer explores reverse alchemical transmutation less positively and more explicitly in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Chaucer weaves alchemical tradition, scientific treatises, and his own moral narrative together to create the story of the Yeoman and the two canons, who emerge as striking examples of moral corruption. The jargon and efforts of misguided alchemists only lead to the absence of moral behaviour. While Gower explores alchemy in terms of good and evil, however, Chaucer's take on alchemy is less clear cut. The Canon's Yeoman, who functions as both a central character and narrator of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, fails miserably in his repeated and futile pursuit for gold. He is not looking for moral truths; instead, he uses his technology for extremely selfish purposes. He puts on a performance for the pilgrims as a means of presenting himself in a respectable light, but the reader recognises the error of his ways, from his leaden, bleary-eyed appearance to his alchemical failure.

Yet the Canon's Yeoman and his tale, as both character study and narrative, have moral value for Chaucer's audience. Chaucer uses the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* to draw upon complex ideas about social concerns concerning unscientific and immoral practice and labour.

Moreover, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* examines the misuse of power and human intellect and the impact of moral blindness. As the tale suggests, this misuse reveals not only a failure of experimental endeavour but also the potential to corrupt society (as the success of the swindling canon in *Pars Secunda* suggests). Alchemy as a study has its potential virtues, but alchemical secrets are best left to God rather than characters such as the blabbering Yeoman, the exploitative Canon, or the shamelessly corrupt canon. In short, only Christ's chosen few will be successful with alchemical practice. Human avarice and fallibility deter the pursuit of alchemical perfection.

While Chaucer is arguably the most prominent fourteenth-century Middle English writer to use a fictional alchemist within a narrative and moral framework, alchemical writers of the fifteenth century further explore the uses of alchemy in exemplary narratives.<sup>112</sup> In the following chapter, I will examine how a fifteenth-century scribe adds alchemical verse to John Lydgate's exemplary tale *The Churl and the Bird* and its implication for its Middle English poetic narrative. Although this writer shares affinities with Chaucer and Gower in their moral treatment of alchemy in the narrative, he investigates and expresses alchemy and allegorical truths in different and exciting ways.

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 44.

## CHAPTER FIVE: LYDGATE, EXEMPLARY NARRATIVE, AND THE ALCHEMICAL *CHURL AND THE BIRD*

### Introduction

Following my chapters on reading Chaucer and Gower's alchemical sections for the moral and their exemplary aspects, I will analyse the alchemical version of Lydgate's poem *The Churl and the Bird*, which is included in British Library, MS Harley 2407, and consider how the adaptor presents it as exemplary. Although the anonymous poet does not name his source, the poem is identical to the one ascribed to Lydgate with an additional fifteen stanzas of alchemical verse. In fact, this alchemical version also appears as a variant of *The Churl and the Bird* under the title *Hermes Bird* in Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* and precedes both Chaucer's and Lydgate's entries in this compendium.<sup>1</sup>

Lydgate's original poem tells of a bird who sings in a garden. One day, the churl who owns the garden imprisons the bird. The bird laments at her captivity, and the churl reveals that he plans to cook and eat her. She convinces the churl to release her after baiting him with false promises. Once she is released, she breaks her promise and imparts to him three pieces of wisdom: 'do not be credulous, do not desire the impossible, and do not reject the past'.<sup>2</sup> She then proceeds to boast of a precious gemstone within her body that the churl could have taken had he not released her. The churl bemoans his loss, and she reveals that the gemstone was never there to begin with before patronising him for not following the three wisdoms. She concludes that she has wasted her time with the churl and flies off. In the alchemical version, however, the bird represents Sophic Mercury, and the churl is the failed alchemist.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Again, however, Lydgate's name is not mentioned, although it is clearly lifted from his original source. See Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, pp. 213-16, and Joel Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', *Studies in Philology*, 107.4 (2010), 429-64.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> Fredell rightly argues that this alchemical version in Harley MS 2407 stems from Lydgate's poem rather than the anonymous poem *Hermes Bird* to which Ashmole attributes it. See Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 429.

While Lydgate's poem provides what Joel Fredell calls a 'middlebrow moralising' of the tale (emphasising the three proverbial wisdoms), the alchemical version of Lydgate's poem in Harley MS 2407 alters the moral perspective, and instead becomes an allegory for failed alchemical transmutation.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I will analyse this moral shift in the alchemical version in the poem, identifying its alchemical focus as an *exemplum* about human fallibility and moral blindness while it also includes the moral points from the original poem. Like Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and Gower's alchemical section in the *Confessio amantis*, this *exemplum* raises moral issues about late medieval alchemy in England while also exploring and challenging the possibilities of its practice.

The alchemical version of the poem presents a more cryptic moral reading of the poem.

In the *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum*, Ashmole provides a commentary on *Hermes Bird*:

The whole Work is Parabolicall, and Allusive; yet truly Philosophicall: and the Bird (that intitles it) the Mercury of the Philosophers, (whose vertues and propertice are therein largely described). By the word Chorle, is meant the Covetous and Ignorant Artist, the Garden is the Vessell or Glasse, and the Hedge the Furnace.<sup>5</sup>

This meaning parallels the alchemical allegory of MS Harley 2407 which are nearly identical, with slight stanzaic variations. Ashmole interprets the poem as an allegory, with the garden as the alembic and the churl as the failed alchemist.<sup>6</sup> The churl is described as a 'Covetous and Ignorant Artist', indicating his spiritual ignorance and desire for material goods, wealth, success, and satisfying himself. He is ignorant of the truths of alchemy (i.e. that he cannot attain the Stone) because he is so caught up in his material interests. The adaptor recognises the

<sup>4</sup> Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 432.

<sup>5</sup> Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, p. 467. Although Ashmole's commentary was written in the seventeenth century, it is a good starting point for understanding the alchemical allegory of the poem.

<sup>6</sup> Ashmole also attributes the poem to 'Raymund Lully' (or pseudo-Raymond Lull), 'made English by the afore mentioned Cremer', but this is incorrect. See Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, p. 467. Abbot Cremer of Westminster was thought to be an English alchemist, but M.K. Corbett identifies him as an apocryphal figure. See 'Ashmole and the Pursuit of Alchemy: The Illustrations to the *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum*, 1652', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 63.2 (1983), 326-36, at p. 333. For more on Cremer, see Bruce Janacek, 'A Virtuoso's History: Antiquarianism and the Transmission of Knowledge in the Alchemical Studies of Elias Ashmole', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69.3 (2008), pp. 395-417. Michela Pereira notes that none of the alchemical treatises traditionally attributed to him can be plausibly ascribed to him. See Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus attributed to Raymond Lull* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1989), p. 32. Cf. Keiser, 'The Conclusion of the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*', p. 18. For more on Tyrwhitt's reading of Cremer, see Tyrwhitt, in Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 110-111.

philosophy and elusiveness of alchemical experimentation with the ‘jagounce’ that is not in fact there, and the ‘Covetous Artist’ who, like Chaucer’s Yeoman and the churl, is left with nothing.

### **John Lydgate: Lancastrian Poet**

Lydgate’s poetry was well received during the fifteenth century and until the late sixteenth century in England.<sup>7</sup> His writings also had potential for alchemical readings, as the Harley MS 2407 version shows. In this chapter, I argue that the Harley 2407 version of the poem represents a complex exemplary narrative and alchemical allegory. While the alchemical version has been noted by some scholars, and notably written about by Fredell and R.H. Bowers, it remains underexplored. In examining the alchemical version as an *exemplum*, I will also connect it to Lydgate’s writing, which heralds the changing styles and shifts of the fifteenth century.

Lydgate lived an extraordinary life and achieved considerable fame in his own day, writing over 145,000 lines of verse (more than Chaucer and Shakespeare) and commissioned works for high profile figures such as Henry V, Henry VI, and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, among others.<sup>8</sup> Osborn Bokenham, an English Augustinian friar writing during Lydgate’s lifetime, even christened him ‘fyrst rethoryens’ alongside Chaucer and Gower.<sup>9</sup> Lydgate was very popular in his own lifetime, with some writers considering him superior to Chaucer.<sup>10</sup> Lydgate’s work fell out of favour by the eighteenth century, however, and it was not until the

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<sup>7</sup> In his lifetime, Maura Nolan comments that ‘Lydgate was actively fulfilling commissions from both inside and outside the court’, indicating that he was in high demand. See Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 5. Cf. Lois Ebin, *John Lydgate* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), and Joseph A. Dane and Irene Basey Beesemyer, ‘The Denigration of John Lydgate: Implications of Printing History’, *English Studies*, 81.2 (2000), 117-26, at p. 118. Dane and Beesemyer argue that Lydgate was part of the triumvirate of English poets alongside Gower and Chaucer until the late sixteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>9</sup> Osborn Bokenham, *Life of St Anne*, in *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. M.S. Serjeantson, EETS OS 206 (1938) 1403 (38), referred to in Mitchell, ‘John Gower and John Lydgate: Forms and Norms of Rhetorical Culture’, in *A Companion to Middle English Language and Culture c. 1350-1500*, ed. Peter Brown (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 569-584, at p. 569.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, p. 2.

twentieth century that interest in his poetry and scholarship was revived.<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> While Chaucer's literature was praised for its exemplary form and style in the fifteenth century and Lydgate was undeniably influenced by it, however, in many ways Lydgate succeeded in creating his own style.<sup>13</sup>

### Sources and Influences of Lydgate's Poem

Lydgate's poem *The Churl and the Bird*, which follows the structure of the format of the beast fable, was very popular in the fifteenth century.<sup>14</sup> He decided 'Out of Frenssh a tale to translate, / Which in a paunflet I radde & sauh but late'.<sup>15</sup> While *L'oiselet* may have influenced Lydgate's poem, however, Lydgate likely used more specific sources.<sup>16</sup> Neil Cartlidge argues that Lydgate was dependent on the *Trois Savoires* (an earlier French version of the poem) and *Les Donnei des Amants* (a thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman debate poem) to such an extent as to

<sup>11</sup> Alain Renoir, *The Poetry of John Lydgate* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 1-6.

<sup>12</sup> James Simpson suggests that Lydgate is 'doomed to imitate Chaucer but equally doomed in the attempt'. See Simpson, "'For al my body...weieth nat an unce": Empty Poets and Rhetorical Weight in Lydgate's Churl and the Bird', in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 129-46, at p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Pamela M. King, 'Chaucer, Chaucerians, and the Theme of Poetry', in *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and Jane Cowen (London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, King's College London, 1991), pp. 1-14.

<sup>14</sup> Simpson, 'Empty Poets...', p. 134. It was so popular, in fact, that William Caxton printed it twice and Wynkyn de Worde once. For more on the poem's popularity in the fifteenth century, see Eleanor Prescott Hammond, *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey, Being Examples of Conventional Secular Poetry, Exclusive of Romance, Ballad, Lyric, and Drama, in the Period from Henry the Fourth to Henry the Eighth* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), p. 102. Cf. David Scott-MacNab, 'Caxton's Printings of *The Horse, the Sheep and the Goose*: Some Observations Regarding the Textual Relationships', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 13.1 (2004), 1-13, and Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, p. 2. Although the dating for poem is uncertain, Wolfgang suggests that Lydgate may have written the poem as part of his 'translations' while he composed his Aesopic fables in Oxford (ca. 1405-10). See Wolfgang, "'Out of the Frenssh": Lydgate's Source of *The Churl and the Bird*', *English Language Notes*, 32.3 (1995), 10-22, at p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> John Lydgate, *The Churl and the Bird*, in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble McCracken, EETS OS 192, 2 vols. (London: K. Paul, Trench, and Trübner & Co., 1911), vol. 2, 33-5, p. 469. All subsequent references refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.

<sup>16</sup> Leonora D. Wolfgang, *Le lai de l'Oiselet: An Old French Poem of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Leonora D. Wolfgang (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1990), p. 5. Wolfgang suggests that Lydgate would have known about the *Disciplina clericalis* as a source for his poem. In the *Disciplina*, the bird is explicitly called a nightingale, and the bird is freed from entrapment after he tells the truth. Wolfgang also comments that the stone in this version is referred to as a jacinth.



obviate the need for any other sources.<sup>17</sup> Lydgate draws from his French sources so closely, in fact, that the phrasing is near verbatim in translation, notably when the bird complains of her imprisonment as well as the churl's churlish demand that she sing or he will eat her.<sup>18</sup>

In recent scholarship, some critics view the poem as a socio-political allegory about the Lancastrian dynasty.<sup>19</sup> Lydgate is keen to emphasise the bird's allegorical role, noting in the poem's introduction that it features 'moralites concluding in prudence' (3-5). His approach to the fable genre in particular is central to this chapter.<sup>20</sup> For Lydgate, the fable is a suitable medium, one in which he can express his moral points through 'Problemys, liknessis, & ffigures' (1).<sup>21</sup> As Mitchell comments, however, it is not a straightforward negative *exemplum*.<sup>22</sup> The interpretation of these moral points is skewed by the bird's behaviour, creating a morally complex reading of both the original poem and the alchemical version. Lydgate clearly establishes the moral of the story, one of the main characters is a talking bird, and the poem is relatively short at 387 lines (with additional lines in the alchemical version).

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<sup>17</sup> Neil Cartlidge, 'The Source of John Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*', *Notes and Queries*, 242 (1997), 22-24, at p. 23. Cartlidge also suggests that Lydgate was either working from *Trois Savoirs* or *Les Donnei des Amants*, though not from one of the surviving copies. Wolfgang also mentions the *Chastoiement* as a possible source, which features a variation of the tale in which the bird is trapped in a snare and the villain. Cf. Wolfgang, *Le lai de l'Oiselet*, p. 28. Elizabeth Eva Leach comments that the poem draws from the thirteenth-century French *lai de l'oiselet*, which drew from a parable of saints' lives in *Barlaam and Josephat*, a Christianised life of Buddha that dates back to the seventh or eighth century. For more on this connection, see Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 97; Wolfgang, *Le Lai d'Oiselet*, pp. 7-8; Hammond, *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey*, p. 102; and Gaston Paris, *Le lai de l'oiselet: poème français du XIIIe siècle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1884). Dorothy Yamamoto and Alain Renoir suggest that the *Gesta Romanorum* was also a key source for the poem. Cf. Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 43; Alain Renoir, *The Poetry of John Lydgate*, p. 44; and Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, p. 193. See also *Gesta Romanorum*, trans. Charles Swan and Wynnard Hooper (New York: AMS Press, 1970), pp. 318-9, and Petrus Alfonsi, *The Disciplina Clericalis of Petrus Alfonsi*, ed. E. Hermes and trans. P.R. Quarrie (London: Routledge and Paul, 1977), p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> Cartlidge, 'The Source of John Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*', p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, p. 1. Nolan suggests that Lydgate's texts were intended to bolster the child on the throne. Cf. Helen Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 197. See also Simpson, 'Empty Poets...', p. 134, and Simpson, 'John Lydgate', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature, 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 205-16, at p. 212.

<sup>20</sup> Lois Ebin, *John Lydgate*, p. 105. Ebin defines the medieval fable as tales that have animal characters and as *exempla* that reveal moral points. Cf. Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, p. 198. Pearsall rightly observes that Lydgate 'extracts every ounce of morality' in the poem. Cf. Hammond, *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey*, p. 409.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell, 'John Gower and John Lydgate', p. 582.

The talking bird offers interesting parallels between animal and human, overlapping both human and animal worlds.<sup>23</sup> The bird's human-like qualities, particularly its rational mind and proverbial wisdom, give it moral authority, yet Lydgate clearly labels it as a bird rather than a human.

As I will discuss in this chapter, the beast fable also teaches 'suspicion both of verbal elaboration and the delusory powers of the imagination'.<sup>24</sup> The bird provides wisdoms, or supposed truths to the churl, yet this is complicated by the absence of the stone.<sup>25</sup> In alchemical terms, Mercury's knowledge is unattainable for the alchemist since 'she' has mastery in an element that is impossible for him.<sup>26</sup> I suggest that knowledge in the poem is divided between the alchemist's ignorance and Mercury's superior knowledge, and knowledge is also presented through the experience of reading the poem as exemplary.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> On the topic of medieval birds in the fable, Mann further suggests that 'birds come nearest to imitating or spontaneously reproducing human speech', and this 'clever mimicry makes it possible to treat them as quasi-human'. See Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, pp. 30, 193.

<sup>24</sup> Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Mann comments that 'birds focus on the issue of what truth there is to be found in language', yet in the alchemical version of *The Churl and the Bird*, I suggest that the Hermes bird also questions the truth of alchemy as well as language and knowledge. See Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 193. On the topic of medieval birds and their moral roles in the fable, Yamamoto comments that medieval 'birds are there to teach man', and function morally for 'those who observe, and understand'. She also suggests that birds distance themselves from humans over their mastery of flight, which humans cannot attain. See Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human...*, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Yamamoto stresses that 'knowledge' is illusory in the poem, particularly since the alchemist lacks knowledge of alchemical practice and the Stone. I agree that knowledge in the poem is not clear-cut, but neither is it illusory as she suggests. Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human...*, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Given the alchemical content of the manuscript and the poem's allegorical content, it is likely that the alchemical *The Churl and the Bird* would have appealed to aspiring adepts. As mentioned earlier, Ashmole included it in his alchemical compendium. The bird's moral ambiguity is not specific to *The Churl and the Bird*; in fact, as Mohammad Hadi Kamyabee notes, the moral ambiguity of the medieval fable could often complicate its straightforward message. See Kamyabee, "'And out of fables gret wysdom men may take: Middle English Animal Fables as Vehicles of Moral Instruction', University of Toronto, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1997, p. 7. See also Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, *The Manciple's Tale*, and Lydgate's version of *The Tale of the Cok* in *Isopes Fabules* for other examples of medieval bird fables with moral ambiguity. See the Chaucer tales in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 252-61, 282-86, and Lydgate, *Isopes Fabules*, ed. Edward Wheatley, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013).

### Lydgate and Burgh's *Secrees of Old Philisoffres*

Before examining *The Churl and the Bird*, it is also worth mentioning the alchemical passage in Lydgate's later work *Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, an adaptation of pseudo-Aristotle's *Secretum secretorum* which he co-wrote with Benedict Burgh (one of Lydgate's admirers). *Secrees* is regarded as Lydgate's final work, and was likely commissioned by either Henry VI or Viscount Bouchier.<sup>28</sup> Unlike *The Churl and the Bird*, *Secrees* was not well received, partially due to Lydgate's early death as well as its lack of order; he died before he could finish it in 1451, with Burgh completing the rest.<sup>29</sup> Despite the shortcomings of Lydgate and Burgh's poem, however, its alchemical passages are important for an understanding of the alchemical reading of *The Churl and the Bird*. In Lydgate's alchemical passage, Dame Study provides a decretal against studying the 'forbidden arts', including a warning about the cost of studying alchemy:

But the fals Erryng hath fonnyd many Oon;  
 And brought hem afftir in ful greet Rerage,  
 By expensys and Outragious Costage  
 Ffor lack of brayn they wern maad so wood  
 Thyng to begynne which they nat vndirstood  
 Ffor he that lyst put in experience,  
 Fforboode Secrees I holde hym but a fool  
 Lyk hym that temptith of wilful necligence  
 To stoned vp right On a thre foot stool,  
 Or sparyth a stewe and fyssheth a bareyn pool:  
 When al is doon he get noon other grace,  
 Men wyl scorne hym and mokke his foltyssh fface.  
 It is no Crafft poor men tassaye,  
 It Causith Coffres and Chestys to be bare,  
 Marryth wyttes, and braynes doth Affraye;  
 Yit be wryting this book doth declare,  
 And be Resouns lyst nat for to spare,  
 With goldeyn Resouns in taast moost lykerous  
 Thyng per ignotum prevyd per ignocius.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Schirmer, *John Lydgate*, pp. 248-9. It is more likely that Henry VI was the patron for this translation since he was appointing commissions for alchemical study during this time, and Linden suggests that Henry VI prompted Lydgate to complete the alchemical section. Cf. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Schirmer remarks that Lydgate 'would probably have brought some order into this poetic jumble'. See Schirmer, *John Lydgate*, p. 249.

<sup>30</sup> John Lydgate and Benedict Burgh, *Lydgate and Burgh's Secrees of Old Philisoffres: A Version of the Secreta secretorum*, ed. Robert Steele (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1894), 570-88, pp. 18-9. All subsequent references to Lydgate's *Secrees* refer to this edition.

