

## The Maze of Alchemy in Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*

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*The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* and *Tale* concerns alchemy. This science, brought to Europe from the Islamic world in the Middle Ages, spread throughout England during Chaucer's time. As Thomas Norton (?1433-1513 or 1514) tells us in his *Ordinal*, it was originally meant to be "a worke and cure dyvyne/ Fowle copyr to make gold or syluere fyne".<sup>1</sup> However, there were many swindlers who turned the craft into a money-making device. Prohibitions were frequently issued to curtail their fraudulent activities during the 14th century. The most famous was that issued by John XXII, pope between 1316 and 1334.<sup>2</sup> But such ecclesiastical efforts did not bear fruit and bogus alchemy swept like a fever all over Europe.

It was formidable for practitioners to achieve the desired end from alchemy. Many abandoned their pursuit when they lost their fortune and energy to continue experiments. But there were also many who could not leave alchemy due to their addiction to the science. Chaucer presents his *Canon's Yeoman* as one of these practitioners who retain hope of success despite their loss of health by repeated failures. It is to resolve such tension that the *Yeoman* resolves to disclose what he considers to be evil about alchemy. At the end of the *Prologue*, he declares in front of the *Canterbury pilgrims* the following:

Al that I kan anon now wol I telle.  
Syn he is goon, the foule feend hym quelle!  
....  
He that me broghte first unto that game,  
Er that he dye, sorwe have he and shame!

For it is ernest to me, by my feith;  
 That feele I wel, what so any man seith.  
 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[G], 704-14)<sup>3</sup>

Obviously the Yeoman is pulled by ambivalent forces.<sup>4</sup> That is, he has had enough grief and sorrow in his hopeless alchemical labor; yet he is obsessed with this same mysterious work. The Yeoman believes the Canon is entirely responsible for this troubled inner state, for his master is the one who has brought him into this alchemical chaos. Therefore, while the Yeoman has profound respect for his master's learning, he must direct his criticism against the same person once he has decided to overcome his ambivalence toward the craft. Seen in this light, the Yeoman's tale, consisting of the *Prima Pars* and the *Pars Secunda*,<sup>5</sup> can be reasonably considered a reportage of his verbal attempts to detach himself from the enslavement to the ominous craft of alchemy.

Opinions are divided among critics as to whether the Yeoman's attempts were successful or not.<sup>6</sup> This paper aims to demonstrate that his effort does not effect the isolation of himself from the world of alchemy. First, we will examine his failures. Secondly, we will consider the *raison d'être* of the conclusion of the *Pars Secunda* with special reference to an alchemical symbol: the dragon. Finally we will review the Yeoman's effort in order to see why it is doomed to failure.

## I

The *Prima Pars* of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (VIII[G]720-971) takes the form of a confessional monologue where he reveals the vanity of alchemical research under the guidance of his master. Here the Yeoman gives a recitation of the catalogue of apparatus and materials needed for the

experiment, which is occasionally interrupted by his comments on the folly of experimenters.

The Yeoman starts his story with a reflection on the seven years spent in the laboratory. His pursuit was a hopeless one without the possibility of success, which has brought him nothing but the detriment of his health. The Yeoman warns his audience against the magic of alchemy:

Lat every man be war by me for evere!  
 What maner man that casteth hym therto,  
 If he continue, I holde his thrift ydo.  
 For so helpe me God, therby shal he nat wynne,  
 But empte his purs, and make his wittes thynne.  
 And whan he thurgh his madnesse and folye  
 Hath lost his owene good thurgh jupartye,  
 Thanne he exciteth oother folk therto,  
 To lesen hir good as he hymself hath do.  
 For unto shrewes joye it is and ese  
 To have hir felawes in peyne and disese. (VIII[G], 737-47)

The Yeoman says he has learned this lesson from a clerk, but only now does he recognize its truth based on his bitter experience. Here, he explains some alchemical effects on its practitioners' minds by showing the general pattern which everyone is to follow if he continues his experiment. He indicates that he is one of many such victims suffering under the spell of the ominous craft.