Alchemical study is the antithesis of Dame Study's moral campaign to 'do well', as Linden puts it.<sup>31</sup> In this passage, Lydgate focusses on money, particularly how alchemical pursuit 'Causith Coffres and Chestys to be bare' (583), indicating its failures and losses. Moreover, its deceptive and covetous practices lead to mockery and ill fortune. The Canon's Yeoman exemplifies the 'foltyssh fface' (581), or foolish face, of the alchemist.<sup>32</sup> This passage also reflects the contemporary and earlier condemnations of alchemy, notably Pope John XXII's decretal as well as Henry IV's more recent Statute against gold-making in England in 1403-4.<sup>33</sup> Lydgate's view of alchemy here is predominantly negative. Alchemy here leads to failure, barrenness, poverty, and debt, reinforcing the impression made by Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman as a failed alchemist. Lydgate even echoes Chaucer's use of '*ignotum [...] per ignotius*' (588), referring to the futility of alchemical experimentation.<sup>34</sup>

### **Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird as Exemplum***

Lydgate's poem *The Churl and the Bird* is far more explicit as an *exemplum* in both its original and alchemical forms. Lydgate shows no subtlety in the introduction to his poem, identifying the moral intentions of the poem: 'With moralites concluding in prudence' (5) and more

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<sup>31</sup> Linden, 'Alchemy and the English Literary Imagination: 1385-1633', University of Minnesota, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1971, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> See *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956), p. 686. Collette and DiMarco further link Lydgate's condemnation to the Canon's Yeoman's eyesight and immorality, reflecting the themes of the previous chapter. See Collette and DiMarco, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', p. 728. Cf. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>33</sup> See Geoghegan, 'A Licence of Henry VI to Practice Alchemy', pp. 10-17. Henry IV's Statute was not repealed until 1689.

<sup>34</sup> See also Chaucer, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, VIII.1457. Chaucer is the first English poet to use this phrase in an alchemical context. Norton also notably mentions the *ignotum per ignotius* phrase in his *Ordinal of Alchemy*: 'In the Canon his tale, saynge what is thuse, / but quid ignotum per magis ignotius / that is to saye, what maie this be, / but unknowe by more unknowne named is she', identifying Chaucer as the source for this phrase in the alchemical tradition. Damon also comments that all subsequent authors after Chaucer and Norton (with the alchemical scribe as *The Churl and the Bird* as a possible exception) cite either Chaucer or Norton as their source. For more on the alchemical tradition of *ignotum per ignotius*, see Damon, 'Chaucer and Alchemy', p. 787. See also Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy*, 1159-65, pp. 11, 38, and Kathryn Langford Hitchcox, 'Alchemical Discourse in the *Canterbury Tales*: Signs of Gnosis and Transmutation', Rice University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1988, p. 10. Linden also explores what he calls the *ignotum per ignotius* alchemical tradition in early modern England in his dissertation 'Alchemy and the English Literary Imagination', p. 65.

specifically the bird's 'Thre proverbis paied for raunsoum' (38). He is also clear in identifying it as a beast-fable: 'bestis thei take, & fowlis, to witnessis, / Of whoos feynyng fables first aroos' (31-2). Lydgate describes the churl as one 'which had[de] lust & gret corage, / Withyne hymself, bi diligent travaile / Tarray his gardeyn with notable apparaile' (45-7). This description helps to explain his behaviour, particularly his impulsiveness and rashness. The churl does work hard, but his situation with the garden is an unusual one.<sup>35</sup> The churl's garden is not just any garden either; in fact, it is quite beautiful:

Al thaleys were made pleyn with sond,  
The benchis turved with newe turvis grene,  
Sote herbis with condittes at the hond,  
That wellid vp ageyn the sonne shene,  
Lich siluer stremys, as any cristal cleene [...] (50-4)

The churl has evidently done quite well for himself. In Lydgate's version and the alchemical version, the reason for the churl's ownership of the beautiful garden is not explained. In *L'oiselet*, however, the *villein* purchases the property from the son of a deceased nobleman. The author attributes the mishandled inheritance to the property decline.<sup>36</sup> The background information here provides the *villein*/churl with the rationale to disrupt the courtly lifestyle that the bird embodies. Lydgate and the alchemical adaptor perhaps omit this information to instead emphasise the churl's churlishness/covetousness, which again links to the idea that only the chosen elect can understand the mysteries of alchemy.

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<sup>35</sup> Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England*, p. 197. This is further augmented by the fact that the bird calls him 'Ser Cherl' (363) at the end of the poem, which is another paradox, or quite possibly a joke. Barr comments that the notion of the churl owning the garden seems paradoxical, given his low-class status and the implications of owning a medieval garden. Yet not all medieval peasants were impoverished; in fact, due to the socioeconomic shifts in the later Middle Ages, some peasants possessed land that exceeded fifteen acres, and had greater access to market opportunities. For more on the topic of wealth among the medieval English peasants, see notably Mark Bailey, 'The Commercialisation of the English Economy, 1086-1500', *Journal of Medieval History*, 24.3 (1997), 297-311, at p. 308; John Hatcher, 'English Serfdom and Villeinage: Towards a Reassessment', *Past & Present*, 90 (1981), 3-39, at p. 25; Christopher Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 298-354; and P.D.A. Harvey, *The Peasant Land Market in Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Many thanks to Ryan Wicklund for informing me about late medieval economic history in England.

<sup>36</sup> See vv. 25-6 of the poem in Wolfgang, *Le lai de l'Oiselet*, p. 55, as well as Wolfgang's synopsis of the poem on p. 2. Cf. Leslie C. Brook, 'The Bird's Three Truths in the *Lai de l'Oiselet*', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 19 (1993), 15-25, at p. 15.

The highlight of the garden is the beautiful singing bird in the laurel tree. Scholars remain divided on the species of the bird.<sup>37</sup> Leach enticingly argues that the bird is a nightingale because of ‘the fact that she is small, eats worms, and sings “amerously” toward evening and before dawn’.<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Lydgate deliberately does not identify its species. It is not wholly important what species the bird is, particularly since its role is more symbolic in alchemical terms. In the alchemical version, it is more important that the bird clearly self-identifies as Hermes bird, functioning as an alchemical symbol and metaphor, as I will discuss later. The bird has a seemingly supernatural appearance, with ‘sonnyssh fetheris brihter than gold wer, / Which with hir song makith heuy hertis liht’ (59-60). The bird’s feathers are not merely gold in colour, but they are *brighter* than gold, signifying celestial connotations. The bird also sings a ‘verray heuenly melodie / Euen and morwe’ (71-2). The bird contrasts the earthly desires (‘luste’) of the churl, and is instead wiser than humans, representing a link between the heavens and the earth.

In his ignorance, the churl decides to imprison her, displaying his disregard for her well-being as well as his selfishness, using her captivity to ‘reioissh his corage’ (82).<sup>39</sup> It is the mark of churlishness not to appreciate and to resent the beautiful song, and perhaps a denial of nature’s beauty.<sup>40</sup> She tells the churl that ‘Song & prisoun haue noon accordaunce’ (99) since

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<sup>37</sup> Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England*, p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> In the *Trois Savoirs* version, the bird claims that the churl shares the same monotonous song as the cuckoo due to ‘its natural inability to learn’. See Leach, *Sung Birds*, pp. 98, 127.

<sup>39</sup> Marie de France also notably uses the trope of the imprisoned bird in her *lai Laüstic*, in which the nightingale symbolises the unconditional love between a married woman and her paramour knight. The jealous husband imprisons the bird and despite her pleas, he breaks its neck and throws its corpse at her, covering her dress with its blood. While the circumstances in the *lai* are very different from Lydgate’s poem and the alchemical version, I suggest that like the churl, the husband is also a force of destruction, seeking to kill the bird for his own ends. See Marie de France, *Laüstic*, in *Marie de France Poetry: New Translations, Backgrounds and Context, Criticism*, ed. Dorothy Gilbert (New York: W.W. and Company, 2015), pp. 120-5. For more information on this poem, see also Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Corey Sparks argues that the bird’s very nature compels her to sing, ‘working a musical magic of relief on hearers’. See Sparks, ‘Lydgate’s Jailbird’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 36 (2014), 77-101, at pp. 93-4.

‘Song procedith of ioie & plesaunce, / And prisoun causith deth and destruccion’ (101-2). Her promise to the churl arises as her reaction to her imprisonment:

‘But if thou wilt reioissh my syngyng,  
Late me go flee free fro [al] daungeer,  
And every day in the morwenyng  
I shal repair vnto thi laurer  
And fresshly syng with lusty notis cleer  
Vndir thi chaumbir or afor thyn halle,  
Eury sesoun whan thou list me calle.’ (113-9)

In her entrapment, the bird appeals to the churl with the promise of an obedient performance ““eury sesoun whan thou list me calle”” (119). The selfish churl is charmed by this prospect because it would give him complete authority and command over the bird. The churl is blind to the bird’s true gift, her beautiful harmony, which transcends the material qualities that he desires, declaring ““Or to the kechen I shalt hi body bryng, / Pulle hi ffetherys that be so briht and cleere, / And aftir rost, or bake to my dyneer”” (145-7). He sees the bird as a quick, ephemeral meal with no foresight of the consequences or impact of his actions. He also remains wholly ignorant of the bird’s celestial connotations, regarding it as a commodity. There is no rational reason for the churl to eat the bird other than his own idiocy. He is driven by impulsiveness and blinded by his own wants and needs. In this way, he acts as an agent of destruction in the poem, seeking to destroy beauty for his own entertainment and disrupting the harmony between macrocosm and microcosm that the bird establishes through her singing. The bird tempts him with promises beyond the material, telling him ““More of availe, take heed what I do profre, / Than al the gold that is shett in the coffre”” (160-1). This passage is implicitly alchemical, since the endgame is multiplying gold through the transmutation of metals. The bird claims that her words are more important than any material object, even a hoard of gold. In doing so, however, she also appeals to the alchemist/churl’s material interests, providing an incentive for her release. Although the bird manages to escape using her wit, the churl does not value the wisdoms she imparts to him, much as the alchemist does not value or understand the wisdom that Mercury provides. It is due to his human fallibility that he fails to understand this

exchange and continues to err in his alchemical experimentation. The churl/ignorant alchemist cannot understand wisdom/alchemical secrets for what they are.

Upon her release, the bird reiterates the moral point of the poem, that “Eche man bewar, of wisdam & resoun, / Of sugre strowid, that hidith fals poisoun” (179-80). Yet the bird is also guilty of hiding truths, since she lies by promising one thing (i.e. fulfilling the churl’s command) but then delivering another (patronising the churl before flying off and revealing that her offer was a lie). The unreliable nature of the bird thus brings into question the exemplary function of the poem, which is arguably complicated by its alchemical allegory in Harley MS 2407. On one hand, the bird’s words are meant to enlighten the churl, to set an example for his covetousness, but on the other hand, the bird is a liar, and moreover guilty of not practising what she preaches. Nevertheless, she does deliver the three proverbial wisdoms, namely “Yiff nat of wisdam to hasty credence” (197), “Desir thou nat bi no condicioun / Thyng that is impossible to recur” (206-7), and “For tresour lost make nevir to grett sorwe” (213). The irony of the bird’s deliverance is that the churl is a churl, and as the poem reveals, he does not follow any of the wisdoms.<sup>41</sup> The *villein*/churl interprets the three truths as arbitrary.<sup>42</sup> I suggest that the proverbial wisdoms are true, but their value and meaning are lost on foolish churls/alchemists, who should not aspire to higher wisdoms.

Yet the churl is not the only character in the poem whose behaviour should be considered when reading it as exemplary. The bird’s patronising nature arises from her inflated sense of superiority. She calls to the churl, “Thou were [...] a verry natural foole, / To sofre me departe of thi lewdnesse” (225-6). She ridicules his very nature, since he is by nature a churl and since

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<sup>41</sup> Grennen argues that the churl laments something which he never had in the first place, which violates the second (and third) precept, and he also violates the first precept by believing the bird to begin with. Brook’s commentary on *L’oiselet* can also be extended to Lydgate’s original poem and the alchemical version as well: ‘what the bird has taught him in fact is the essence of wisdom—never to presume to think one truly knows anything, as it is always possible to appreciate more fully what one assumes one already knows’. See Grennen, ‘Jargon Transmuted’, pp. 176-7, and Brook, ‘The Bird’s Three Truths in the *Lai de l’Oiselet*’, p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Brook suggests that the proverbial wisdoms are ‘obvious bits of common sense that he and everyone knows already’, yet I suggest that the churl does not understand them or value them for what they are. See Brook, ‘The Bird’s Three Truths in the *Lai de l’Oiselet*’, p. 18.



he was foolish enough to let her go. Moreover, she taunts him with descriptions of the wealth he could have had if he had kept her:

‘And in [thyn] hert[e] han grett hevynesse.  
That thou hast lost so passyng gret richesse,  
Which myht suffise bi valew in recky[n]g  
To pay the ransom of a mighty kyng.’ (128-31)

The bird’s equation of her captivity with the possession of great wealth is merely a ploy, but she knows the churl will fall for it. It also adds to her humiliation of the churl.<sup>43</sup> The churl is never granted any mercy in the bird’s attacks, and she has particular disdain for him.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, she leads the churl to regret his past, although it is technically not his past since he is lamenting for an idealised past that never was. Her diatribe continues:

‘Ther is a ston which callid is iagounce,  
Off old engendrid withynne my entrayle  
Which of fyne gold peiseth a great unce,  
Cirtyne of colour, like garnetes of entaile  
Which makith men victorious in bataile,  
And who-so-ever bere on hym this stoon  
Is ful assured of his mortal foon.  
Who hath this stoon in poscessioun,  
Shal sofre no poverty, nor non indigence,  
But of all tresour haue plente & foisoun,  
And euery man shal doon hym reverence  
And noon enmye shal hym doon offence;  
But from thyn handis now that I am goon,  
Pleyn if þou wilt, for thi part is noon.  
It causith love, it makith men gracious  
And favorabil in euery mannys siht,  
It makith accord attween folk envious,  
Comfortith sorweful, makyth hevy hertis liht,  
Lik thopasion of colour sonnyssh bright;  
I am a fool to telle þe al attonys,  
Or teche a cherl the prys of precious stonys.’ (232-53)

In Lydgate’s poem, the stone is a jacinth as its citrine colour indicates, yet it is extraordinary powerful.<sup>45</sup> The bird convinces the churl that the ‘iagounce’ is physically contained within her. The stone has magical powers, making ‘men victorious in bataile’ (237) and being the ‘mortal

<sup>43</sup> Brook comments that the poet shows nothing but contempt for the churl, and this applies to all versions. See Brook, ‘The Bird’s Three Truths in the *Lai de l’Oiselet*’, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Brook comments that the ‘unsophisticated *vilain* is no match for the trained clerical mind of the bird’. See Brook, ‘The Bird’s Three Truths in the *Lai de l’Oiselet*’, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> In the alchemical version, the invaluable ‘iagounce’ which the bird describes is the Philosopher’s Stone.

foen' (enemy) to those who oppose its user's rule.<sup>46</sup> The 'jagounce' appears in Anglo-Norman and English lapidaries as 'jacinth' or 'hyacinth', where it is described as having protective properties.<sup>47</sup> Yet the bird's stone is everlasting and affects mortality, proving to be far superior to the jacinth in the lapidaries. This stone also has the power to eliminate all poverty, and thus appeals to the churl's gullible nature and materialistic ideals.

Rather than seek wealth, the churl should conform to his role in society, and thus behave as a traditional churl with "a mookfork in his honde" (264). Such is the case with ignorant alchemists as well. Rather than seek out the Stone through their churlish ambitions, they should stick with what they know in their element (i.e. not transmute metals since they will be prone to failure). This does not, however, negate the possibility of alchemical transmutation in the poem, however, since the bird's appearance as Mercury confirms this. It does, however, that the churlish alchemist is unsuited to be an adept. The bird concludes that "I lese my tyme any moore to tarye, / [To telle a bovir of the lapidarye]" (265-6), since the churl neither processes nor comprehends what she has told him.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the churl cannot appreciate the bird's values or wisdoms that the bird has attempted to impart to him. With Lydgate's final verses which explicate the bird's diatribe, she revels in her torment of the churl. She is keen, for example, to remind him "That thou haddist, thou getist no more ageyn" (267). The churl will not get a second chance. In this sense, Lydgate portrays her as a more complex and contradictory character than the more clear-cut exemplary figure from his source material.

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<sup>46</sup> See the *MED* entry for 'jagounce'. The Anglo-Norman lapidaries also emphasise its yellow colour and invaluable properties. See Paul Struder and J. Evans (eds.), *Anglo-Norman Lapidaries*, (Paris: É. Champion, 1924).

<sup>47</sup> *A Medieval Book on Magical Stones: The Peterborough Library*, trans. Francis Young (Cambridge: Texts in Early Modern Magic, 2016), pp. 53-4. The scribe describes how, upon contact with the stone, it allows travelers to safely travel to another country. Moreover, when the stone's user stays with a host, all things will be revealed to him. For more on the role of this stone in the lapidaries, see *English Mediaeval Lapidaries*, ed. J. Evans and M.S. Serjeantson, EETS OS 190 (London, 1933), and *The Middle English Boke of Stones: The Southern Version*, ed. George R. Keiser, Scripta 13 (Brussel: Ufsal, 1984), pp. 29-34, pp. 16-7.

<sup>48</sup> Mitchell links the fable to moral rhetoric, explaining that 'rhetoric is not always effectual, for proverbial wisdom does nothing to change the churl's behaviour'. See Mitchell, 'John Gower and John Lydgate', p. 581.

The bird again echoes the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* when she states that “‘All is nat gold that she with goldish hewe, / Nor stoonys all bi natur, as I fynde, / Be nat saphires that shewe colour ynde’” (306-8). As with Chaucer's tale, in this passage the bird criticises the churl's superficiality and inability to see beyond the surface, or rather his inability to see that the bird holds nothing. Simpson comments that the poem ‘strips the surface down to reveal nothing within’, and this passage demonstrates this.<sup>49</sup> The bird further asserts the non-existence and impossibility of the stone, commenting that

‘For al my body, peised in balaunce,  
Weieth nat an vnce, rewde is thi remembraunce,  
I to have moore peise closyd in myn entraile,  
Than al my body set for the countirtaile.’ (312-5)

Unfortunately for the churl, he also disobeys the bird's third wisdom, lamenting for a treasure which never existed. He also neglects the fact that a stone of the magnitude described could not logically fit into a bird of her small size. On the other hand, however, Mitchell posits that ‘the enchanting but absent stone figures the difficulty of whether the fable has a moral core or is void’.<sup>50</sup> The bird's stone is ideal but non-existent. She further comments

‘Thou sholdist nat make to mych sorwe,  
Whan thou seest thou maist it nat recur;  
Heer thou failist, which doost thi besi cur  
In thi snare to catche me ageyn,  
Thou art a fool, thi labour is in veyn.’ (325-9)

Not unlike the Canon's Yeoman, the churl fails in his labour. Similarly, the ignorant alchemist fails in his quest for transmutation, and both are misled by their delusions of grandeur. It is not so much a missed opportunity as misguided labour, inevitably lacking success. The bird's diatribe and the impossibility of having the Stone within her testify to that. On the other hand, however, she is a liar, giving the churl the illusion that her body contains the precious stone. She lectures him about the three wisdoms, but he does not process them. Mitchell critiques her reliability as a source of moral value in the poem: ‘Should readers beware of being tricked into

<sup>49</sup> Simpson, ‘Empty Poets...’, p. 139.

<sup>50</sup> Mitchell, ‘John Gower and John Lydgate’, pp. 581-2.

thinking the fable has substance?’<sup>51</sup> In this reading, the bird’s moral authority seems dubious and deceptive.<sup>52</sup> The bird’s lie tests not only the churl’s credulity, but the reader’s as well.<sup>53</sup> In this light, he argues that the poem could be read as ‘circular and self-referential’ in the search for moral meaning.<sup>54</sup> While the bird’s lie and behaviour should be called into question, however, I believe that the poem does in fact present itself as exemplary, and moreover there is true meaning to the poem, particularly in the alchemical version; although the churl and the bird do not seemingly learn from their experiences, the reader does.<sup>55</sup>

In the final stanzas, Lydgate reiterates the moral of the poem, although as we have seen, the *exemplum* is more complicated and intricate than it seems. Lydgate tells the reader that

For losse of good takith no gret heede,  
 Beeth nat to sorwefful for noon aduersite,  
 Coveitith no-thyng that may nat bee,  
 And remembrith, wheer that euer ye gon,  
 A cherlis cherl us alwey woo-begon. (367-71)

In other words, one should expect nothing from a churl, and he is not worth pitying. Likewise, the covetous alchemist is ‘woo-begon’ (371) since his covetousness will blind him to the reality of his endeavours every time; his aspirations are ultimately illusory, which results in failure for both the alchemist and the churl. Like the Canon’s Yeoman, the churl/ignorant alchemist cannot transmute anything, resulting in wasted labour. Although the churl’s and the bird’s behaviour complicate the exemplary reading of the poem, Lydgate nonetheless brings it to the fore.

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<sup>51</sup> Mitchell, ‘John Gower and John Lydgate’, pp. 581-2.

<sup>52</sup> As Joanna Martin rightly comments, ‘the bird as poet and teacher is problematic and unreliable, and despite her early negotiating skills clearly wants to have everything on her terms’. See Martin, ‘John Lydgate’s Shorter Secular Poems’, in *A Companion to Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffrey and A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), pp. 87-98, at p. 92.

<sup>53</sup> Mitchell further suggests that her lies instigate *insolubilia*, which clouds the true meaning of the poem, making it inaccessible. Mitchell, ‘John Gower and John Lydgate’, p. 582. For more on the medieval understanding of *insolubilia*, see Paul Vincent Spade, ‘Insolubilia’, in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100-1600*, ed. Norman Kretzmann et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 246-53.

<sup>54</sup> Mitchell, ‘John Gower and John Lydgate’, p. 582.

<sup>55</sup> As Mitchell suggests, the poem’s ‘meaning is conveyed through the *experience* of reading’, and this can be extended to the alchemical version as well. See Mitchell, ‘John Gower and John Lydgate’, p. 582.

## Harley MS 2407 and Its History

Before I examine the alchemical version as exemplary, it is important to discuss the manuscript itself.<sup>56</sup> The manuscript is a compendium of alchemical tracts and treatises from the late medieval period, featuring excerpts from pseudo-Geber, pseudo-Arnald of Villanova, Albertus Magnus, and Lydgate's poem.<sup>57</sup> There are Latin excerpts on parchment as well as Middle English excerpts on paper.<sup>58</sup> In particular, the manuscript focusses on alchemy and magical stones, including several anonymous treatises on the Philosopher's Stone and its supernatural powers.<sup>59</sup> John Dee owned the manuscript, which he kept in his library at Mortlake.<sup>60</sup> Fredell suggests that Ashmole, whose own diagrams and alchemical poems and treatises in the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* mirror those found in the manuscript, came into contact with them through Dee's son Arthur, who was an alchemist.<sup>61</sup>

On 5 November 1723, Humfrey Wanley, the Library-Keeper of Robert Harley, the First Earl of Oxford, purchased the manuscript from John Batteley and thus added it to the Harley manuscript collection.<sup>62</sup> Beginning in 1708, Wanley catalogued all the Harley manuscripts up

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<sup>56</sup> Singer classifies Harley MS 2407 as a fifteenth-century manuscript. Although she does not provide an exact date, the British Library catalogue places Harley MS 2407 in the late fifteenth century. See Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 2, p. 579, and the British Library entry for Harley MS 2407, last accessed 19 July 2016 <<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=3670>>

<sup>57</sup> R. Julian Roberts and Andrew G. Watson identify it as *Alchemical and Medical Receipts in Latin and English* and mention pseudo-Arnald of Villanova's *Rosarius*, pseudo-Hermes's (or Merlin or Rasis) *Laudabile sanctum (Gemma salutaris)*, and Richard Carpenter's treatise 'Of titan and magnesia...' in its contents. See John Dee, *John Dee's Library Catalogue*, ed. Roberts and Watson (London: Bibliographical Society, 1990), p. 167.

<sup>58</sup> See Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 2, p. 689. J.J.G. Alexander writes that Harley 2407 has 'thirteen full-page drawings (five mainly diagrammatic), thirty spaces planned for one-third page miniatures, one three-quarter page, and one-half page miniature. The plan for a book such as this needed an alert scribe.' See Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490*, 2 vols., *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles*, ed. J.J.G. Alexander, 6 vols. (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), vol. 1, p. 43. The British Library notes that the alchemical diagrams featured in Harley 2407 are copied in Sloane 1171 and Egerton 845, two other alchemical compendiums. See the British Library entries for Sloane 1171 and Egerton 845 respectively, and the entry for Harley 2407, last accessed 5 August 2016 <<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=3670>>

<sup>59</sup> See Humfrey Wanley, *The Diary of Humfrey Wanley, 1715-26*, ed. C.E. Wright and Ruth C. Wright, 2 vols. (London: The Bibliography Society, 1966), II, p. 263. See R.H. Bowers, 'Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*, MS. Harley 2407, and Elias Ashmole', *Modern Language Notes*, 49 (1934) 90-94, at p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> See Harley MS 2407, fol.69v. See also Roberts and Watson, *John Dee's Library Catalogue*, p. 168.

<sup>61</sup> Fredell, p. 452. See also John Dee, *John Dee's Library Catalogue*, pp. 167-8.

<sup>62</sup> Wanley, *Diary of Humfrey Wanley*, vol. 2, p. 263 n.1.

to Harley 2407 (he died before he could complete the cataloguing).<sup>63</sup> Wanley interprets the alchemical version of *The Churl and the Bird* as ‘A Poem, comparing Matrimony to a Bird in a Cage: translated out of French into English’.<sup>64</sup> The Matrimony refers to the chemical union of Sulphur and Mercury, the latter of which is depicted as a bird in the cage in the allegorical reading of the poem. The poem also features accompanying illuminations, which add a visual effect to the reading, although some of the illustrations are missing.<sup>65</sup>

### **Further Insights into the Alchemical *Churl and the Bird***

The version of *The Churl and the Bird* in MS Harley 2407 adds seven alchemical stanzas between stanzas 35 and 36, and then one final one between stanzas 40 and 41.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, this version omits the first four stanzas of Lydgate’s original introduction, and cuts ahead to Lydgate’s remark that ‘Poets write wondrous liknessis’ (29) and his purpose with the translation from the French. Perhaps the adaptor considered Lydgate’s description of the trees as too verbose, or perhaps it detracted from the alchemical focus of the revised version. Lydgate’s original version is devoid of any implicit alchemical references, but the verses of the poem in MS Harley 2407 reveal its alchemical reading.<sup>67</sup> I cite Fredell’s most recent transcription of the verses from the manuscript:

35a  
 As y the abrayde her before  
 of a ston now that y hade  
 the wich now thow has for lore  
 be al reson thou shyldys ben sad

<sup>63</sup> Wanley, *Diary of Humfrey Wanley*, vol. 1, xxiv.

<sup>64</sup> See Edward Harley and Edward Mortimer (eds.), *A Catalogue of the Harleian Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 4 vols. (London, 1808-12), vol. 2, pp. 689-90.

<sup>65</sup> Fredell observes that the images seem to have been added after the text was written, and possibly added by the adaptor himself. See Fredell, ‘Alchemical Lydgate’, p. 449. Fredell reprints the images in his article ‘Alchemical Lydgate’, pp. 440, 442-4.

<sup>66</sup> Bowers, ‘Lydgate’s *The Churl and the Bird...*’, p. 91.

<sup>67</sup> Bowers and McCracken transcribe the alchemical verse into their editions, but as Fredell notes, these transcriptions have errors. See Fredell, ‘Alchemical Lydgate’, p. 434. Cf. Bowers, ‘Lydgate’s *The Churl and the Bird...*’, pp. 91-3, and McCracken, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, vol. 2, pp. 485-6. Curt F. Bühler also points out their errors in ‘A Note on the Stanza 24 in Lydgate’s *The Churl and the Bird*’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 40.4 (1941), 562-3, at p. 562. Fredell’s translation is mostly accurate, although I have included the thorns where omitted.

and in the herte no þyng glad  
 now chorle I the tel in my device  
 I was eyred & bred in swete *paradyce*

35b

Now no namys y schal the tel  
 of my stone that y cal iagowns  
 and of her vertuis with his smel  
 þat ben so swete and so odeferus  
 With ennok and ely hath be my servis  
 my swete songe þat sowndeth so scherpe  
 with angelles voyse that passeth eny harpe

35c

The nigrum deamond þat ys in morienis sees  
 and the white charbonkkel þat rolleth in wave  
 the setryne reby of ryche degreys  
 that passeth the stonys of comen sawe  
 in the lapidery ys grownd by olde lawe  
 he passeth al stonys þat ys under hevyn  
 after the cowrse of kynde by þe planets sevyn

35d

Hit ys for non chorle to have schu[c]h tresour  
 that exsedeth al stonys in the lapidery  
 and of all vertuis he bereth th flowr  
 with all ioye and grace þat maketh man mery  
 that in this worlde schal non byn sory  
 now very chorle thow passeth thy gras  
 y am at my liberte evyn as y was

35e

As clerkys fyndeth in the bybell  
 at paradys patis whan he was cast  
 by an angel both fayr and styll  
 a downe knyng elysaunder ther i prest  
 and of all stonys 3yt was y left  
 soche stonys in place few ben y brought  
 seroful ys þe chorle & hevyn in his þowt

35f

Now more chorle 3yt tel y can  
 and thow wolt to me take hede  
 the byrde of ermes ys my name  
 n al the worlde that ys so wyde  
 with gleteryng of grace by euery syde  
 hose me myght have in hys covertowr  
 he wer rychcher than eny emperor

35g

Elysawnder the conqueror my ston smot downe  
 up on his helme whan hit pyhht  
 no mort ha a pese that ys so rownde  
 hit was ther to no manys syght  
 that leyde so playne the manly knyht  
 now y tel the with melde stevyn  
 this myghtty grace cam owte fro hevyn

40a

Now cherle y have the her tolde

My vertuys here with grete experience  
 hit wer to sume man better than golde  
 to [th]e hit ys no fructuis a sentence  
 a chepys croke to þe ys better þan a launce  
 a dew now globe with herte sore  
 on cherlys clowchys com y neuer more.<sup>68</sup>

Although Lydgate's alchemical views in the *Secrees* are predominantly negative, the adaptor in Harley MS 2407 clearly saw the potential for alchemical allegory and furthering its exemplary narrative in *The Churl and the Bird*.<sup>69</sup> Fredell attempts to link the miniatures to George Ripley's authorship, and while there are similarities, there is no concrete evidence for this connection.<sup>70</sup> He does, however, convincingly illustrate the parallels in alchemical illuminations between MS Harley 2407 and Ashmole's text, revealing that Ashmole was clearly influenced by these images or perhaps the style of imagery, and moreover these late medieval images may have helped to determine the visual culture of early modern alchemy.<sup>71</sup> While the garden may not necessarily be Ripleyan, Fredell's suggestion is otherwise convincing. As Grennen points out, the death of the animal in the final verses of the alchemical version follows an 'animal sacrifice' formula, referring to the late medieval trope of the metaphorical animal enduring peril within an alchemical context in order to learn hidden truths and wisdoms.<sup>72</sup> The 'jagounce' is greater than the 'nigrum deamond þat ys in morienis sees' (35c), the 'white charbonkkel þat rolleth in wave (35c), and the 'setryne reby of ryche degreys' (35c), suggesting the Stone's superiority over the most valuable known gemstones of its time.<sup>73</sup> It is also worth mentioning that the location of the black diamond ('morienis sees') could be

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<sup>68</sup> Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', pp. 433-4.

<sup>69</sup> Fredell writes that 'the alchemist insertion in *CB* clearly represents an alert and well-read poet playing with the Alexander materials, and a pre-formed Ripleyan garden inhabited by allegorical plants and animals'. See Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 451.

<sup>70</sup> Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 450.

<sup>71</sup> See Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', pp. 450-1.

<sup>72</sup> The *MED* also identifies the hyacinth as another name for the Philosopher's Stone. See the *MED* entry for 'hyacinth' and 'jagounce'.

<sup>73</sup> Grennen interprets the 'jagounce' as a cipher for the Philosopher's Stone, which is consistent with the description of the Stone's seemingly supernatural powers. See Grennen, 'Jargon Transmuted', p. 177. For more on the topic of the meaning of medieval gemstones, see, for instance, Evans and Struder, *Anglo-Norman Lapidaries*.



likened to the Byzantine monk Morienus, whose alchemical treatise *De compositione alchemie* (*On the Composition of Alchemy*) was the first alchemical treatise to be translated from Arabic to Latin and reach the Western world in 1144.<sup>74</sup> This reference could further indicate the alchemical authority of the bird's Stone over the other gemstones, and suggest his alchemical mastery of the stone. The *MED* defines 'morien' as a Moor, however, and thus it seems likelier that the black diamond is found in Moorish seas rather than Morienus's seas.

The first image in Harley MS 2407 accompanying the poem features birds flying over a body of water, with the Sun and the Moon (alchemically representing Gold and Silver) in the background.<sup>75</sup> This image of the birds in their element, which is alien to humans, can be juxtaposed with the second image, which features a group of unpleasant looking peasants in a hamlet or village under the recurring Sun and Moon.<sup>76</sup> This illustration helps to establish the setting of the poem, with the peasants literally looking ahead to the key events of the poem, which take place in the garden, and perhaps indicates a contrast between the birds in the heavens and the peasants upon the earth. One of these characters may be the churl, since the adaptor describes him between stanzas 7 and 8, although this remains uncertain. The third illustration in Harley MS 2407 shows the bird in the garden sitting in the laurel tree and singing to the heavens. Again, the Sun and the Moon appear. Ashmole's description of the garden as a 'Vessell' in *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* seems quite plausible here, given its geometrical

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<sup>74</sup> Newman, 'Technology and Alchemical Debate in the Late Middle Ages', p. 425. As I will further discuss in my final chapter, Morienus was one of the most familiar alchemical figures during the late Middle Ages.

<sup>75</sup> Fredell suggests that this initial illustration provides the birds with a central role in the poem. I would add that this scene identifies the bird as an alchemical symbol alongside the Sun and the Moon, and demonstrates its mastery over flight, which is unattainable to the churl. McLean further comments that alchemical birds function as mediators between the heavens and the terrestrial world, which I suggest also applies to this text and image, where the positioning of the birds divides the earth (represented by the sea) from the heavens. See Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 440; McLean, 'The Birds in Alchemy', *The Hermetical Journal*, 5 (1979), 15-19, at p. 15'; and Harley 2407, fol. 76. Fredell also comments that some of Ashmole's illustrations in *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* come directly from Harley 2407, including a basilisk and an angelic spirit, See Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 453. It should be noted, however, that Ashmole does not appear to include any illustrations from the Harley 2407 version of *The Churl and the Bird* in the *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum*.

<sup>76</sup> Harley 2407, fol. 76v. Fredell comments that they are looking towards the garden. See Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 442.

shape, which seems to resemble the dimensions of an alembic, and the quadrangular figure of the hedge suggests a furnace. The shape of the laurel tree and its placement as centrepiece in the illustration further indicate its allegorical connotations, faintly resembling a medieval alembic.<sup>77</sup> The bird, who is perched at the very summit of the tree and pointed skywards, seems to bridge the gap between the terrestrial world and the heavens. The churl appears in the fourth image in Harley MS 2407 (fol. 77v), clearly pleased to have ensnared the bird. His appearance within the furnace/garden signifies intrusion, particularly as he excitedly looks to the alembic. The reader and bird both know that there is nothing fruitful to come from his foolish attempts, however. The alembic traps the bird and disrupts its natural processes. In the next image (fol 78) between stanzas 13 and 14, the churl has a firm grasp around the bird. This illustration corresponds to the passage where the bird/Mercury complains about her entrapment in the alembic/cage. Fredell comments that the image represents the ‘imprisoning effects of cupidity versus the freedom necessary to the spirit’.<sup>78</sup> This is the fifth and final image, though it seems apparent from the outlines for illuminations on the succeeding folios that the adaptor intended to add more.

As mentioned earlier, in this version, the churl represents the alchemist, the bird represents the Hermes bird, and the garden represents the furnace, with the cage representing the alembic. The bird explicitly identifies herself with the alchemical tradition, announcing that ‘the byrde of ermes ys my name’ (35f), after Hermes Trismegistus, the founder of Hermetic philosophy.<sup>79</sup> The Hermes bird is born from the Philosopher’s Egg during the process of alchemical transmutation:

Therefore burn it with a dry Fire, that it may bring forth a Son, and keep him warily lest he fly away in smoke; and this is that which the Philosopher saith in his *Turba*. Whiten the earth, and Sublime it quickly with Fire,

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<sup>77</sup> See Harley 2407, fol. 107.

<sup>78</sup> Fredell, ‘Alchemical Lydgate’, p. 444.

<sup>79</sup> Abraham identifies the ‘byrde of ermes’ as Mercurius during the alchemical process, particularly the ‘mercurial vapours as they ascend in the alembic during distillation and sublimation, and descend as celestial rain or dew, washing the black bodies (the dead bodies below)’. See Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, p. 25.

untill the Spirit which thou shalt finde in it goe forth of it, and it is called *Hermes Bird*; for that which ascends higher is efficacious purity but that which fals to the bottome, is drosse and corruption.<sup>80</sup>

Abraham comments that the taming of the Hermes bird is a 'key task in the work of maturing the philosopher's stone. Mercurius must be captured and tamed so that he becomes the alchemist's willing servant, a force controlled and directed rather than one which is overwhelming and out of control'.<sup>81</sup> Roger Bacon mentions the Hermes bird in his treatise *Radix mundi*, which William Salmon translated in his *Medicina practica* (1692):

And as of the yolk and white, with a little heat, a Bird is made (the shell being whole until the coming forth or hatching of the chicken) so it is in the work of the Philosophers Stone. Of the citrine body and white liquor with a temperate or gentle heat is made the *Avis Hermetis*, or Philosopher's Bird.<sup>82</sup>

The bird is produced from the furnace (garden, in this case nature) in the process of attaining the Philosopher's Stone. Bacon's bird's citrine body matches Lydgate's description of the bird with 'sonnyssh fetheris brihter than gold [...]' (59). As mentioned earlier, the Philosopher's Bird (Mercury) is a philosophical principle (Mercury joining Sulphur in a chemical union, which in turns yields the Philosopher's Stone) rather than the actual metal. While Hermes bird does represent metaphorical Mercury, however, it seems incongruous with the metaphorical basilisks and toads that appear in the Ripleyan tradition, particularly since the adaptor clearly establishes Mercury as a bird in the poem.

Fredell also links the Hermes bird to its appearance in the Ripley Scrolls, a series of illuminations and Middle English verses produced in the late fifteenth century, but seldom attributed to Ripley until the late sixteenth/seventeenth century.<sup>83</sup> The Hermes bird also appears

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<sup>80</sup> Arthur Dee, *Fasciculus Chemicus*, ed. Lyndy Abraham and trans. Elias Ashmole (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997), p. 61. It is unlikely that Aristotle actually wrote this, but it is worth including given the context. See also Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, p. 25.

<sup>81</sup> Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>82</sup> Bacon, *Radix Mundi*, in *The Alchemy Reader*, trans. Linden, 41.9, p. 116. See also Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 434.

<sup>83</sup> Rampling argues that the Ripley Scrolls verses were probably linked to Ripley for convenience rather than accuracy. See Rampling, 'Establishing the Canon', p. 190. Rampling further suggests that the Ripley Scrolls are best considered composite works rather than the work of an individual author in 'The Catalogue of the Ripley Corpus', p. 134. Rampling describes a Hermes bird in the fifteenth-century scroll, in which it devours the wings which give it flight. She interprets this as part of the process of coagulation which, together with the process of dissolution (*solve et coagula*), formed the Philosopher's Stone. Cf. Rampling, 'A Secret Language: The Ripley Scrolls', in *Art and Alchemy: The Mystery of Transformation*, ed. Dedo von Kerssenbrock-Krosigk, Beat Wismer,

in the illumination accompanying the poem *Father Phoebus* in the Ripley Scrolls, where it appears as a composite of bird body and king's head.<sup>84</sup> Although the latter image appears in the early modern period, it remains consistent with the alchemical imagery and characters in the poem. The bird's alchemical role in the story is further emphasised by its 'jagounce'. In alchemical terms, the Hermes bird (Mercury) could 'birth' the Philosopher's Stone ('jagounce'), furthering the allegorical reading of the poem. The irony in the poem, however, is that the bird has no 'jagounce' to show. While the 'jagounce' does not necessarily refer to the Philosopher's Stone in medieval alchemical texts, in this instance it is used as a cipher to represent it, fusing together the precious gemstone of the lapidary and the alchemical tradition.

The churl (ignorant alchemist) in the alchemical version entraps the bird (Mercury) with the intention of taming her so that she will sing for him (produce gold), yet in his ignorance, he is oblivious of his inability to succeed with alchemy. Moreover, the idea of unattainable or forbidden knowledge due to his ignorance remains prevalent in both versions of the story. The alchemical adaptor also clearly establishes the dichotomy between churl/chemist and bird/Mercury.<sup>85</sup> In essence, the churl can never be the bird or have what the bird has, as much as he may think he can. Similarly, the ignorant alchemist can never enjoy Mercury's supernatural perspective since he is limited to his inferior view of the world. His actions also disrupt natural balance in the garden, which is exemplified in the French sources and echoes Chaucer's final verses on alchemy. Rather than disrupt nature searching for a Stone that probably does not even exist, it is better to leave alchemy's secrets to its garden. Since the bird yields no stones (and since it is a physical impossibility for the bird), it is better to leave nature

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and Sven Dupré (Düsseldorf: Hirmer/Museum Kunstpalast, 2014), pp. 38-45, at pp. 38, 43-4, and Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', pp. 434-5, 446. For an outline of the Ripley Scrolls corpus, see R. Ian McCallum, 'Alchemical Scrolls Associated with George Ripley', in *Mystical Metals in Gold*, pp. 161-88.