Then the Yeoman starts explaining the curious practices of alchemy by listing the catalogues. He intends to isolate himself from the spell of the science by condemning its experimental procedures one by one. But once he starts recreating the world he has lived in for seven years, he gets lost in a vortex of quaint terms, displaying his great knowledge of the craft. It is only after mentioning the four spirits and seven bodies (VIII[G]820) that he returns to his original purpose of debunking alchemy. He then tries to assure the audience that alchemy rewards nobody for their effort: "This cursed craft

whoso wole excercise,/ He shal no good han that hym may suffice” (VIII[G]830-31). Thus by stressing the unproductivity of the alchemical work, he tries to keep himself from rekindling his old enthusiasm with the science. But even this repudiation does not last long nor break the Yeoman’s attachment to the alchemy and its materials. He interrupts his comment to give more information: “Yet forgat I to maken rehersaille/ Of watres corosif . . . .” (VIII[G]852-53)

Thus throughout his performance, his display of alchemical catalogues alternates with his lamentation of loss and disappointment. These alternations occurring at short intervals indicate that the Yeoman is still torn by the conflicting forces we have noted in the Introduction. Now with his narration approaching the end, the Yeoman needs something that would decisively sever his tie with alchemy. In fact, he hangs his hope for a solution in his own description of the Canon’s laboratory, for he plans to mark it with a scene of the explosion of the alchemists’ pot. He expects the climax to convince the audience of the futility of alchemy. With such expectation in mind, the Yeoman depicts the explosion as follows:

These metals been of so greet violence  
 Oure walles mowe nat make hem resistance,  
 But if they weren wrought of lym and stoon;  
 They percen so, and thurgh the wal they goon.

....

Thus han we lost by tymes many a pound—  
 And somme are scatered al the floor aboute;  
 Somme lepe into the roof. Withouten doute,  
 Though that the feend noght in oure sighte hym shewe,  
 I trowe he with us be, that ilke shrewe! (VIII[G], 908-17)

This description demonstrates that the alchemical ingredients, however carefully accumulated, can cause a great disaster. This dramatic scene, based

on the Yeoman's real experience, is convincing enough to dispel the false pretention of alchemy.

Therefore if he stopped his narration at this point, he might possibly succeeded in resolving his ambivalence. However, the Yeoman, wishing to depict the practitioners' morbid state of mind, adds their emotional reactions to the explosion scene:

Every man chit and halt hym yvele apayd.  
 Somme seyde it was long on the fir making;  
 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."

....  
 I kan nat telle wheron it was long,  
 But wel I woot greet strif is us among. (VIII[G], 921-31)

In this scene of confusion and mutual recrimination, the only level-headed figure is his master, who shows a different attitude toward the explosion, saying:

"What... ther is namoore to doone;  
 Of these perils I wol be war eftsoone.  
 I am right siker that the pot was crased.  
 Be as be may, be ye no thyng amased;  
 As usage is, lat swepe the floor as swithe,  
 Plukke up youre hertes and beeth glad and blithe." (VIII[G], 932-37)

"Pees!... the nexte tyme I wol fonde  
 To bryngen oure craft al in another plite,  
 And but I do, sires, lat me han the wite.  
 Ther was defaute in somewhat, wel I woot." (VIII[G], 951-54)

A problem arises when the Yeoman sees this response in relation to his view of alchemy. Finding his master as he is in his own description of the

laboratory, the Yeoman is obliged to reconsider the theory of alchemical effects on practitioners' minds that he has presented in the *Prima Pars* (VIII[G]738-47). When the Yeoman remarks that any practitioner would addle his brain, he is sure to include his master in the same category. The master in the laboratory scene, however, does not become upset after the accident. Even in the midst of the calamity, he is calm and complacent, unlike his disillusioned apprentices.<sup>7</sup> In the same context the Yeoman goes on to say that he who goes mad through many failures would find delight in seeing others in the same alchemical pain and suffering. It seems unlikely that the Canon shares this delight with such a practitioner. He encourages his disciples to invest in his experiments, but he does not enjoy watching their disappointment and suffering after recurrent failures. Significantly, the Canon is willing to take responsibility for the disaster and is ready to accept blame if his disciples fail again (VIII[G]951-53).