<sup>84</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, pp. 49-80.

<sup>85</sup> Yamamoto comments that 'churls can never attain the commanding perspective enjoyed by beings like a little bird, who understands and appreciates all the fine distinctions upon which the world's order rests'. While she is referring to the original version, this meaning can also be extended to the alchemical version. See Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human...*, p. 44.

alone, and thus leaving the bird (Mercury) in the garden rather than failing to transmute her in the alembic (cage).

The poem also alludes to Alexander the Great, who was extremely popular during the Middle Ages and whose life could be interpreted as exemplary and/or cautionary. David Salter argues that Alexander's life was very appealing, and his stories boasted adventure and excitement.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, his 'invincibility in battle, unprecedented size of the territory that he conquered, and the very young age at which he achieved his victories,' as well as his reputation as a conqueror, helped cement his fame.<sup>87</sup> Yet he was also known for his human fallibility, particularly the fact that he died young and lost his empire, and as a figure who sought eternal life and tried to overcome death, which perhaps appealed to alchemical writers. He was also known for his overreaching or 'covetous ambition' as well as his belief in his own indestructibility, and thus his moral standing in medieval literature was often contentious.<sup>88</sup> George Cary comments that the notion that medieval Alexander represented 'the true exemplar theme of man's futility in the face of death' dominated medieval *exempla* anthologies.<sup>89</sup> He suggests that Lydgate read Alexander as a figure who 'conquered all the world and found the stone of Paradise; but did not know the value of moderation, and let his desires overpower his self-control', suggesting his lack of moderation as his downfall; the churl also demonstrates this in his desire to eat the bird despite the perfection of the garden he already possesses.<sup>90</sup> In

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<sup>86</sup> David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge and Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2001), p. 111. For more on the role of medieval Alexander, see notably Page, *Magic in Medieval Manuscripts* (London: British Library, 2004), pp. 10-1; Knapp, 'The Work of Alchemy', p. 32; George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956); David Ashurst, *The Ethics of Empire in the Saga of Alexander the Great: A Study Based on MS AM 519a 4to* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2009); Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (London: Macmillan, 2009); Markus Stock, 'The Medieval Alexander: Transcultural Ambivalence', in *Alexander the Great in the Middle Ages*, ed. Markus Stock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 3-12; 'Alexander and the Universal Chronicle: Scholars and Translators', in *The Medieval Alexander Legend and Romance Epic: Essays in Honour of David J.A. Ross*, ed. Peter Noble, Lucie Polak, and Claire Isoz (Millwood: Kraus International, 1982), pp. 1-10; and Ashurst, 'Alexander Literature in English and Scots', in *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Z. David Zuwiyya (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 255-90.

<sup>87</sup> Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, p. 112.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Stoneman, *Legends of Alexander the Great* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), vii, xlii.

<sup>89</sup> Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, p. 147.

<sup>90</sup> Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, p. 156.

this instance, the bird uses the figure of Alexander to express his fallibility and defiance of death, and attributes his downfall ('my stone smot downe') to the supreme power of the Philosopher's Stone. Despite his achievements and his conqueror status, Alexander is still fallible due to his pride and subservient to greater powers beyond his control, and he cannot avoid his mortal fate. The bird's comments not only suggest the superiority of nature over humanity, but also that the Stone is an unstoppable supernatural object that can hinder and destroy even the greatest and most successful conquerors.

The adaptor also connects the famous historical figure to the alchemical tradition, presenting his story as a cautionary tale. Lydgate was aware of Alexander's alchemical connections in the *Secretum secretorum*, having written about it in his own adaptation.<sup>91</sup> Alexander was also connected to the occult through the mythological story of the Egyptian sorcerer Nectanabus impregnating his mother Olympia while masquerading as a dragon. Nectanabus tutors young Alexander in the ways of the occult, and then Alexander kills him and becomes Aristotle's pupil.<sup>92</sup> The bird's allusion to Alexander and the Stone is part of the taunt to humiliate the churl/chemist, driving home the point that 'Hit ys for non chorle to have schu[c]h tresour' (35d).

In addition to this, the alchemical adaptor also establishes Alexander's earthly paradise as the setting for the Stone (35e), linking them together. In this passage, the bird describes

at paradys patis whan he was cast

<sup>91</sup> Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 436.

<sup>92</sup> Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England*, p. 114. In the late Middle Ages, alchemical treatises were also ascribed to Aristotle. In one account, he is credited with imparting his virtues and four Philosopher's Stones to Alexander, connecting him to alchemical knowledge and power. See Thorndike, 'The Latin Pseudo-Aristotle and Medieval Occult Science', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 21.2 (1922), 229-58, at pp. 233-5. Read also describes a version of Alexander's story where he discovers the *Tabula Smaragdina* (*The Emerald Table*) in the tomb of Hermes Trismegistus. This version fuses together the Alexander tradition and the Hermetic tradition, with the Stone functioning as the ultimate conquest. Read, *Through Alchemy to Chemistry* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1957), p. 22. He does not provide a source for this version, however. Cf. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 20. C.J.S. Thompson credits pseudo-Albertus Magnus for first mentioning this story in the Western world. In his version, Alexander discovers the tablet in a cave near Hebron, where it was stolen from the dead hands of Hermes by Abraham's wife Sarah. It is unlikely that it appears in *De mineralibus* as Thompson suggests because it is an authentic Albertus work, although it may appear in the pseudo-Albertan text *De secretis chemica*. See also Thompson, *Alchemy and Alchemists* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2012), p. 31.

by an angel both fayr and styl  
 a downe knyng elysaunder ther i prest  
 and of all stonys 3yt was y left [...]

M.M. Lascelles and N.R. Ker convincingly argue that the Earthly Paradise episode of the Alexander romance appeared in the Middle Ages, notably in its earliest form as the twelfth-century Latin text *Alexander Magni Iter ad Paradisum*.<sup>93</sup> Towards the end of the story, a citizen of Paradise presents Alexander with a ‘stone of changeable colour’.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, this stone has magical powers and is comparable to the Stone that the bird describes, ‘for when he should understand the property of the stone and its significance all ambition should leave him’.<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, Alexander summons an old Jew to weigh the Stone, and consequently it is revealed that it weighs more than gold, but when covered with dust is lighter than a feather.<sup>96</sup> The old Jew explains that the Stone represents ‘the king’s eye which, so long as it is open, covets all it sees, but when covered with a little dust will be well content with nothing’.<sup>97</sup> His parable connects with the theme of moral blindness which was explored in the previous chapter. The stone in this Alexander story has a moral function since it is intended to cure him of his pride.<sup>98</sup> The bird’s exposition indicates that it is the same Philosopher’s Stone, which ‘no namys y schal tel’ (35b) and which possesses ‘all ioye and grace þat maketh man mery’ (35d). While the bird does not explicitly expound on moral sight here, the alchemist/churl is driven by his own covetousness, much like Alexander’s covetousness for conquering, and the bird’s patronising is a moral attempt to steer the alchemist away from his own pride.

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<sup>93</sup> M.M. Lascelles and N.R. Ker recount the story in ‘Alexander and the Earthly Paradise in Mediæval English Writings’, *Medium Ævum*, 5.1 (1936), 31-48, at pp. 36-8. This story also appears in Sir Gilbert Hay’s *The Buik of Alexander the Conquerour*, which he wrote in Scots in 1460. John Cartwright dates the story of Alexander’s journey through the Earthly Paradise to 500 A.D., when it was recorded in the Babylonian Talmud. Hay’s adaptation expands at length upon the Earthly Paradise episode. See Cartwright, ‘Sir Gilbert Hay’s *Alexander*: A Study in Transformations’, *Medium Ævum*, 60.1 (1991), 61-72, at pp. 61-7. Fredell adds that this episode would not have been well known in the English mainstream at the time, and only appears in Hay’s work in medieval Britain. Cf. Fredell, ‘Alchemical Lydgate’, pp. 437-8.

<sup>94</sup> Lascelles and Ker, ‘Alexander and the Earthly Paradise...’, p. 37.

<sup>95</sup> Lascelles and Ker, ‘Alexander and the Earthly Paradise...’, p. 37.

<sup>96</sup> Lascelles and Ker, ‘Alexander and the Earthly Paradise...’, p. 38.

<sup>97</sup> Lascelles and Ker, ‘Alexander and the Earthly Paradise...’, p. 38.

<sup>98</sup> Lascelles and Ker, ‘Alexander and the Earthly Paradise...’, p. 38. The authors describe other romances with eye-stones, but this version is most notable for its comparable description of the stone and its properties.

The purpose of the final alchemical stanza (40a) reinforces the bird's diatribe, perhaps functioning as an indictment against covetous alchemists that recalls the decretals against alchemy.<sup>99</sup> The churl would not appreciate the Stone, even if he had it. The bird's moralising reveals that the 'ignorant are incapable of perceiving the inner truth of narrative'.<sup>100</sup> After all, this is the same churl who captured the beautiful singing bird in the first place and threatened to eat her if she did not comply with his wishes. The bird declares 'in cherlys clowchys com y neuer more' (40a), promising a complete divide from the churl/chemist and his failed experimentation. While stanza 40a is not inherently alchemical, it underlies the alchemist's futility and misguidedness.

Yet if the *The Churl and the Bird* is not a straightforward *exemplum*, then the alchemical version of the poem further complicates it. The bird imparts her proverbial wisdoms to the churl, but they seem to fall on deaf ears, and he does not seem to learn from her lessons. She concludes that she has wasted her time with the churl. The bird also boasts of her 'jagounce', which she tells the churl should 'be al reson thow shuldys ben sad' (45a), and yet she has nothing to show for it, which calls into question the practice of alchemy itself and its expectations.<sup>101</sup> While the churl is guilty of not following her wisdoms and acting churlishly, she deceives him with the would-be 'jagounce'. She wants the churl to feel bad for his stupidity, but he is what he is, an alchemist who fails in his quest. The churl ends up duped, a victim of his own morally blind ambitions, like the Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman. It was his own lack of wisdom and foolishness that leads him to failure. As the bird says, it is 'but foly with the for to carpe' (337). Initially, interpreting the *exemplum* here seems elusive. Yet, in consideration of

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<sup>99</sup> Fredell comments that this stanza follows the 'pearls before swine' diatribe that the bird engages in from stanza 38 with her use of similes to illustrate his failures. Fredell, 'Alchemical Lydgate', p. 450. The passage in Matthew 7:6 reads 'Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.'

<sup>100</sup> Simpson, 'Empty Words...', p. 138.

<sup>101</sup> Commenting on Lydgate's version, Simpson writes that 'much of the bird's own advice turns out to be a lie'. See Simpson, 'Empty Words...', p. 137.



Ashmole's commentary, alchemy has merit and it is 'truly Philosophicall' (467). The bird relates her 'vertuys here with grete experience' (40a) to the churl. While the churl may not learn anything from her, the reader learns not only from the mistakes of the churl but also from the experience of the bird, who is a form of alchemy herself. As with the *Secrees*, the Harley 2407 version of *The Churl and the Bird* also functions as a 'warning to the ignorant of the dangers inherent in the pursuit of alchemy'.<sup>102</sup> As I have discussed, the Stone in the poem, whether or it exists, is also forbidden to the churl.

Lydgate's original poem, a beast-fable with a seeming complex *exemplum*, transforms and transmutes with its additional alchemical stanzas in Harley 2407. I have argued that the alchemical version in Harley 2407 takes Lydgate's poem a step further, transforming it into an allegory for failed transmutation and chemical experimentation. While Lydgate is not attributed to the Harley 2407 version, it is still very much his poem, drawn from French and Latin sources, and moreover an extension of his moral vision. On the surface, the alchemical allegory appears as an *exemplum* for alchemists against covetous practices, and thus Ashmole's reading of the poem is an invaluable starting point for understanding it. Upon deeper inspection, however, it is also an *exemplum* about moral blindness, misplaced knowledge (and lack thereof), and human fallibility. Lydgate draws from the alchemical literary tradition of Chaucer and Gower, and the alchemical adaptor even repeats a line from the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The alchemical poem, while most likely not written by Ripley, does display aspects of the Ripleyan tradition in its imagery and verse, paving the way towards the sixteenth and seventeenth alchemical traditions while also maintaining its roots in the late fifteenth century. The use of alchemy in the poem is complex, raising moral points about alchemical experimentation and pursuits of the time while also calling into question the practice itself with the denial of the Stone. Like Chaucer, the alchemical poet does not deny that there are alchemical secrets since

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<sup>102</sup> Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 61.

the character Hermes bird has a connection in the cosmos, but the knowledge she possesses remains inaccessible to the ignorant alchemists or Artists, who are compared to churls. Ignorant alchemists are 'woo-begon' (371) by their very nature, and the secrets of alchemy are best left to those who have knowledge of them.

## CHAPTER SIX: ALCHEMICAL ADEPTS, MERLIN, AND THE ELF QUEEN: ALCHEMY AND *EXEMPLA* IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY MIDDLE ENGLISH DIALOGUES AND RECIPES

### Introduction

Following my analysis of the alchemical version of *The Churl and the Bird* in Harley MS 2407 as exemplary, I will now examine two alchemical dialogues in fifteenth-century manuscripts. Ashmole includes an alchemical dialogue/debate between ‘Marlin’ and ‘Martin’ in the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, which is a similar version to the first dialogue I will discuss.<sup>1</sup> He comments that ‘In Some Coppies I have found these Verses placed before *Pearce the Black Monk*, upon the Elixir’, yet does not provide any further details or information about the poem’s history or sources.<sup>2</sup> The poem featured in Ashmole’s compendium is an excerpt from the late fifteenth-century poem *The Argument Betweene Morien the Father & Merline the Sonne; How the Philosophers’ Stone Should be Wrought*.<sup>3</sup> In his version of *A Dialogue betwixt the Father and the Sonne*, Ashmole reproduces lines 77-94 and 100-14 from the source material, but omits the rest.<sup>4</sup> The poem in its entirety, however, which can be found in Ashmole MS 1445, is particularly significant, functioning as an *exemplum* alongside the alchemical version of *The Churl and the Bird*, Book IV of Gower’s *Confessio amantis*, and Chaucer’s *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*.

The poem features a dialogue between Morienus the alchemical adept and his child Merlin, who seeks knowledge of ‘how the Philosopher’s Stone should be wrought’ (26). Morienus agrees to teach him the perfect spirit of Mercury on condition that Merlin conceals it and practises virtuously and charitably. He cites the allegory of a child who is conceived by

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<sup>1</sup> Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, pp. 427-8.

<sup>2</sup> Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, p. 427.

<sup>3</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor dates the poem to the latter half of the fifteenth century due to its language. See F. Sherwood Taylor, ‘The Argument of Morien and Merlin: An English Alchemical Poem’, *Chymia*, 1 (1948), 23-35, at p. 26. Taylor also reprints the poem from pp. 26-35. All subsequent references to the poem refer to this article.

<sup>4</sup> Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, pp. 365-7.

the father (Sun) and mother (Moon) within the city (the vessel). The child is purified from corruption and produces many children with his mother, who all subsequently die. Then they are cared for by a 'Master Physician' who resurrects them. The perfected Mercury becomes a conqueror and marries a queen (Almaga) and thus allegorically constitutes the Philosopher's Stone.<sup>5</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor concludes that the poem's 'allegorical account of the alchemical process in terms of human generation and growth' is familiar and 'cannot be said to add to our scanty knowledge of alchemical theory and practice', but much more could be said about the exemplary and poetic aspects of the poem.<sup>6</sup> While the alchemical relationship between father and son is also familiar in alchemical poetry, this poem is particularly worthy of note because it is set between the characters Morienus and Merlin.<sup>7</sup>

Alongside Amans and Genius's alchemical dialogue in the *Confessio amantis*, this poem further exemplifies the ways in which poets make use of the dialogue to talk about alchemy in late medieval England. Drawing from classical and Arabic uses of the alchemical dialogue, fifteenth-century authors used it as a form for expressing alchemy and exemplary narrative as it became more popular among English audiences in the vernacular.<sup>8</sup> The dialogue also presents

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Peter H. Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin', in *Comparative Studies in Merlin from the Vedas to C.J. Jung*, ed. James Gollinck (Lewiston, New York: Mellen, 1991), pp. 91-110, at p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> He rightly identifies the familiar theme of human generation in alchemical literature, particularly with the allegory of the sexual union between the man and the woman, but the poet's use of the city metaphor is an innovative approach to alchemical poetry of the fifteenth century and its exemplary function. See F. Sherwood Taylor, 'The Argument...', p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, one of the preceding alchemical recipes 'Dixit filius patri suo' ('The Son Said to His Father') contained in the Albertus/Queen of Elves manuscript (Trinity College, Cambridge, R.14.44) provides another example of the father/son tradition in alchemical poetry, although in this version the recipe is presented from the son's point of view and he proceeds to list an alchemical recipe (IV.fol.15).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the topic of dialogues on alchemy, see, for instance, Regula Forster, 'The Transmission of Secret Knowledge: Three Arabic Dialogues on Alchemy', *Al-Qantara*, 37.2 (2016), 399-422, at pp. 399-400, and Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 104. For a more general overview of medieval dialogues, see Irma Taavitsainen, 'Dialogues in Late Medieval and Early Modern Writing', in *Historical Dialogue Analysis*, ed. Andreas H. Jucker, Gerd Fritz, and Franz Lebsanft (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 243-68; Francis Lee Utley, 'Dialogues, Debates, and Catechisms', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, ed. Albert E. Hartung, 11 vols. (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of the Arts and Sciences, 1972), vol. 3, pp. 669-745; and more recently Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and *Dialogues and Debates from Late Antiquity to Late Byzantium*, ed. Averil Cameron and Niels Gaul (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017). Timmermann also cites the anonymous poems *The Mystery of the Alchemists*, which forms part of the *Verses upon the Elixir*, the Latin *Alumen de Hispania*, which was the source material for the early modern English poem *Richard Carpenter's Work*, as well as some Middle English poems from Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum*

a more accessible form for alchemical knowledge as teachable and learnable.<sup>9</sup> The movement into the alchemical recipe reflected the contemporary interest in its form while maintaining the didacticism and order of the dialogue.<sup>10</sup> The fifteenth century also saw the increasing emergence of vernacular alchemical recipes, which had previously been confined to Latin, but now circulated in Middle English, which enabled wider readership and understanding of the craft.<sup>11</sup> As seen in the previous chapter, while many of these fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical scribes wrote anonymously, their ideas were still consistent with the presentation of alchemical poems as exemplary, and they use allegory and draw from familiar literary figures to illustrate their moral points. Unlike Gower and Chaucer, however, these anonymous writers were read by a more alchemically inclined rather than widespread audience, as their

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*Britannicum* as evidence of an enduring tradition of scientific dialogues during this period. The thirteenth-century Old French scientific dialogue *Sidrak and Bokkus*, featuring a dialogue between a heathen king and a Christian philosopher, was also part of this tradition, although it did not circulate widely until the sixteenth century. Cf. *Sidrak and Bokkus: A Parallel-Text Edition from Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 559 and British Library, MS Lansdowne 793*, ed. T.L. Burton, EETS OS 312, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998-99), vol. 1, xxiv-xxvii, and Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves: A Fifteenth-Century English Verse Dialogue on Alchemy', *Anglia*, 122 (2004), 640-62, at p. 651. Grund also comments on the rarity of alchemical dialogues with given participant names (i.e. Morienus and Merlin as well as Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves, which is another reason why I chose to focus on these two particular poems in this chapter).

<sup>9</sup> Forster, 'The Transmission of Secret Knowledge', p. 418. Grund also suggests that the dialogue was a popular form for scientific poetry because it could be used for didactic and instructive purposes, which I suggest is consistent with its presentation as exemplary narrative. See Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', p. 651. Cf. Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 106. Timmermann also suggests that this popularity was due to English audiences preferring anonymously written rhyming recipes for alchemical knowledges rather than alchemical poems written by known authors at the time. She further comments that the structure of the didactic dialogue organised the text into sections and condensed alchemical theories into dialogue responses, making it easier for the readers to understand. Taavitsainen suggests that the rhymes made it easier to memorise the content and connected to oral culture. See Taavitsainen, 'Transferring Classical Discourse Conventions into the Vernacular', in *Medical and Scientific Writing in Late Medieval English*, ed. Irma Taavitsainen and Päivi Pahta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 37-72, at p. 39. The medieval recipe is not to be confused with the modern understanding of recipe; in the Middle Ages, a recipe could be either culinary, medical, or *secreta*. For more on the topic of medieval recipes, see Grund, 'The Golden Formulas: Genre Conventions of Alchemical Recipes in the Middle English Period', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 104.4 (2003), 455-475, at p. 456. As Grund notes, the medieval alchemical recipe has only been minimally studied. For other examples of fifteenth-century Middle English alchemical recipes, see notably W.L. Braekman, *Studies on Alchemy, Diet, Medicine [sic] and Prognostication in Middle English* (Brussels: Scripta, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 104. Ruth Carroll observes that Anglo-Norman recipes were translated into Middle English in the late fourteenth century, with the first one appearing in 1395. They were still considered a novelty in the fourteenth century and appear more prominently in English literature as a literary form in the fifteenth century. See Carroll, 'Middle English Recipes: Vernacularisation of a Text-Type', in *Medical and Scientific Writing in Late Medieval English*, pp. 174-96, at pp. 176, 190.

<sup>11</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 1.

limited appearance in manuscripts and the subject matter indicates.<sup>12</sup> These examples of vernacular alchemical poetry, however, reveal the growing interest in alchemy as a less arcane and more licit science, which became more profound in the early modern period.

Many of the alchemical themes and ideas explored in these poems are characteristic of the fifteenth century, particularly the theme of unity, the Mercury-Sulphur theory, and the allegory of the chemical wedding. The dialogue shifts between the father and master Morienus and his son Merlin, two characters who represent very different traditions in the late medieval world. As I will discuss in this chapter, this dialogue is also an *exemplum* for alchemical practice, particularly the value and accessibility of knowledge. Unlike most of the previous poems containing alchemy that I have looked at, which were predominantly secular, the Morienus/Merlin dialogue has strong Christian aspects.<sup>13</sup> In religious terms, alchemical transmutation can be read analogously to the death and resurrection of Christ, which follows the alchemical stages. While this dialogue shares aspects of the other poems containing alchemy I have already discussed, this dialogue's allegorical and exemplary imagery, particularly the depiction of the metaphorical children in the city as well as the virtuous relationship between father and son (master and apprentice), creates an exemplary narrative in which alchemy is used to make moral points about knowledge and learning as well as indicate the religious values of alchemical experimentation.

### **Alchemical Morienus**

The two characters in the *Argument between Morien and Merlin* draw from different and mythologised backgrounds. Morienus was supposedly a Byzantine Greek who lived in the

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<sup>12</sup> Timmermann, 'Alchemy in Cambridge', p. 346.

<sup>13</sup> While F. Sherwood Taylor's reading of the poem is useful for this dissertation, he does not discuss the religious aspects of the poem.

mountains of Jerusalem and who was practising alchemy in the seventh or eighth century.<sup>14</sup> In 1144, Robert of Chester (Robertus Castrensis) translated Morienus's alchemical treatise from Arabic into the Latin text *Liber de compositione alchimie* (*Book on the Composition of Alchemy*).<sup>15</sup> Robert of Chester's intention was to include alchemy in a more general study of the arts and sciences in Western Europe since they would have been unfamiliar in the twelfth century.<sup>16</sup> In the treatise, Khalid ibn Yazid ibn Mu'ammiya seeks out Morienus to help him with the Great Work (that is, alchemy).<sup>17</sup>

The history of the relationship between Morienus and Merlin is subject to debate, and possibly draws from Welsh origins. In the tenth-century Welsh poem *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer* (*The Conversation of Myrddin and His Sister Gwenddydd*), for example, one of Myrddin's brothers is named Morien.<sup>18</sup> In the text, Myrddin is depicted as a

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<sup>14</sup> Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', p. 652. See also Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 34, and Robert Halleux, 'The Reception of Arabic Alchemy in the West', in *Encyclopedia of the History of Arabic Science*, 3 vols. (New York: Routledge, 1996), vol. 3, 963-84.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Obrist, 'Views on History in Medieval Alchemical Writings', *Ambix*, 56.3 (2009), 226-38, at p. 229. The authenticity of Morienus's authorship has been disputed. The Arabic alchemist Ibn Umail mentions Morienus in the tenth century, yet Ibn an-Nadim, another Islamic tenth-century scholar, writes that Khalid's translator was named Stephanos. Richard Reitzenstein points out that the Morienus tract draws from an alchemical dialogue between Stephanos and the Byzantine emperor Heraclios. While Ibn an-Nadim does mention Morienus in a list of 51 philosophers, he does not connect him to either Khalid or Stephanos, which raises questions about his existence. Stavenhagen posits that Morienus's treatise could be a 'polemic in support of a tradition threatened with obsolescence', referring to the alchemical tradition in the Arabic world, which was in decline when it was written, and nearly obsolete when the Morienus/Merlin dialogue was written. More recently, Gabrovsky suggests that Morienus was originally from the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, but a Latin copyist interpreted him as Roman. He further argues that the medieval friars used the figure of Morienus to 'reclaim alchemy as Christian knowledge'. Gabrovsky's point supports the Christian angle of the poem, and thus Morienus's role could also help justify the poem's alchemical content as Christian. See also Stavenhagen, *A Testament of Alchemy*, pp. 63-4; Richard Reitzenstein, 'Alchemistische Lehrschriften und Marchen bei den Arabern', *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten*, 19, 66-75, at p. 192; and Gabrovsky, *Chaucer the Alchemist*, pp. 73-4.

<sup>16</sup> Obrist, 'Views on History...', p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> Stavenhagen observes that Morienus was a key personage in Western medieval alchemical literature, with numerous treatises ascribed to him. See Stavenhagen, *A Testament of Alchemy*, p. 53. Gabrovsky adds that Khalid escaped political turmoil after the death of his brother in 682. While in exile, he sought the wisdom of Morienus, who lived reclusively in the mountains and sent alchemical gold to Jerusalem each year. See also Gabrovsky, *Chaucer the Alchemist*, p. 73.

<sup>18</sup> Goodrich also suggests that the scribe of the poem may have mutated the Welsh Myrddin's father's name 'Morfryn' into 'Morien'. See Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin', p. 95. Cf. A.O.H. Jarman, 'The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy', in *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. P.H. Goodrich and R.H. Thompson (Routledge: London, 2003), pp. 105-30, at p. 122, reprinted from *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*, ed. Rachel Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 117-45.

wild man of the woods and Gwendydd acts as his disciple.<sup>19</sup> Myrddin is a source of knowledge here, described by Gwendydd as a ‘wise man and a diviner’.<sup>20</sup> Myrddin mourns the death of his brothers, lamenting that ‘Dead is Moryen, bulwark of battle’.<sup>21</sup> It is important to point out, however, that no alchemical references are made in the poem, and the use of the name could be coincidental. Both Morien and Myrddin are briefly mentioned in *Y Gododdin*, which was an elegy commemorating the men of Gododdin who died at a battle in Catraeth at around 600: ‘Morien defended the fair song of Myrddin’ (A.40).<sup>22</sup> In the *Argument between Morien and Merlin*, however, Morienus is the father of Merlin, who is a child.<sup>23</sup> I suggest that it is possible that the scribe accidentally mutated Merlin’s brother’s name, with Morien becoming the father rather than the brother. It is unlikely, however, that the author of the Morienus and Merlin dialogue used the Welsh source. Since Morienus was already established as an authority in numerous alchemical texts in the late Middle Ages, it is more probable that he drew from this figure instead.

### **Fifteenth-Century Merlin**

In the *Argument between Morien and Merlin*, Merlin is depicted as a child. This Merlin, however, does not resemble other depictions of him in fifteenth-century manuscripts, in which

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<sup>19</sup> T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons 350-1064* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 337.

<sup>20</sup> *Four Ancient Books of Wales*, ed. W.F. Skene, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Edmondson and Douglas, 1868) II, p. 462. See also *The Red Book of Hergest*, Jesus College, Oxford, MS 111.

<sup>21</sup> Skene, *Four Ancient Books of Wales*, I, CXXI, p. 476.

<sup>22</sup> The dating for *Y Gododdin* is uncertain. It is contained in the Book of Aneirin (Cardiff MS 2.81), which was written in the latter half of the thirteenth century. It is believed, however, that the poem was written much earlier. See *The Poems of Taliesin*, ed. Ifor Williams and trans. J.E. Caerwyn Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), and the twelfth-century MS *Liber Landavensis*, reprinted and translated in English in Christopher A. Snyder, *Age of Tyrants* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2008), p. 254.

<sup>23</sup> Ashmole was suspicious about this relationship, commenting that ‘Merlin was before Morien 100 years’. Grund also comments that both Merlin and Morienus appear separately as adepts in alchemical writing of the fifteenth century. Goodrich suggests that their relationship is ‘clumsy’ since there are evident incongruities between their representations, notably their age and depiction in other fifteenth-century texts, which I discuss in the following pages. See Ashmole reprinted in F. Sherwood Taylor, ‘The Argument...’, p. 23; Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 652; and Goodrich, ‘The Alchemical Merlin’, p. 95. For more examples of alchemical Morienus, see Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Manuscripts*, vol. 3, pp. 793-4.



he is usually presented as an adult.<sup>24</sup> The characterisation of Merlin as a brilliant child draws more from the Welsh tradition as well as the Middle English and Latin alchemical tradition.<sup>25</sup>

In the fifteenth century, Merlin was an instantly recognisable name in literature, and Goodrich argues that its use in this poem bolsters the text's authority.<sup>26</sup> Merlin was interpreted as a magical figure of superior knowledge and prophetic wisdom who counsels King Arthur. Drawing from the Welsh tradition, Geoffrey of Monmouth had established Merlin in the *Historia regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*) as a figure of magical and occult knowledge and prognostications.<sup>27</sup> By the fifteenth century, Merlin was seen as a prophet and alchemist, providing moral counsel for Arthur as well as possessing knowledge of the secrets of nature.<sup>28</sup>

Merlin was not only known for his occult knowledge and proto-scientific thinking in the fifteenth century, however. Hughes also discusses Merlin's supernatural birth from the union

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<sup>24</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, 'The Argument...', pp. 23-4. See also Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin' and my article 'Merlin the Scientist? Magic and Medieval Science in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*', in *Darkness and Illumination: The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Medieval and Early Modern World: Proceedings of the 2015 MEMSA Student Conference*, ed. Hannah Piercy, Abigail Richards, and Abigail Steed (Durham: Durham University Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 2016), pp. 41-61.

<sup>25</sup> Goodrich argues that Morienus and Merlin's unusual father/child relationship may have been intended to 'reflect the genealogical allegory of the processes described in the texts'. He also suggests that the author likely knew about the Latin alchemical treatise *Rhases Castrensis de 12 aquis* (translated as *Rhases to his Son Merlin*), which may have formed the basis of this alchemical dialogue. See Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin', pp.94-5. Ashmole MS 1416 also contains a Rhases/Merlin dialogue, in which the incipit reads 'Liber Rasis suo filio Merlino editus' ('The Book of Rasis published by his son Merlin'). The translation is my own. In this dialogue, Rhases takes on Merlin as his disciple and imparts his alchemical knowledge to him. This dialogue also survives in fifteenth-century manuscripts as the *Liber Merlini*. For more on other alchemical Merlin dialogues, see Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 2, p. 523; Ashmole MS 1416, fol.148, and William Henry Black, *A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue of the Manuscripts Bequeathed unto the University of Oxford By Elias Ashmole* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1845), p. 1135; and Hughes, 'Politics and the Occult at the Court of Edward IV', in *Princes and Princely Culture 1450-1650*, ed. Martin Gosman, Alasdair A. MacDonald, and Arjo J. Vanderjagt, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), vol. 2, pp. 97-128, at p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin', p. 91. Hughes suggests that Merlin was seen as a founder of alchemy by the sixteenth century. See also Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England*, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Goodrich identifies Merlin as a 'master of lore', which enables him to 'know past and future, uncover political plots, find treasure, change his shape, create marvellous works of art and engineering, and counsel Arthur and his knights'. He also comments that Hermes Trismegistus was a master of lore too, since the name 'Trismegistus' refers to his mastery of philosophy, kingship, and priesthood. Alchemy and magic share affinities in their attempts to manipulate the inner qualities of things. See Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin', pp. 91, 93.

<sup>28</sup> Norton cites Merlin as an alchemical authority and encouraged his patron Edward IV to search for the secret science of alchemy. See Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy*, p. 7, fol. 3v, 68. Cf. Hughes, 'Politics and the Occult at the Court of Edward IV', p. 105. I provide more examples of this fifteenth-century Merlin in the following paragraphs.

of a woman and an incubus, arguing that he possesses ‘the forbidden knowledge that had been the devil’s gift to his son’.<sup>29</sup> I suggest that this particular interpretation, stemming from Geoffrey’s version, which itself draws from Latin tradition as well as Welsh prophecies, is crucial to understanding the figure of Merlin in the poem.<sup>30</sup> While many writers of the twelfth century, including Geoffrey himself, may have considered the incubus as the son of the devil, O.J. Padel rightly argues that the Galfridian Merlin’s identity as the son of an incubus endorses his supernatural abilities.<sup>31</sup> Yet this alchemical version resolves the moral ambiguity of Merlin’s fatherhood since Morienus is his father. The poet seems to draw from Robert de Boron’s tradition of a more Christian Merlin, preserving the marvellous child of Geoffrey’s work while extending Merlin’s knowledge to a ‘far-reaching range of Christian power’.<sup>32</sup> Merlin appears as a child in the Vulgate cycle, where he is depicted as a hairy baby, which reflects his devilish heritage.<sup>33</sup> In addition, his exceptional and prophetic knowledge is said to stem from his devilish background:

And when he was born, he unavoidably had the power and the mind of a devil, and the cunning, because he was sired by one [...] This is the reason why he knew the things that were done, spoken, and past: he inherited this from the devil. (13)

The child Merlin in the alchemical dialogue, however, is the son of Morienus, depicted as a moralistic father figure and adept, and thus the opposite of a devil father. The poet makes this clear in the first line of the poem as a means of dissociating Merlin from the ‘son of the devil’ (1) tradition.

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<sup>29</sup> Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> See Runstedler, ‘Merlin the Scientist?’, p. 48, and Goodrich, ‘Introduction’, in *Merlin: A Casebook*, 1-102, at p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> O.J. Padel, ‘Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Development of the Merlin Legend’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 51 (2006), 37-65, at pp. 25-6. See also *The Romance of Merlin*, ed. Peter H. Goodrich (London: Garland, 1990), p. 14, and Mark Walker (trans.), *Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Life of Merlin* (Stroud: Amberley, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Knight, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power through the Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> *The Story of Merlin*, trans. Rupert T. Pickens, in *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris Lacy, 7 vols. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), vol. 2, 13-7. See also Knight, *Merlin*, p. 59.

It is also important to consider the role of Merlin as a child in the poem in the post-Vulgate cycle, in which he appears as a four-year-old child.<sup>34</sup> In this version, he appears as a child who interprets Arthur's prophetic dream about Mordred, and then rebukes Arthur for fathering Mordred through incest. Arthur responds by calling Merlin a "true devil".<sup>35</sup> The poet also establishes Merlin's all-knowingness ("you are thinking nothing that I do not know") (7). Merlin appears more moralistic than in the Vulgate cycle, condemning Arthur for his faults and appearing again as a wise and knowledgeable child. Yet after their conversation, he changes his appearance and appears to Arthur as an old man, revealing his shape-shifting abilities (9). Similarly, Merlin appears as a child of fourteen in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, where he asks Arthur why he is acting pensively.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he calls Arthur "a foole to take thought for hit that woll nat amende the" (30-1), which again draws from the post-Vulgate cycle. Interestingly, Arthur does not condemn his devilish heritage in Malory's version, but instead tries to criticise his youth and lack of experience, "For thou arte nat so olde of yerys to know my fadir" (31). Merlin not only appears here as a child who "tolde you trouthe" (32), but also as a shape-shifter who transforms into an old man (31). While the alchemical poet establishes Merlin as a child who is not described as a shape-shifter in the dialogue, Merlin's depiction in these examples indicates that he is not a normal child and perhaps not a child at all. This could suggest that his role as a child in the alchemical version is more allegorical than literal, and the dialogue form suggests a school lesson.

The alchemical Merlin depicted in the fifteenth-century dialogue discussed in this chapter is philosophical and virtuous, seeking his father's knowledge for 'good end' (12).<sup>37</sup> Merlin is

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<sup>34</sup> Knight, *Merlin*, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> See *The Post-Vulgate Cycle: The Merlin Continuation*, trans. Martha Asher, in *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, vol. 8, 7, and Knight, *Merlin*, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Definitive Original Text*, ed. P.J.C. Field (Rochester, D.S. Brewer, 2017), fol. 17r, C I.19, 25-8, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy*, pp. 170-1. Hughes draws comparisons between Merlin and the figure of the alchemist, with their occult knowledge of astrology and natural processes. He suggests that some of Edward IV's alchemists cite Merlin as a source of textual authority in their recipes, notably the Morienus and Merlin dialogue as well as a treatise on the marriage of the red and white man, and Edward IV's 'physician' Roger

also briefly mentioned in the *Liber de expositione lapidis philosophici* as well as in an alchemical treatise by Emalissus (the author identifies himself as Merlin) who explicitly cites Merlin as the prophet and counsellor of King Arthur and the son of an incubus.<sup>38</sup> He also comments ‘Omnis hic trutinatio est una’ (‘All is one here by weight’), referring to the alchemical principle of the unity of matter.<sup>39</sup> The author likely identifies as Merlin in order to capitalise on Merlin as a scientist. This latter depiction draws on the tradition of Merlin as the son of an incubus, stemming from the Galfridian, Vulgate, and post-Vulgate cycles.<sup>40</sup> The manuscript contains numerous alchemical tracts and treatises in Latin and Middle English, notably the Rhases and Merlin dialogue as well as tracts attributed to Ortolanus, Roger Bacon, Hermes, and other alchemical authorities.<sup>41</sup>

In his fifteenth-century alchemical treatise *Omne datum optimum et omne donum perfectum*, John Dastin mentions Merlin in his letter on the Philosopher’s Stone, where he quotes him supporting the Sulphur-Mercury theory for the chemical union necessary for the Stone.<sup>42</sup> In the sixteenth century, the Benedictine monk John Sawtry similarly evokes the *Gemma salutaris*, which was attributed to Merlin: ‘Merlin says if the white woman be married to the red man / They are combined together and they that were two shall be made as one’.<sup>43</sup> These verses identify key alchemical themes, for example the principle of chemical union, as

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Marchall attributes a recipe for methaglyn (flavoured mead or a wine-based drink) to Merlin. Note that Roger Marchall describes himself as Edward IV’s physician. For more on Marchall, see Voigts, ‘A Doctor and His Books: The Manuscripts of Roger Marchall (d. 1477)’, in *New Science out of Old Books: Studies in Manuscripts and Printed Books in Honour of A.I. Doyle*, ed. Richard Beadle and A.J. Piper (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), pp. 249-314. The Latin *Merlin Allegoria*, written in either the fourteenth or fifteenth century, also depicts an alchemical Merlin, and was very popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. See also Richard Newhauser, ‘The *Merlin Allegoria* in English’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 10.1 (1980), pp. 120-32.

<sup>38</sup> See Singer’s entries for Merlin in *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 1, p. 321, and vol. 2, pp. 519-22 for other Merlin works. Emalissus’s Latin explicit reads ‘Fuit autem hic ut fatetur Merlinis Silvestris qui prophetiam super corona regis anglie induxit filium incubi [...]’

<sup>39</sup> This translation is my own.

<sup>40</sup> This explicit is contained in Ashmole MS 1416, which Black argues was written in the early fifteenth century. Black, *A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue*, p. 1128.

<sup>41</sup> Black, *A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue*, pp. 1129-35.

<sup>42</sup> See Theisen, ‘John Dastin’s Letter on the Philosopher’s Stone’, p. 84.

<sup>43</sup> Bodleian Library Ashmole MS 1459, quoted in Hughes, ‘Politics and the Occult at the Court of Edward IV’, p. 126.

seen in the allegory of the chemical wedding between the man and woman, or between the white and the red (Mercury and Sulphur).<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the verses also demonstrate Merlin's alchemical authority and knowledge in fifteenth-century alchemical writing.

Although Merlin was depicted as an alchemical figure in fifteenth-century Latin and vernacular manuscripts, he was neither the most nor the least prominent. Singer's catalogue cites him in eight different documents (although she excludes the *Morienus and Merlin* alchemical dialogue), compared with more notable alchemical figures such as Hermes Trismegistus, whom she cites in 92 texts, pseudo-Geber (24 texts), Rhases (33 texts), and *Morienus* (17 texts).<sup>45</sup> As I will argue, the role of Merlin in the dialogue seems to stress the alchemical authority of the poem as well as the relationship between father and son.

### ***Analysis of the Argument between Morien and Merlin***

The beginning of the *Morienus/Merlin* dialogue, 'As the Child Merlin sat on hys father's knee' (1), immediately establishes the theme of inheritance from father to son, or from the master to the apprentice.<sup>46</sup> *Morienus* transmits his superior alchemical and philosophical knowledge to his son Merlin, a child with scholarly ambitions, who wishes 'To seeke Philosophy that Clarkes do reade / If I coude of the perfect knowledge thereof spede' (5-6). Moreover, his moral intentions here are comparable to those of fifteenth-century alchemists such as Norton, who identifies alchemy as a 'profound philosophy, a subtle science'.<sup>47</sup> The pursuit of knowledge itself becomes an alchemical quest to perfect the imperfect through transmutation. *Morienus*

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<sup>44</sup> Goodrich also points out the 'need for secrecy, the value of biblical scripture, and the principle of homeopathy' as key conventional themes in the poem. See Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin', p. 94.

<sup>45</sup> Goodrich, 'The Alchemical Merlin', p. 92. Norton also mentions Merlin and *Morienus* among his list of alchemical authors in literature of the fifteenth century. Cf. Norton, *The Ordinal of Alchemy*, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, 'The Argument...', pp. 26-35.

<sup>47</sup> Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy*, p. 5.

provides Merlin with the knowledge to grow, develop, and transmute, and through this Merlin undergoes his own transformation into a more intelligent and more virtuous human being.

The beginning of the poem also establishes it as one with religious significance. In the opening lines, Merlin tells Morienus ‘Bless me Father [...] for love and Charitie’ (2). Merlin’s words are reminiscent of a religious confession. In this instance, however, he seeks his father’s counsel. This shows that this alchemical dialogue can be interpreted as an exemplary narrative for secular as well as religious purposes. Despite his attempts at ‘vertuous livyng’ (10), Merlin claims ‘for in mani wildsome Cuntrys have I gon / But as yet perfeit Elixir coude I find non’ (17-18). The Philosopher’s Stone remains elusive and unattainable to him, much as in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, the *Confessio amantis*, and the Harley MS 2407 version of *The Churl and the Bird*. Despite his extensive alchemical knowledge, he remains unsuccessful, unlike his father, who is an adept. Yet Merlin is not driven by moral blindness as is the case with the alchemists in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and the Churl. He is simply naïve in his misguided pursuits. Morienus tells him that ‘All thie tyme therein thou spendest in vayne / Much Philosophy thou maist finde in Scripture’ (20-1). Like the Canon’s Yeoman, Merlin wastes his time and labour searching for the *elixir vitae*, or the Stone. Unlike the Yeoman, however, he acts with good intentions. While the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* ends with the Yeoman remaining a failure, Merlin’s failures are addressed from the start. He turns to his father, who is a source of great knowledge and wisdom (Morienus literally fathers his knowledge). While the scriptures contain much philosophy, however, Morienus does not rule out the possibility of seeking philosophy in alchemy, although attaining the Elixir is out of the question.

Merlin’s alchemical failures reveal his human fallibility. Referring to alchemical techniques, he further comments:

‘[...] ffor they that Salte and Corasives do take  
No cleane mettall can they ever make  
ffor yt hath so much of saltnes [...]’ (32-5)  
Worke yt by nature and it shall not be soe [...]

Merlin has exhausted the possibilities of experimenting with salt and corrosives without success, and he lacks the insight and wisdom to find alchemical success. He uses the metaphor of tree grafting to illustrate the impossibility of his current task:

‘Weene ye to graff good Peres upon an Elder tree  
 Or Cheryes in a Cole Stock nay nay father yt wyl not be  
 For brambles will bear no grapes greene  
 Nor the Walnut tre beare good Aples I weene  
 And ther for graff kyndly yee that graffers be  
 And then ye schale have good frute, prove and se  
 Braunches that be graff on stoke good and sure  
 The frute therof schale never rott but ever endure [...]  
 For God never made thyng but one naturally  
 And that was mankynde alone  
 For in all other thyngs, nature is none.’ (43-58)

The metaphor of the tree grafting iterates the familiar theme of unity, namely all matter derives from the same source.<sup>48</sup> It is futile to graft pear branches onto elder trees and expect pears because they are incompatible; pear fruit requires pear trees since they are the same species. Similarly, it is pointless to transmute lead into gold unless it is the same species, and thus Merlin’s approaches to alchemical experimentation have been ineffective. Merlin also articulates the familiar theme of original sin: ‘One nature quoth Moryen what mai yt be / Of fowle corruption quoth Merlyn I weene / And of a fowle matter that was unclene’ (62-4). His recognition of inherent bodily corruption signifies both postlapsarian views as well as the first stage of the alchemical process (*nigredo*), which requires the animal matter to be purged from the substance in a metaphorical death. He also mentions the familiar theme of the planets of the macrocosm reflected in the microcosm of humankind (70-2). This notion also links to the theme of unity, since humankind is made in the image of the cosmos: ‘In the mould of Man ther place thei tooke’ (71), referring to the relationship between man and the planets. Morienus

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<sup>48</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor also comments that this passage illustrates the alchemical theme of the ‘impossibility of generating things desired except from things of its own species’. See F. Sherwood Taylor, ‘The Argument...’, p. 24.

also mentions ‘foure spirits’ (100) that are required for the Great Work.<sup>49</sup> These spirits can be made (101) and are volatile in nature.<sup>50</sup>

The religious aspects of the dialogue are also shown in Merlin’s alchemical knowledge, which also suggest its exemplary framework. Morienus is curious to know ‘Where hast thou gon to lerne all thes / For the thyng thou sayest is very true [...]’ (93-4). Not only does Merlin speak the truth and possess ‘high wysdome’ (96), but when asked, he reveals that he is also divinely inspired: ‘No other [...] but our heavenly King / And my symple wytt theron ever studyeing’ (97-8). He also reveals that he has learned about alchemy ‘Through the worke of God [...] / The brightness of the Holy Ghost ys Air / And the light that gevith of lyfe in any lyvyng thyng ys fyr’ (90-2). In this sense, the pursuit of the alchemical elixir can also be read as a moral *and* Christian ideal towards which the practitioner should strive.<sup>51</sup> The poet interprets Merlin’s marvelousness, as shown with his pre-knowledge of alchemy, as divine rather than demonic or devilish. Yet, despite his knowledge, Merlin does not know much about alchemy, and Morienus’s didactic role in the story is to teach him the ‘right path’, suggesting the exemplarity of the poem. Merlin also swears an oath to Christ (157) in support of his alchemical learning.

Morienus also emphasises the importance of the successful alchemist possessing good moral conduct, further revealing the exemplary aspects of the poem:

‘Who so could thys work perfectly know and see  
The avayle thereof so great might be  
That some men thereof should be so proude and stoute  
That they would not know the pore people that came them about  
And somme of them would be soe full of Joy and delight  
That they would forget the Lord God that ys so full of might [...]’ (119-124)

<sup>49</sup> John Gower also mentions the four spirits. See Gower, *Confessio amantis*, IV.2464.

<sup>50</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, ‘The Argument...’, p. 24. These volatile substances are the ‘foure spiritz’ that Gower and Chaucer also refer to, including quicksilver (mercury), orpiment (arsenic trisulfide), salt armoniac (ammonium chloride), and brimstone (sulphur). See also Walter W. Skeat in Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Skeat (London: The Chancellor Press, 1985), p. 660.

<sup>51</sup> See also Matus, ‘Resurrected Bodies and Roger Bacon’s Elixir’, p. 324.



The alchemists must be of ‘Condicion good and sure’ (116) so that they maintain their moral sight and focus. They risk losing sight of God through their excessive pride and overeager desire for the Stone and its power. The false canon in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* exemplifies the ignorance and extreme selfishness of Morienus’s description, particularly since he ‘would not know the pore people that came them about’ (122) and ‘would forget the Lord God that ys so full of myght’ (124). The canon acts in his own interests and disavows God, with the Yeoman commenting ‘God kepe us from his false dissymulynge!’ (1073).<sup>52</sup> The pilgrim Canon further exploits his Yeoman’s labour as part of his own desires to attain the Stone. As I have discussed, the false canon in the tale is a more extreme example of moral blindness, representing everything that philosophy and science should *not* be. Merlin, on the other hand, has a better master in Morienus, whose paternal role provides moral support and guidance; he considers Merlin’s welfare and well-being, whereas the Yeoman is left alone to his own devices.

After Merlin swears an oath as well as a vow to Christ to be a good and virtuous alchemist (155-6), Morienus agrees to teach him the making of the philosophical Mercury since it is the most perfect work. He cites an allegory of the conception of children within a walled city as part of his instruction.<sup>53</sup> As is typical with alchemical treatises of its time, the allegory is used to describe the secrets of alchemy in cryptic terms. Yet the allegory of the city is strikingly original. It begins with the chemical union of man and woman: ‘First a father and a mother you must have before / And a Chyld of them shall be conceived and borne’ (168-9). The product of their union represents the creation of Mercury. Morienus particularly emphasises the woman’s role (169-70, 175-6). He describes her vagina and womb as the ‘matrix of a woman’ (180), which metaphorically represents the alembic or vessel for Mercury to be generated

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<sup>52</sup> Chaucer, *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, VIII.1073.

<sup>53</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, ‘The Argument...’, pp. 24-5.

within. The man's sperm enters her to beget the child or Stone (180-1). He also emphasises the importance of purity for the alchemical birth to take place. The seed must remain pure within her womb (183), 'For if any Corrupcon come where the chylde ys / It might never ingender then to be a man I wys' (186-7). The male child (i.e. Mercury) is seen as the metaphorical fruit of the birth, pure from bodily corruption which might pollute its growth. In alchemical terms, the substance that will become Mercury requires containment and separation from the outside world in order to be nurtured and develop. In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the Canon's Yeoman bungles his attempts to create this chemical union; his pot breaks and his metaphorical 'seed' spills everywhere (973), which Calabrese suggests represents his failed attempts at alchemy.<sup>54</sup> Morienus identifies the father as Silos and the mother as Anul (197-8), which as F. Sherwood Taylor notes are reversals for Solis (the Sun, or Gold) and Luna (the Moon, or Silver).<sup>55</sup> The author's cryptic use of the symbols is likely an attempt to conceal the identity of the metaphorical parents of Mercury. As I have mentioned elsewhere, these anagrams and symbols function as a challenge to the adept, to protect the secrets of alchemy from the uninitiated, who might use them for immoral purposes.

Yet the Great Work remains incomplete as Morienus details the children's continued growth:

'And theie schale dwelle in a lowe Cuntrie  
 And in a stronge City welle walled aboute  
 That theie of there Enimyys thereof schale have no doubt  
 The Cuntrie ys full good ingresse  
 The wych ys called Homogenes  
 Artevallo thus call me the City  
 And the chylds name must be Mercury.' (201-7)

Within the city, the child (spirit) is called Mercury.<sup>56</sup> Morienus provides the dimensions of the city (alembic) (210-3) necessary for Mercury to inhabit. The child (Mercury) is eventually

<sup>54</sup> Calabrese, 'Meretricious Mixtures', p. 286.

<sup>55</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, 'The Argument...', p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor describes 'Artevallo' as a vessel or alembic, which represents the city that houses the child. He also deciphers 'Artevallo' as an anagram for 'olla vetra' in connection with the marginal annotation 'vitreolla'. See Taylor, 'The Argument...', p. 25. While alchemical vitriol refers to a crystalline body such as zinc and copper

brought from the city (alembic) and washed in ‘waters twelve’ (224), referring to Ripley’s twelve gates of the alchemical process, which he describes in *The Compound of Alchemy* in 1471. Mercury the child then lies with his mother ‘So that manie children there shalbe borne’ (251). Elizabeth Archibald describes medieval incest as paradoxical since it is taboo but it can also ‘further the protagonist’s career in some unexpected ways’.<sup>57</sup> Archibald provides examples of ‘positive inbreeding’, or eugenics (that is, extraordinary children born of incest) in medieval literature, including Gregorius and Albanus, two holy men who were conceived through incestuous relationships.<sup>58</sup> She also comments that holy incest produces Christ since the Virgin Mary is both the daughter and mother of Christ.<sup>59</sup> The ‘incest’ between Mary and her father/brother/son is the salvation of humankind, and the solution to original sin.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in the alchemical dialogue, the allegorical incest is not seen as taboo but necessary. The incestuous union creates purer offspring or refines the alchemical substance into a purer form. Through this incest, the metaphorical children inherit the ideal characteristics of the son and mother that are necessary for the next stage. In alchemical terms, the incest is necessary because it does not allow for external contamination, which could affect the purity of the mixture. The alchemical dialogue provides another example of positive inbreeding since the resulting Philosopher’s Stone merits ‘celebration rather than reproach’.<sup>61</sup>

From this union, twenty-five children are born ‘Tyll death comyth and slayeth them all’ (266). Yet death is not the end, but merely a change, as Morienus states (267-8), and in the

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sulphate [see Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, p. 212], Abraham’s definition of vitrification, which is the ‘conversion of matter conversion of matter into glass or a glassy substance through the action of heat’, seems more aligned with ‘vitreolla’ and ‘olla vetra’ given the context here. In either case, the use of ‘Artevallo’ seems to involve a glass vessel or the making of one for the ‘final fixation of the matter in the alembic into the philosopher’s stone’. See also Abraham, pp. 211-2.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 230. See also Archibald, ‘Gold in the Dungheap: Incest Stories and Family Values in the Middle Ages’, *Journal of Family History*, 22.2 (1997), 133-49, and Nowlin, ‘Narratives of Incest and Incestuous Narrative: Memory, Process, and the *Confessio Amantis*’s “Middel Weie”’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 35.2 (2005), 217-44.

<sup>58</sup> Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, p. 238.

<sup>59</sup> Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, p. 238.

<sup>60</sup> Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, p. 238.

<sup>61</sup> Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, p. 238.

alchemical process it involves the use of fire. One of the dead children ‘shall tourne to lyfe againe’ (280), which can be read as an allusion to Christ’s death and resurrection. Moreover, this transformation is analogous to the Eucharist, which could be interpreted as a metaphor for successful alchemical transmutation. In the Eucharist, the sacramental bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Similarly, in the dialogue, the one metaphorical child survives. When becoming Mercury, he loses his substantial form, which is his essence, the composite of matter and form, but he retains his accidents, which are inherent qualities that do not change the physical body’s essence (e.g. change in hair colour, a lack of an arm, the child’s body).<sup>62</sup> The body of the metaphorical child, which is given new life through his resurrection, effectively *becomes* Mercury. This process purifies the child, restoring his soul while maintaining his accidents.

From there, the mixture (child) undergoes a series of further, more complex alchemical processes and experimentations under a ‘Master Physitian’ (290), who is the alchemical adept. These processes further suggest the exemplarity of the poem, with the allegorical instructions functioning as exemplary means of achieving perfection. Although the identity of the ‘Master Physitian’ is not made explicit, it could be Christ as doctor given the Christian content of the poem and the apparently supernatural powers of the practitioner. As Morienus explains, the ‘Master Physitian’ is defined by his virtuous character and good moral condition, and thus he doctors and cares for the sole child Mercury. These experimentations refine and perfect Mercury, resulting in his conquering and powerful image:

And then schale the childe be wondrous bryght  
 Faire and strong and of greate myght  
 He shalbe so furious and so strong and myghty  
 That of bodyes he shall get the victory  
 And turne them alle unto hys beames  
 For he schalbe Kyng of seaven Realmes

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<sup>62</sup> For more on the comparisons between alchemical transformation and the Eucharist, see notably Eggert, ‘Hamlet’s Alchemy: Transubstantiation, Modernity, Belief’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64.1 (2013), 45-57, at p. 48. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 2, Q.77, Art. 1, Pt. III, pp. 2462-3, and J.T. Rhodes, ‘The Body of Christ in English Eucharistic Devotion, c. 1500-1620’, in *New Science out of Old Books*, pp. 388-419.

And also he schalbe a conqueror wyth the best  
 Wherever that he goe either by East or West  
 Hys fathers death recover shall he  
 And tourney them unto the sayd degree  
 Also all bodys he wyll convert  
 Into hys fader & moder being in desert  
 A thousand he wyll causen to be yelden in fyre  
 And make them of hys fathers power [...] (305-18)

Mercury transformed recalls Alexander in his strength, intelligence, ambition, and conquests. He is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, but his role here is heavily implied. The poet uses this conqueror figure as a metaphor for Mercury's absolute power. Like Alexander, Mercury has grown into a conquering king. Following his conquests, Mercury transforms the remaining alchemical bodies into his father and mother (315ff), replicating the alchemical process in their image and thus retaining their purity. This passage also suggests Mercury's Christ-like image, particularly since he 'make them of hys fathers power' (318), signifying implicitly divine authority of his father, God. Mercury then marries the queen (Almaga) (327-8), whom F. Sherwood Taylor identifies as 'Azot', or philosophical Mercury. Yet this union seems unsuitable since Morienus is illustrating the allegorical union of the red and the white (Mercury and Sulphur rather than Mercury and Mercury).<sup>63</sup> Mercury and Sulphur are joined (346) in creating the Elixir or Stone, 'And thus much fruite of them may spring' (337). The 'fruit' (or children in this instance) refers to gold production. Like Merlin, the children inherit their perfection from their parents, who have been refined to their perfect forms, and with the union between Mercury and Almaga, the Philosopher's Stone has been created.

Compared to the other poems I have already discussed, this poem ends on a more hopeful, albeit cryptic note for alchemical success. Morienus has laid the theoretical groundwork and imparted his alchemical wisdom to Merlin, but whether it is successful in practice remains to be seen. In the final lines of the poem, Morienus stresses the importance of attaining Sulphur: 'And therefore set thyne heart and thie delight / To Gett the lyon that ys Collour white' (365-

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<sup>63</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, 'The Argument...', p. 34 n.22. See also L. Zetzner, *Theatrum chemicum* (1613).

6). The 'lyon' refers to the Green Lion, which is a recurring alchemical metaphor in alchemical literature. Its greenness represents its vegetation and unclean state. The alchemist can produce philosophical Mercury from its impure state, however.<sup>64</sup> This passage also refers to the first alchemical stage *nigredo*, which involves a corporeal 'death' (the lion's here) before it can become 'the lyon that ys the Collour white' (366), that is the *albedo*, or whitening stage. The 'lyon' can also refer to Christ. The goal of the *exemplum* is to follow in Christ's image since his life represents the ideal and thus the gateway to the elixir. Morienus's final words advise Merlin to focus on the transmutation from black to white in order to pursue the moral ideal of the poem, which is to devote himself to Christ ('set thyne heart and thi delight'). It is through Christ that the elixir can be achieved.

The dialogue between Morienus and Merlin offers more positive ways of using alchemy to present an exemplary narrative in fifteenth-century Middle English poetry, providing ideas about the transmission and value of secret knowledge. The poet uses the familiar names of Morienus and Merlin to establish the poem's alchemical authority and uses the father/son dialogue form to convey the exemplary meaning of the poem. As is the case with other alchemical poems featuring the father/son relationship, the father (Morienus) schools the son (Merlin) and transmits not only his knowledge of alchemical transmutation and the Stone, but also encourages Merlin to become a better alchemical practitioner, Christian, and human being. While Merlin's attempts with alchemy are unsuccessful, the poem is more positive in its portrayal of alchemy than the other poems I have discussed; Morienus, for instance, knows the secrets of alchemy, and the poet presents him as an alchemical adept, suggesting the potential for successful alchemical transmutation and validating the existence of the Stone. This poem also reveals the religious aspects of alchemical experimentation as an *exemplum* in dialogue

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<sup>64</sup> Rampling, 'Establishing the Canon', p. 204. Grennen also comments on the 'hunting of the green lion', in which the lion is metaphorically lured into a ditch, dismembered, and then dies. With the lion dead and butchered, it can now be used as prime matter for producing philosophical Mercury. See also Grennen, 'Jargon Transmuted', pp. 48-9.

form. The religious imagery in the dialogue, particularly its allegory for the death and resurrection of Christ, would have been familiar to its fifteenth-century audience, but the poet's use of metaphor in terms of the city and incest mark it as unique.

### **Albertus Magnus and Elchyzell Dialogue**

The late fifteenth-century alchemical tract *Semita recta Albertus peribet testimonium* (*The Right Path Albertus Bears Evidence*), preserved in Trinity College, Cambridge MS R.14.44, also uses alchemical dialogue within an exemplary framework as seen in *The Argument between Morien and Merlin*.<sup>65</sup> Rather than using the father (Morienus) and son (Merlin) figures for the dialogue, however, the poet chooses the famous thirteenth-century German Dominican friar Albertus Magnus and the fictional Queen of Elves (Elchyzell) to depict an alchemical exchange between an alchemical adept and the allegorical figure of elvishness. Grund rightly suggests that the figure of Albertus Magnus in this version of the poem is used to boost its alchemical authority since after his death he had alchemical works attributed to him.<sup>66</sup>

In my view, this alchemical dialogue also functions as an exemplary narrative, citing the reconciliatory aspects of the poem as a more positive depiction of late medieval alchemical practice and experimentation. This poem also reveals the ways in which poets were making use of alchemy in dialogues in fifteenth-century Middle English poetry, particularly the increased access to alchemical work in the vernacular, which would flourish in the early modern period. As in the previously discussed dialogue, alchemical practice in this poem is not only presented as possible but is also encouraged. This poem does not represent the 'poor'

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<sup>65</sup> Grund reprints this poem in 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', pp. 657-8.

<sup>66</sup> Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', pp. 645-6. Interestingly, it is neither included in Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britanniae*, nor does Schuler mention it among the alchemical treatises that Ashmole omitted. Cf. Schuler, *Alchemical Poetry*, xxx n.20. The ones listed include *The Argument of Morienus and Merlin*, William Bollose's *The Marrow*, and *The Working of the Phylozophers Stone*. He also notes that some of the treatises may have appeared after 1500.

quality of fifteenth-century alchemical literature, but rather diverse ways of depicting alchemy for moral purposes in literature as well as its wider readership.<sup>67</sup>

### Summary and Manuscript

In the dialogue between Albertus and Elchyzell, they meet in the wilderness of Damascus, and she instructs him how to create the alchemical elixir that can transmute base metals into silver or gold. The poem follows the Mercury-Sulphur theory for producing the elixir, and the process with which to achieve this, which is also dependent on the theory. Albertus requests clarification from the Queen as the poem progresses, and they both use alchemical allegory and symbolism to codify the chemical processes. The poem is short at 64 lines. The manuscript contains other alchemical tracts and treatises, such as transmuting copper into gold and making copper as bright as gold, as well as medical recipes in Latin and Middle English and a tract on temperatures (fol. 1).<sup>68</sup> Although the poems in the codex appear to have been copied by different hands, Grund suggests that its version of the *Semita recta* was written by the same scribe who likely wrote the three preceding alchemical recipes as well.<sup>69</sup> In terms of authorship,

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<sup>67</sup> Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 4, p. 332.

<sup>68</sup> See Trinity College, Cambridge MS R.14.44, p. 189, for instance, for a recipe treating ‘mormall’ or cold sores as well another recipe on treating gout. Cf. Honkapohja, *Alchemy, Medicine, and Commercial Book Production*, pp. 215-24. This manuscript was allegedly donated alongside numerous other manuscripts to the Wren Library by Thomas Walley, a former Vice-Master of Cambridge University, although this claim is unsupported. One tract is attributed to Roger Bacon with another headed ‘Bakon’ (presumably referring to Bacon as well); another Latin epistle is attributed to Arnald of Villanova, and the manuscript also includes various recipes on alchemy. See Trinity College, Cambridge MS R.14.44, IV.fol.8v for the tract with the incipit ‘Bakon’. In the treatise, the scribe emphasises the necessity of the Vegetable Stone for acquiring the Philosopher’s Stone. The *Speculum alchemiae* is attributed to Roger Bacon, which appears on fol. 117 of the manuscript. The pseudo-Arnald treatise is an anonymous translation of his alchemical text *Semita semitae*. The manuscript also features an alchemical recipe with the incipit *Rosary*, which is a treatise on making colours (‘This tretise shewith how ye shall gouerne your fire...’). For more on the contents of the manuscript, see Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 1, p. 226, and Mooney (ed.), *The Index of Middle English Prose Handbook XI: Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), p. 42.

<sup>69</sup> Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, pp. 655-6. This version of *Semita recta* appears in the final few folios of the manuscript. The preceding alchemical recipes are written in Middle English in red ink and are separated by red lines. The incipits include ‘Dixit filius patri suo’ and ‘Alia Regula’(IV.fol.14v), which includes a set of a rules for understanding properties of the sun (gold) and the moon (silver), and an incomplete set for mercury. Many of the recipes are brief and appear incomplete. For more on these incipits and recipes, see M.R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Catalogue of Trinity College, Cambridge: A Descriptive Catalogue*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900), vol. 2, pp. 330-1, Thorndike, *Catalogue of Incipits in*



there is a signature or explicit at the bottom of the Albertus Magnus/Queen of Elves poem in black ink on fol. 17a that reads ‘Exm Goweld’.<sup>70</sup> While the illegibility of the signature leaves this argument open to debate, it does point out that it is likely the name of the author and that it is an *exemplum*. Although neither ‘Goweld’ or ‘Doweld’ appear elsewhere in any standard biographies, it is possible that it is an anagram as Grund suggests, or perhaps this author is simply very obscure, as is the case with the mysterious Thomas Potter for British Library MS Sloane 3580B, which I will further discuss later in this chapter.<sup>71</sup> The poem has aspects of the medieval alchemical recipe, particularly in the teaching of the Queen of Elves, which Grund argues intends to give credibility to an often-discredited science.<sup>72</sup> I agree with this, and as with the Morienus/Merlin dialogue, the exemplary framework confirms this more positive reading of alchemy. The manuscript concludes with more alchemical recipes, some of which are incomplete, as well as a list of areas around Cambridge (IV.fol.18), suggesting that it may have been written in Cambridge.<sup>73</sup>

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*Mediaeval Scientific Writings in Latin* (London: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1963), pp. 441-4, and more recently Timmermann, ‘Alchemy in Cambridge’, pp. 341-4.

<sup>70</sup> Grund interprets this as ‘*Exemplum Doweld*’ while Singer and James read it as ‘Goweld’. Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 662. Cf. Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 1, p. 156, and James, *Trinity College Cambridge Catalogue*, p. 179.

<sup>71</sup> Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 662. Grund also identifies it as a poem of the latter half of the fifteenth century due to the dialect, and attributes it to Norfolk. See also Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 656 n.48.

<sup>72</sup> Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 652.

<sup>73</sup> Due to its geographical location and academic establishment, Cambridge became a site for alchemical writing and practice in the fifteenth century and particularly in the early modern period, although alchemy was not recognised as part of the academic curriculum. It could, however, be studied to better understand nature and for medical practices and was tolerated if its experimentations were lawful and ethical. For more on alchemical study at Cambridge, see notably Timmermann, ‘Alchemy in Cambridge’, pp. 349-51, and Mordechai Feingold, ‘The Occult Tradition in the English University of the Renaissance: A Reassessment’, in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 73-94, at pp. 77-8. For evidence of early modern alchemical laboratory experiments in Cambridge, see notably Spargo, ‘Investigating the Site of Newton’s Laboratory in Trinity College, Cambridge’, *South African Journal of Science*, 101 (2005), 315-21.

### **Albertus Magnus, *Semita recta*, and Pseudo-Albertus**

The ‘Albertus’ character in the poem is Albertus Magnus since he is so closely connected to alchemical literature in the fifteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, since Albertus Magnus was a scientist of high repute, the poet probably used his name to capitalise on his fame and authority.<sup>75</sup> Grund observes that there are two known copies of the Albertus Magnus/Queen of Elves version of the *Semita recta*; the other version appears in London, British Library MS Sloane 3580B, which is comprised of alchemical writings and which Thomas Potter copied in 1579-80.<sup>76</sup> Grund also points out differences between the manuscripts, notably the slight omissions as well as the improved syntax in MS Sloane 3580B.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Queen of Elves**

Although the role of Albertus Magnus in the poem can be connected to his alchemical reputation in the fifteenth century, the role of the Queen of the Elves is more mysterious. Grund argues that the role of Elchyzell as Albertus’s instructor may be a ‘conscious strategy, taking advantage of Albertus’s reputation as a man possessing superhuman powers’.<sup>78</sup> Yet the exact nature of her role in the poem remains uncertain. Ingham further suggests that the meeting between the two figures metaphorically signifies an interrelationship between the ‘rational’ and

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<sup>74</sup> Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 645.

<sup>75</sup> Kibre, ‘Alchemical Writings...’, p. 499. Kibre argues that the use of Albertus’s name in the pseudo-Albertan tradition gives the text authority and responsibility.

<sup>76</sup> Grund claims that there are no records or biography for Potter. Keiser points out, however, that his writings indicate that he was a ‘conscientious and learned man who has clearly spent much time looking at manuscripts and has knowledge of and experience in textual scholarship’. He also provides a possible identity for Thomas Potter, suggesting that he was a Benedictine monk who was ordained in 1534 and studied logic, theology, and rhetoric in 1539, and remained in Durham College after it was secularised that same year. Whether this is the same Thomas Potter cannot be proved, but Keiser’s argument seems most likely. See Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 656, and Keiser, ‘Preserving the Heritage: Middle English Verse Treatises in Early Modern Manuscripts’, in *Mystical Metal of Gold*, pp. 189-214, at pp. 192-3. Keiser cites A.B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford, A.D. 1501-1540* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 392. Cf. Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, p. 91.

<sup>77</sup> He also comments that the version found in MS R.14.44 is the more complete copy, and thus it is likely that the *Semita recta* in Sloane 3580B was copied from it, although it may have been copied from another manuscript now lost. See Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 656. For more on the popularity of the late medieval dialogue, see Grund, ‘Textual Alchemy’, p. 202.

<sup>78</sup> Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, pp. 647-8.

the ‘magical’.<sup>79</sup> I also suggest that this dialogue represents a collaboration between these two spheres, working together through the medieval alchemical recipe.<sup>80</sup> As I have discussed, alchemy in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is ‘elvysshe’ in its unattainability and elusiveness. The alchemical knowledge that Elchyzell imparts to Albertus in the dialogue is literally ‘elvysshe’ since she is the Queen of Elves. I agree with Ingham’s argument that ‘elvysshe’ in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is equivocal rather than negative as Green suggests.<sup>81</sup> In this version of the *Semita recta*, the elvishness seems more benevolent than ambiguous. I suggest that despite Albertus’s role as an adept, the secrets of alchemy are elvish or inaccessible to him, and thus Elchyzell schools him about the elixir.<sup>82</sup> It also suggests his human fallibility, since the success of alchemy remains unknown to him whereas it is known to the Elf Queen. Yet her supernatural status and her status as a woman call into question the truth of alchemical practice and what she tells him. She is an unusual choice as a character, representing a sort of muse and teacher to Albertus.<sup>83</sup> Ingham offers two helpful readings for Elchyzell’s role in the story: the first is that it implies the scholar’s admiration for an alchemist elf, and the second suggests that it shows ‘the alchemist’s ability to cross cultures: elite and popular, philosophical and craft’, which seems more convincing since the meeting and use of these characters suggest a crosscultural relationship.<sup>84</sup> This dialogue also differs significantly from the *Morienus* and

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<sup>79</sup> Patricia Clare Ingham, *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 157.

<sup>80</sup> Ingham also links Elchyzell’s elvishness to Richard Firth Green’s comment on the term ‘elvysshe’ in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, that ‘alchemy is an elvish calling and the alchemist’s expertise is elvish’, referring to its elusiveness and the problems of its practice. See Ingham, *The Medieval New*, p. 158. Cf. Green, ‘Changing Chaucer’, p. 180.

<sup>81</sup> Ingham, *The Medieval New*, p. 158.

<sup>82</sup> In Chaucer’s *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the knight searches for an Elf Queen since only she can provide him with the highest form of gratification that he seeks. The paradox of this, however, is that she is unattainable to him in the human world, and since Geoffrey the pilgrim never finishes his tale, it is unclear whether he is successful or not. Similarly, the ‘elvysshe’ nature of alchemical knowledge makes it inaccessible to humans in the Albertus/Elf Queen dialogue. The Elf Queen, it seems, provides the highest form of knowledge needed to understand and successfully practice alchemy. See Chaucer, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, VII, pp. 212-7, and James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 111-2.

<sup>83</sup> Grund suggests that her supernatural status builds upon Albertus’s superhuman reputation, and thus further contributing to his mythical status. See Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, pp. 647-8.

<sup>84</sup> Ingham, *The Medieval New*, p. 157.

Merlin dialogue in its secular focus yet it still establishes the ‘right path’ for moral well-being.<sup>85</sup> Albertus is metaphorically blinded by his own lack of alchemical knowledge. While Elchyzell’s instructions are meant to provide him with answers and clarity, however, it remains unclear to what extent he benefits from them since it is knowledge beyond his human understanding.

On the other hand, however, and following the satire of the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, the scribe’s presentation can also be read as an elaborate joke or satire. In consideration of ‘elvyssh’ as a term used for alchemy and other technical practices, one can see how the joke can be extended. The Elf Queen teaches Albertus science rather than offering him money or love, which is virtually unheard of during this period of writing. Commenting on medieval elf queens and fairy mistresses, James Wade points out that their depictions are rarely unproblematic, which suggests the Elf Queen’s potentially subversive role in the alchemical dialogue.<sup>86</sup> Ingham also comments that the Elf Queen represents the ‘less admirable or less rigorous elements associated with alchemical practice’, although her behaviour in the poem seems genuinely virtuous.<sup>87</sup> Since Albertus Magnus is human, he can neither reciprocate nor fully receive the supernatural wisdom that the Elf Queen imparts to him, suggesting the imbalance

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<sup>85</sup> Ingham rightly comments that the ‘right path’ refers not only to alchemy, but to their collaboration in general. See Ingham, *The Medieval New*, p. 157.

<sup>86</sup> While the Elf Queen’s gift of science appears to be well-intended, Wade comments that ‘since supernatural gifts can never be adequately reciprocated by someone from the human world, therefore, it appears that there is an imbalance in the exchange system’. See Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, pp. 110, 115. For more on the role of Elf Queens and faeries, see notably Green, *Elf Queen and Holy Friars*; Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Matthew Woodcock, *Fairy in the Faerie Queene: Renaissance Elf-Fashioning and Elizabeth Mythmaking* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); and C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 122. The medieval romance *Thomas of Erceldoune* also features a gift exchange between human and Elf Queen. The poet Thomas the Rhymer wishes to give his love to an Elf Queen. After he sleeps with her, however, she transforms from a beautiful woman into a loathly lady, suggesting the alien and potentially illusive nature of the Elf Queen. She does, however, provide him with the gift of prophecy. Much of the scholarship on this text is dated but still useful. For more scholarship on *Thomas of Erceldoune*, see notably *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, ed. James A.H. Murray. EETS OS 61 (London: N. Trübner & Co, 1875); William P. Albrecht, *The Loathly Lady in Thomas of Erceldoune* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Publications in Language and Literature, 1954); Josephine M. Burnham, ‘A Study of Thomas of Erceldoune’, *PMLA*, 23.3 (1908), 375-420; E.B. Lyle, ‘Sir Landevaleale and the Fairy-Mistress Theme in *Thomas of Erceldoune*’, *Medium Ævum*, 42.3 (1973), 244-50; Ronald Hutton, ‘The Making of the Early Modern British Fairy Tradition’, *The Historical Journal*, 57.4 (2014), 1135-56; and Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 173-5.

<sup>87</sup> Ingham, *The Medieval New*, p. 157.

between them. As I will show, while this alchemical dialogue is exemplary, the subversive relationship between Elf Queen and human scientist provides a complex *exemplum* for alchemical experimentation and practice.

### **Analysis of the Albertus Magnus/Queen of Elves Dialogue**

The poem begins with praise for alchemical practice: ‘Off all þe weys þat I knowe be est or be weste / Euere holde I þis path for on of þe beste / ffor þis is þe ryzt path good & sure’ (1-3). Unlike the path of the wayward Canon’s Yeoman, who wastes his time and his labour, the alchemical path here is the ‘ryzt’ one. The poet is quick to establish the Mercury Sulphur theory as the key to alchemical success (4-9), citing the recurring alchemical imagery of the ‘sol’ and ‘lune’. Albertus leaves Damascus for the ‘weldernesse’ (9-10), where he meets with ‘þe queen of elphys lond vndyr an ev tre’ (12).<sup>88</sup>

The exemplarity of the poem is expressed through the dialogue between the two characters. The poet articulates the closeness of their relationship, noting that the Elf Queen says ‘Albertus knew here ful wel I wene’ (13). This suggests familiarity with elvishness, that is, as Alaric Hall comments, elves as ‘sources of alchemical wisdom’.<sup>89</sup> The relationship between these two characters, however, is platonic and not sexual. As a supernatural character, Elchyzell possesses a higher knowledge of alchemy that remains inaccessible to Albertus.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Grund suggests that Damascus may have been chosen as the setting for the story in order to ‘exploit its mythical status and its associations with alchemy’. He also points out that Damascus would have been familiar to audiences in late medieval England, notably through the use of damask cloth. See Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 648. He lists other examples of Damascus in late medieval writing, including Chaucer’s *The Monk’s Tale* as well as Boccaccio’s *De Casibus Virorum et Feminarum Illustrium* and Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Historiale*. For more on the familiarity of Damascus among medieval English audiences, see notably Aiken, ‘Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer’s Monk’s Tale’, *Speculum*, 17 (1942), 56–68, at pp. 56–57; Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 177-8; and Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in the Fourteenth-Century England*, pp. 22-3. Its exotic setting could also signify the implausibility of such a meeting.

<sup>89</sup> Hall, ‘Elves on the Brain: Chaucer, Old English, and *Elvish*’, *Anglia*, 24.2 (2006), 225-43, at p. 226.

<sup>90</sup> Grund observes that the name ‘Elchyzell’ does not appear elsewhere and suggests that the name is an anagram or code. See Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves’, p. 648 n.20, and Lewis Spence, *The Fairy Tradition in Britain* (New York: Rider and Company, 1948), pp. 24–25. Green suggested to me in email correspondence that the name could be a corruption of the biblical Ezekiel. While it is unlikely that an elf queen would be named Ezekiel, it could be possible, given the unusual content of the poem.

Yet their meeting is harmonious and friendly; in fact, they seem to meet as good friends, and consult with each other rather than debate or disagree.<sup>91</sup> Elchyzell's intentions seem didactic and altruistic since she wants to instruct him 'to helpe þe in þin stodyng' (20).<sup>92</sup> Elchyzell exemplifies what a good teacher should be: she is attentive, patient, informative, and keen to share and transmit her knowledge. Elchyzell's alchemical instruction informs the poem's exemplary narrative. She also presents a different take on the use of alchemy as an *exemplum* for good moral practice in fifteenth-century literature.

Unlike the morally dubious Canon and his Yeoman in Chaucer's tale, who constantly fail in their plans and have no hopes of finding the elixir, Elchyzell has apparently already found it: "Of a trewe lixer I can telle þe / wythynne a monyth made may yt be" (20-1). It seems too good to be true, and it probably is. Not only does she possess the information needed to attain the elixir, but she also can attain it 'wythynne a month' rather than having to spend a lifetime searching fruitlessly for it. She tells him the recipe for a successful elixir:

'yf þou make þi proieccyon upon mercurye  
And yt ys þe beste syluer pat man can fynde  
for yt is made of þe same kende  
Of mercurye and Sulphur I wene  
and 3et of þe same kende þei ben.' (24-8)

Elchyzell points out that Mercury and Sulphur are of the same kind rather than two different principles, reflecting the recurring alchemical theme of unity, that all things are essentially one. Yet this seems impossible for Albertus to accept (29) since he believes that Mercury and Sulphur 'arn dyuers kende' (30), or different kinds of substances.<sup>93</sup> Elchyzell tells him, however, that

'[...] sulphur shulde be made of mercurye  
and þat is werkyng more naturalye  
ffor mercurye wele not be prouabyll metal

<sup>91</sup> Ingham convincingly suggests that their meeting represents Roger Bacon's emphasis on alchemy as a collaboration of nature and art. See Ingham, *The Medieval New*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>92</sup> While Grund assumes the tone of the poem should be taken seriously, Hall questions its tone since it is, after all, a dialogue between an Elf Queen and Albertus Magnus. See Hall, 'Elves on the Brain', p. 226. Due to the seemingly incomplete state of the poem, it is debatable whether it should be read seriously or not, but it is worth considering.

<sup>93</sup> Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', p. 661.

to puttyn hym to asay he faylyth his vertuis all  
 But þat Sulphur prow hym wele not pas  
 þat is made or had where þat Sulphur was.' (31-6)

Their argument initially seems convoluted. Grund offers two interpretations for this passage. In the first interpretation, he reads it as the making of Sulphur out of Mercury as more in accordance with nature. In the second reading, he reads 'werkyng' as a noun and 'naturalye' as an adjective, referring to the process of making Sulphur out of Mercury.<sup>94</sup> The first interpretation seems likelier, however, since 'werkyng' seems to be the verb rather than the noun, and thus Elchyzell emphasises the affinities between Mercury and Sulphur rather than their differences in accordance with nature.

Like the previous dialogue discussed, Elchyzell's instructions exemplify successful alchemical transmutation and practice. She tells Albertus how to make Sulphur, providing a list of alchemical procedures and ingredients necessary for the job.<sup>95</sup> She also uses alchemical jargon to conceal the identity of many of the ingredients.<sup>96</sup> It is evident, however, that the 'right path' to making the alchemical elixir is not clear-cut. She continues describing the alchemical process until the apparent end of the poem, with Albertus interjecting on which 'proporcyon ze þe bestys tweyne' (55) for the evolving mixture. This section of the poem shows aspects of the medieval alchemical recipe.<sup>97</sup> The Queen does not clearly identify the substances necessary for the elixir in the poem; in fact, the poet uses a coding system and anagrams (alchemical jargon) to conceal the identity of many of the substances.<sup>98</sup> This particular coding scheme appears to be unique to this variation of the *Semita recta*.<sup>99</sup> While the language in alchemical recipes was frequently codified to protect the secrets from the uninitiated, Grund points out that the

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<sup>94</sup> Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', p. 661.

<sup>95</sup> See Grund's glossary in 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', pp. 559-60.

<sup>96</sup> Her alchemical jargon includes terms such as 'Artasape' and 'Sugasigi' from 45-6.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Grund, 'The Golden Formulas', p. 460.

<sup>98</sup> Grund describes the poet's strategy as one 'where the coded word needs to be read from back to front and the third and fifth letters need to be supplied'. See Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', p. 654.

<sup>99</sup> See Maurice P. Crosland, *Historical Studies in the Language of Chemistry* (London: Heinemann, 1962), pp. 40-2. Crosland describes different techniques for codifying the alchemical recipes, including transposing the letters of a substance.

typographical errors and corruption in the textual transmission of the surviving manuscripts render these anagrams even more obscure.<sup>100</sup>

Despite Elchyzell's well-meaning instructions, the codified language renders the experiment impenetrable for outsiders such as the reader of the poem. Since the poem is called *Semita recta*, it is implied that Albertus benefits from Elchyzell's final instructions since he is on the 'right path'.<sup>101</sup> Yet the poem's ending appears incomplete and a bit of a cliff-hanger:

'Take þanne Animul good & pure  
and dyssolue hym in 3our water sure  
half an vnce & 3 3 of erucaem þerto  
and Ioyne hem all togedre so [...]' (61-4)

Grund suggests the possibility that the poem may have been corrupted in its transmission due to copyist errors, which may explain the obscurities of some of the ingredients as well as the poem's apparent inconclusiveness.<sup>102</sup> Singer provides an alternate interpretation of the final line of the poem: 'And joyne hem all to Gode so' (IV.fol.17a).<sup>103</sup> This ending also seems less abrupt and more conclusive, uniting the substance to God in the final stage. More recently, however, Timmermann follows Grund's translation of the final line ('And joyne hem all to geder so').<sup>104</sup> In consideration of the alchemical recipes alongside this poem in the final folios of the manuscript, I suggest that this seems to be the most likely ending. The poem could be cut short due to the economic structure of this section of the manuscript and could thus follow the incomplete status of some of the other recipes.

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<sup>100</sup> While Grund provides a helpful glossary for some of the words, other substances remain elusive. For example, the definition of the word 'Almuga' (41) remains unclear; it is interesting to compare it with the use of 'Almaga' in the Morienus/Merlin dialogue, in which it means philosophical Mercury. I suggest that it is likely referring to the medieval understanding of term 'amalgam', which is a compound of mercury that can form aspects of gold when mixed near sulphur. See Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', pp. 654-5, 660-1. He lists the differences in the naming of the ingredients in the manuscripts on p. 655. For more information on this term, see Srebrenka Bogovic-Zeskoski, 'Gold and Not So Real Gold in Medieval Treatises', *Conservar Património*, 22 (2015), 51-8, at p. 54.

<sup>101</sup> Ingham argues that the ending of the poem raises issues of ethical rectitude. See Ingham, *The Medieval New*, pp. 157-8.

<sup>102</sup> Grund, 'Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves', p. 654-5. See also Crosland, *Historical Studies in the Language of Chemistry*, p. 58.

<sup>103</sup> James, *Trinity College Cambridge Catalogue* p. 331. See also Singer, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts*, vol. 1, p. 177.

<sup>104</sup> Timmermann, 'Alchemy in Cambridge', p. 444.



The ending of the poem features another alchemical process, with the ‘Animul’ as a cipher for an alchemical substance.<sup>105</sup> The dissolving of the ‘Animul’ body signifies the ‘animal death’ that Grennen refers to, which constitutes the putrefaction or *nigredo* stage, in which the ‘animal’ (the mixture) must first be slain or mutilated in order to extract the Stone from it.<sup>106</sup> While Albertus seems responsive to her instructions (for example at lines 55, 59), they remain obscure to the reader, and further obscured by the aforementioned copyist errors and possible use of anagrams. While their meeting seems to be effective, with Albertus asking specific questions and Elchyzell clarifying the process for him, the final product remains obscure and in fact runs the risk of becoming *ignotum per ignotius*. Rather than offering a satisfying conclusion with the discovery of the Stone or Albertus’s alchemical success, the poem ends with instructions to create a mixture with codified ingredients before ending abruptly, which questions the existence of the Stone.

### Conclusion

When read as an *exemplum* for good moral practice through alchemical experimentation, this version of *Semita recta* is particularly distinctive, joining alchemical recipe with dialogue and forming an exemplary narrative. Yet this poem’s content is much more secularised than the previous dialogue examined, focusing more on the collaborative aspects as well as the conciliatory meeting of the ‘rational’ and the ‘magical’ than on religious allegory. While the Morienus and Merlin dialogue is a conversation between father and son, this poem depicts one between an alchemical adept and the Elf Queen. Like the Morienus/Merlin dialogue, however, Elchyzell’s alchemical instruction to Albertus has an exemplary function and presents a positive depiction of late medieval alchemical practice. Unlike the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and

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<sup>105</sup> Compare with the alchemical recipes in, for example, MS Harley 2407.

<sup>106</sup> Grennen, ‘Jargon Transmuted’, p. 170.

the alchemical version of Lydgate's poem, this poem focusses more on the importance of knowledge and the value of alchemy as part of its exemplary narrative rather than greed or moral blindness. Although alchemical practice remains obscure and esoteric in the poem, Elchyzell's teaching makes it possible for Albertus to successfully learn the secrets of alchemy, effectively transmitting her alchemical knowledge to him. As with the other poems I have examined, alchemy here is used to make moral points about alchemical practice and collaboration through the master/apprentice relationship, with Albertus as apprentice and the Elf Queen as the alchemical adept.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, well-known figures from the earlier Middle Ages such as Albertus Magnus, Morienus, and Merlin are used in these alchemical dialogues because they already have instant name recognition, and they become part of the exemplary narrative. In the Albertus Magnus and Elchyzell dialogue, alchemical knowledge can be read as didactic, self-improving, and as a means of reconciliation. The *exemplum* of this alchemical dialogue between Albertus and the Queen of Elves reveals the 'right path' not only for moral well-being and instruction, but also for effective and successful alchemical knowledge and practice. It is their collaboration and teamwork on alchemical practice that constitute the 'right path', even if the final results of the recipe can be read as incomplete. While these alchemical poems were read by a narrower circle than more well-known authors I have discussed such as Chaucer or Gower, they show continued interest in exemplary narrative as well as increased access to vernacular alchemical writing in the fifteenth century, which would continue to develop and flourish in Renaissance England.

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<sup>107</sup> Forster comments that the master in the alchemical dialogue 'sets the agenda and rules the dialogue', which she does with her supreme alchemical knowledge. See Forster, 'The Transmission of Secret Knowledge', pp. 417-8.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes at the close of the Middle Ages in England in the late fifteenth century. The English Renaissance alchemists and alchemical writers invent new and innovative ways of writing alchemical poetry, and the exemplary form continues to modify, evolve, and change, particularly with the rising interest in humanism and its challenges to the exemplary form.<sup>1</sup> The increased production of alchemical poetry and literature during this time also reveals its enduring interest and appeal to Renaissance audiences.

The *corpus* of English Renaissance works is too large for discussion here, but it is worth providing a brief overview of Renaissance alchemical writing in England. The alchemical sections in the works of the early sixteenth-century Makars, particularly John Skelton, William Dunbar, and Alexander Barclay, emphasise the medieval themes of the decline of human morality and the estates satire, which are also seen in Chaucer.<sup>2</sup> The alchemical sections in their works are fertile grounds for further discussion, particularly their transitional role between the medieval and early modern period.<sup>3</sup> The Dutch alchemist Paracelsus heralded the Stagyrian movement and the growing interest in iatrochemistry, which focused on the medicinal aspects

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<sup>1</sup> For more on humanism and the exemplary tradition, see notably Daniel Wakelin, *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature, 1430-1530* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth*, p. 9. Allen suggests that in Renaissance England, 'the new sense of distance between past and present produces scepticism about the capacity of past exemplars to speak to the present'. Timothy Hampton, on the other hand, argues that exemplary literature is a universal phenomenon, and examines exemplary narrative in Renaissance literature. See Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), and Lyons, *Exemplum*, pp. 12-20. Hampton and Lyons both recognise, however, that reading the exemplary mode in the Renaissance period is not without its challenges.

<sup>2</sup> See Alexander Barclay, *The Eclogues of Alexander Barclay*, ed. Beatrice A. White, EETS OS 175 (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), V.601-14, pp. 502-3; William Dunbar, *A Ballad of the Friar of Tugland*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. John Conlee, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 26-108, pp. 116-20; John Skelton, *Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell*, in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 608-11, p. 329. For more scholarship on the use of alchemy in their literature, see Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (London: Faber, 1970); John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Read, 'Alchemy Under James IV of Scotland', *Ambix*, 2.2 (1938), 60-7; and Schuler, *English Magic and Scientific Poems to 1700: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> For recent scholarship on this topic, see notably Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, pp. 64-71; and Dan Breen, 'Laureation and Identity: Rewriting Literary History in John Skelton's *Garland of Laurel*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 40.2 (2010), 347-71.

of alchemy, taking hold among English alchemists in the late sixteenth century and influencing the nature and ideologies of their practices.<sup>4</sup> The alchemical output from English Renaissance writers during this time is numerous, and continues to show positive and negative views of alchemy. Alchemy continued to be challenged and disputed into the seventeenth century, particularly with the *chymical* discoveries of Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton, but as I have mentioned, its defenders included Ashmole, whose annotations have been helpful starting points for this study.<sup>5</sup> Robert Greene's play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594) satirises alchemy for its impossible and futile ends and challenges the medieval alchemical traditions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the impact of Paracelsian alchemy in Renaissance England, see notably Debus, *Man and Nature in the Renaissance*; Debus, *The English Paracelsians* (London: Oldbourne, 1965); Debus, 'Paracelsianism and the Diffusion of the Chemical Philosophy in Early Modern Europe', in *Paracelsus: The Man and His Reputation, His Ideas and their Transformation*, ed. O.P. Grell (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 225-44; Schuler, *Alchemical Poetry*; Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*; Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books, from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London: British Library, 1994); Eggert, *Disknowledge*; Bruce T. Moran, *Distilling Knowledge: Alchemy, Chemistry, and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Janacek, *Alchemical Belief: Occultism in the Religious Culture of Early Modern England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); Lauren Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan England: Simon Forman; Astrologer, Alchemist, and Physician* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964); and Eamon, 'Arcana Disclosed: The Advent of Printing, the Book of Secrets Tradition and the Development of Experimental Science in the Sixteenth Century', *History of Science*, 22.2 (1984), 111-50.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and alchemy, see notably Dobbs, *The Janus Faces of Genius: The Role of Alchemy in Newton's Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Dobbs, *The Foundation of Alchemy in Newton's Thought, or The Hunting of the Green Lyon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Michael White, *Isaac Newton: The Last Sorcerer* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997); F. Sherwood Taylor, 'An Alchemical Work of Sir Isaac Newton', *Ambix*, 5.3-4 (1956), 59-84; Newman and Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*; Principe, *The Aspiring Adept*; Marie Boas, *Robert Boyle and Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958); and Hiro Hirai and Hideyuki Yoshimoto, 'Anatomising the Sceptical Chymist: Robert Boyle and the Secret of His Early Sources on the Growth of Metals', *Early Science and Medicine*, 10.4 (2005), 453-77. I am also grateful to Professor Principe for our email discussions about the meaning of *chymistry*.

<sup>6</sup> For more scholarship on this play, see Lynn Veach Sadler, 'Alchemy and Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*', *Ambix*, 22.2 (1975), 111-24; Werner Senn, 'Robert Greene's Handling of Source Material in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*', *English Studies*, 54.6 (1973), 544-53; Barbara Howard Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), pp. 67-88; and more recently Kevin LaGrandeur, 'The Talking Brass Head as a Symbol of Dangerous Knowledge in *Friar Bacon* and in *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*', *English Studies*, 80.5 (1999), 408-22; Bryan Reynolds and Henry S. Turner, 'From *Homo Academicus* to *Poeta Publicus*: Celebrity and Transversal Knowledge in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*', in *Writing Robert Greene: Essays on England's First Notorious Professional Writer*, ed. Kirk Melnikoff and Edward Gieskes (London: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 73-94; Deanne Williams, '*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and their Rhetoric on Temporality', in *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, ed. Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 31-50; and Mark Dahlquist, 'Love and Technological Iconoclasm in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*', *ELH*, 78.1 (2011), 51-77. See also Melnikoff and Gieskes, 'Recent Studies in Robert Greene (1989-2006)', in *Writing Robert Greene*, pp. 205-24 for a helpful overview of recent scholarship on this topic.

Ben Jonson's 1610 play *The Alchemist* and his 1615 masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* were written as a bitter attack on the alchemists and the alchemical tradition, rejecting their occult quests as fraudulent and charlatanism.<sup>7</sup> His contemporary William Shakespeare does not discuss actual alchemists, but he does occasionally use alchemy metaphorically in a positive sense, as in this reference to Brutus: 'His countenance, like richest alchemy, / Will change to virtue and to worthiness'.<sup>8</sup> John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan also make positive and negative allusions to alchemy in their poetry.<sup>9</sup> Gower and Chaucer are also presented as alchemists, which is considerably mythologised from their reputation as fourteenth-century poets.<sup>10</sup> As I have discussed, Ashmole in particular describes Gower as Chaucer's alchemical master and recognises the importance of their works within the English alchemical tradition. Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* appears extensively in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English alchemical

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<sup>7</sup> See Ben Jonson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bettington et al., 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), vol. 3. For more scholarship on Jonson's alchemical play and masque, see Duncan, 'The Alchemy in Jonson's *Mercury Vindicated*', *Studies in Philology*, 39.4 (1942), 625-37; Linden, 'Jonson and Sendivogius: Some New Light on *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*', *Ambix*, 24.1 (1977), 39-54; Duncan, 'Jonson's *Alchemist* and the Literature of Alchemy'; Mebane, 'Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: Utopianism and Religious Enthusiasm in *The Alchemist*', *Renaissance Drama*, 10 (1979), 117-39; and Cheryl Lynn Ross, 'The Plague of *The Alchemist*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 41.3 (1988), 439-58.

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. Martin Spevack, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), I.iii.159-60, p. 66. In this scene, Casca uses alchemy as a metaphor to suggest Brutus's value to Cassius in their assassination of Julius Caesar. See also William B. Toole, 'The Metaphor of Alchemy in *Julius Caesar*', *Costerus*, 5 (1972), 135-51. Shakespeare also explicitly mentions alchemy in *King John* (III.i.994), *Timon of Athens* (V.i.2375), and *Sonnets* 33 (449) and 114 (1584), although all his allusions to alchemy are metaphorical.

<sup>9</sup> For more on seventeenth-century English alchemical poetry, see Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, pp. 193-223; Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990); Linden, 'Alchemy and Eschatology in Seventeenth-Century Poetry', *Ambix*, 31.3 (1984), 102-24; Ferdinando Abbri, 'Alchemy and Chemistry: Chemical Discourse in the Seventeenth Century', *Early Science and Medicine*, 5.2 (2000), 214-26; and Duncan, 'Donne's Alchemical Figures', *ELH*, 9.4 (1942), 257-85.

<sup>10</sup> For more on early modern depictions of Gower and Chaucer as alchemists, see, for example, my forthcoming article 'Elias Ashmole's Reading of John Gower's Alchemy in the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*', *Neophilologus*; Schuler, 'The Renaissance Chaucer as Alchemist', pp. 305-34; Corbett, 'Ashmole and the Pursuit of Alchemy', p. 327; Brann, 'Alchemy and Melancholy in Medieval and Renaissance Thought', pp. 127-48; Gareth W. Dunleavy, 'The Chaucer Ascription in Trinity College, Dublin MS D.2.8', *Ambix*, 13.1 (1965), 2-21; Timmermann, 'New Perspectives on "The Chaucer Ascription in Trinity College, Dublin MS D.2.8"', *Ambix*, 53.2 (2006), 161-5; and Kahn, 'Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Part II', pp. 63, 65. See notably British Library Sloane MSS 320, fol. 34b, and 1098, ff. 17 b-18 for sixteenth-century extracts of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.

compendiums, but due to the parameters of this dissertation, I cannot fully discuss its impact and reception here.<sup>11</sup>

This thesis has examined Middle English poetry featuring discussions of alchemy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from an ethical viewpoint, revealing that medieval English alchemical writers present their narratives as exemplary and use alchemy as a metaphorical tool. The role of alchemy in medieval literary studies, particularly its exemplary framework, remains relatively unexplored in critical discussion. The most significant conclusion presented here is that medieval alchemy was being used in several different exemplary ways within a literary context. While certain authors such as Chaucer and Gower might not have seen alchemy as successful, it could still represent a powerful metaphor for self-improvement and moral well-being or a warning against the dangers of moral blindness, greed, and sloth, while also providing incentives to overcome them. For other authors, such as the anonymous composers of the alchemical dialogues discussed in my sixth chapter, alchemy could be successful and was considered exemplary for good living. These differing accounts suggest the rich diversity and complexities of Middle English poetry containing alchemy during this time; they are not necessarily entirely positive or negative, but rather nuanced and ambivalent, and sometimes satirical as well. Medieval alchemy could be theoretically attainable but inaccessible to the flawed practitioner, or a wholly fraudulent act that exemplifies covetousness. Medieval literature containing alchemy, however, was not always metaphorical and symbolic; in fact, it could be quite practical as well.

In this thesis, I have argued for the presentation of these narratives containing alchemy as exemplary, linking Mitchell's reading of the 'ethics of exemplarity' in Gower and Chaucer

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<sup>11</sup> Chaucer was particularly popular among Elizabethan alchemical circles. Some Renaissance authors also used Chaucer's alchemical section to advance their own rhetorical agendas. In *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584, for example, Reginald Scot notably cites the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, associating alchemical practice with diabolical powers and possibilities, with its covetousness signifying witchcraft and forbidden magic. See Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. Brinsley Nicholson (London, 1886), p. 294.

and extending it to English poetry containing alchemy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While modern audiences are often quick to dismiss Middle English poetry containing alchemy or allusions to it as mere pseudo-science, its exemplary and moral aspects still hold value as a literary device and motif, and provide fresh insights into human fallibility, human behaviour, and well-being as well as demonstrating the level of interest in alchemy and the familiarity of its terminology among vernacular readers in late medieval England.

I have suggested that Gower establishes the model of the ‘new *exemplum*’ in the alchemical section of Book IV of the *Confessio amantis*, and it continues to be used in vernacular alchemical poetry over the next century. Chaucer also follows this model in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, although his subversion of the exemplary model through his use of an unreliable narrator provides different ways of thinking about alchemical practice and its related themes in the vernacular. The anonymously written alchemical version of Lydgate’s *The Churl and the Bird* in Harley MS 2407 reveals the continued use of alchemy in exemplary narratives in Middle English poetry, and it shows how the source material could be changed and modified to suit the writer’s exemplary agenda. In the final chapter, I identified two fifteenth-century alchemical dialogues as continuing this stream of thought, depicting alchemical pursuits and collaboration as exemplary and as a means of self-improvement and well-being. These dialogues also show how late medieval writer made use of famous alchemical figures, such as Merlin, Albertus Magnus, and Morienus, within an exemplary framework, though with a hint of irony or satire in the role of the Elf Queen.

Throughout this dissertation, I have aimed to illustrate that the reading of these medieval poems and narratives containing alchemy corresponds with reading Middle English poems as *exempla*, and I have suggested advancing an understanding about what is ‘good’ about medieval alchemical practices and the textual implications for being better practitioners and individuals. This study lends further insight into exemplary narrative focused on alchemy as

its moral context and raises interesting questions about the understanding of and interactions with medieval alchemy in the text. The vernacular tradition indicates its growing popularity beyond the religious and scientific communities in fourteenth and fifteenth-century England and is important for the development of the field in Renaissance literature. As Patterson suggests, alchemy continues to be a ‘strange phenomenon on the margin’, but reading alchemy for the moral enables the reader to think about human achievement and prompts action for better human behaviour.<sup>12</sup> The secrets of alchemy remain alluring not only for medieval and Renaissance readers, but for contemporary and future audiences as well. As Yuval Noah Harari comments,

One day our knowledge will be so vast and our technology so advanced that we could distil the elixir of eternal youth, the elixir of true happiness, and any other drug we might possibly desire – and no god will stop us.<sup>13</sup>

While the elixir of eternal life currently remains unknown, Harari suggests a future where alchemy is indeed possible, yet it is a world without God. In such a future, perhaps the alchemists will become gods themselves, but this also prompts moral questions about legal regulations and the limitations of knowledge. One wonders if these alchemists will overcome these limitations in the future, or if, like Lydgate’s churl, they will be ‘woo-begon’ by their very nature.

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<sup>12</sup> Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances*, p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Signal, 2016), p. 139.



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