Now it is obvious that the Yeoman's description of the laboratory scene is in conflict with his previous remarks in so far as the presentation of the Canon is concerned. The Yeoman says the Canon is to blame because he has brought him into the alchemical hell. But now he realizes that the Canon's demand for support does not constitute an intentional theft. This contradiction indicates the Yeoman's difficulty in determining his master's goals of practicing alchemy. Apparently the Canon's commitment to the craft, unimpeded by repeated accidents, is based on his own system of value. Unfortunately the Yeoman has failed to see this during the seven years with his master. Consequently, he cannot rid himself of his discomfort toward his master's moral obscurity, which has kept him from turning his ambivalence into the resolution to leave the science of alchemy.

The *Pars Secunda* of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (VIII[G]972-1481) presents the Yeoman's continued effort to dissociate himself from the maze of alchemy. The Yeoman, who has just experienced a failure, never directs his

criticism against his master again; he does not want to repeat the pattern of struggling in the tangles of his master's moral obscurity. His new strategy is to narrate a story in which an obvious scoundrel, another much more fiendish canon, dupes a priest. As the Yeoman makes clear in his narration, his point of telling the story is to verify how the root of the canon's treachery is a desire to bring Christ's people to mischief (VIII[G]1068-72). Thus he attempts to rekindle the audience's hatred against another vicious aspect of alchemy.

Fortunately, the order of the story keeps this purpose straight as he presents the priest as one who is so pleasant and serviceable that his landlady does not require him to pay for the lodging and he characterizes the false canon as a traitor similar to Judas earlier in the narration. It is clear that the Yeoman, who needs sympathy for the losses he has suffered, identifies with the priest, who, in spite of his good nature, is manipulated by the canon. Thus he wants the audience to understand his predicament through the fictionalized character representing himself.

While he narrates his story, the Yeoman tries hard to draw our attention to the canon's temptation which he intends to represent those of all the wicked alchemists' of the world. However, the Yeoman soon finds himself depicting the weakness of the priest as well. It is surprising that the priest lends him the money so easily when he has no reason to trust him. This certainly suggests the gullibility of the priest. Because of this fault, the priest allows the canon to play his confidence trick. Besides these examples of the priest's gullibility, we also find small seeds of his covetousness when he readily agrees to learn the canon's "philosophie" and when he gets excited after seeing the ostensible evidence of the canon's alchemical success. The seeds soon develop into a genuine sin, as suggested in the narrator's comment: "... to the chanoun he (the preest) profred eftsoone/ Body and good" (VIII[G]1288-89).

As we noted, the Yeoman entirely sympathizes with the priest; he has directed an incredible amount of anger toward the deceptive canon with brief mention of the gullibility and covetousness of the priest. What he downplays, however, is the interplay of the two characters in the story.<sup>8</sup> As the narrative proceeds, the Yeoman must admit that the priest's consent to the canon's request is vital to ensure success in the confidence trick. Three times in the narrative the Yeoman says that he becomes weary of demonstrating the canon's falseness (VIII[G]1093; 1172; 1304), which, in fact, is a confession that he cannot describe the canon's viciousness without describing the fault of the priest. Thus the Yeoman, halfway through the *Pars Secunda*, faces a limitation in his second attempt to extricate himself from his ambivalence to alchemy.

## II

In the conclusion of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (VIII[G]1426-81) the narrator turns to alchemical authorities. His quotation of "philosophres" has provoked some controversy as to its probability.<sup>9</sup> But, as we have observed, the Yeoman's knowledge of alchemy is not so limited as critics have considered. It seems reasonable to suppose that the Yeoman, who has presented the long list of alchemical ingredients, can cite alchemical authorities as well. What matters is rather that the Yeoman cites them to deny the possibility of finding the Philosopher's Stone. The Yeoman, who has twice failed to resolve his ambivalence, finally resorts to those authorities in order to convince himself and his audience of the impossibility of turning base metals into gold.

Traditionally the alchemical treatises were written in allegorical language to preserve the secrets of alchemy from those who would turn the craft into a materialistic one.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly symbols were created to keep some alchemical knowledge classified. Let us pay attention to the symbol the



Yeoman refers to: the dragon (VIII[G]1435). This is a very old symbol in the world of alchemy. As early as the 4th century, Zosimos, the most important of the Greco-Egyptian alchemists, used the figure of a serpent<sup>11</sup> in his *Visions*:

And that I may not write many things to you, my friend, build a temple of one stone, like ceruse in appearance . . . . Let it have within it a spring of pure water glittering like the sun. Notice on which side is the entry of the temple . . . . For narrow is the place at which the temple opens. A serpent lies before the entry guarding the temple; seize him and sacrifice him. Skin him and, taking his flesh and bones, separate his parts; then reuniting the members with the bones at the entry of the temple, make of them a stepping stone, mount thereon, and enter. You will find there what you seek.<sup>12</sup>

Here, the serpent signifies mercury, as the Yeoman says it does. What is more important is that the serpent must be killed,<sup>13</sup> since it represents "matter in its imperfect, unregenerate state."<sup>14</sup> This indicates the first stage of alchemical transmutation, which frees the nature of mercury from murkiness concealing its shining beauty within a dark prison. C. A. Browne explains the process as follows:

This purification was supposed to be accomplished by the elimination of the black dross and scum of oxides which were formed in the process of amalgamation and fusion, these, according to the alchemists, being the preponderance of earthy impurities in the base metals. By the rejection of this earthy matter the nature of the new body was made of finer quality.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the mercury, cleansed from its corrosion in the distillation, becomes like a new spirit. Only with this decay the Philosopher's Stone can be produced.

This was not valid just for transmuting base metals into gold. According to

many philosophers, alchemy was a mystical pursuit, closely bound up with religious teaching.<sup>16</sup> For them, transmutation of metals was symbolic of the transmutation of imperfect man into a state of perfection. Therefore, man, in order to be regenerated, is expected to endure the same ordeal as does mercury. Archelaos, the Byzantine Greek alchemist, says in his poem *Upon the Sacred Art* composed in the early 8th century:

With inspiration from above take heart  
 And strive with certain aim to reach the mark.  
 The work which thou expectest to perform  
 Will bring thee easily great joy and gain  
 When soul and body thou dost beautify  
 With chasteness, fasts and purity of mind,  
 Avoiding life's distractions and, alone  
 In prayerful service, giving praise to God,  
 Entreating him with supplicating hands  
 To grant thee grace and knowledge from above.

.....  
 Thy body mortify by serving God:  
 Thy soul let wing to look on godliness:  
 So shalt thou never have at all the wish  
 To do or think a thing that is not right  
 For strength of soul is manliness of mind.  
 Sagacious reasoning and prudent thought.  
 All passions purify and wash away  
 The stain of carnal joys with streams of tears  
 Which flood thy weeping eyes, revealing thus  
 The pain and anguish of a contrite heart.<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned in this poem, the metallic transmutation could be brought about only by pure men blessed with divine aid. In other words, transmutation of metals is subsequent to that of souls. Thus, the transmutation signifies the efforts of sinful man to regain the original, happy state bestowed by God in the Garden of Eden. In order to attain this goal, man must destroy

his bodily passions first. When he has vanquished the black Hydra in his heart, then he will be cleansed and will be blessed with divine aid essential for completing the mystical work.<sup>18</sup>

So far we have seen that the serpent (or the dragon) is an important alchemical symbol pointing to the spiritual nature of the quest. As we have observed, the Yeoman knows that the serpent represents mercury and his brother, the brimstone. But it is extremely questionable whether he understands the allegorical meaning of the combination of the two substances in the quest of the Philosopher's Stone. We wonder how the limitation on his interpretation of the authorities has affected his quest as well as his attempt to leave the alchemical hell.

### III

In his unsuccessful quest of the Philosopher's Stone, the Yeoman finds himself turned into the scum of the alchemical process. We wonder what has caused the succession of failures in spite of his technical effort based on alchemical theory. To answer this question, we need to examine his motive for his quest. If he devotes himself to the metallic transmutation, then he neglects the effort necessary to accomplish the transformation of his soul. As we have observed, the goals of alchemy are achieved only when the material work is combined with the mystical search of salvation.

While he presents a detailed explanation of the physical and emotional effects of alchemy on his existence, the Yeoman apparently neglects to disclose his reasons for undertaking the quest. However, his emphasis on the failures in the *Prima Pars* suggests his motives. He repeatedly laments over the loss of his possessions and healthy appearance (VIII[G]722-45; 782-83; 830-37). Moreover, the sympathy he extends to the priest in the *Pars Secunda* also suggests the Yeoman's initial motivation. In particular the Yeoman's apostrophe to the priest — "O sely preest! O sely innocent! With coveitise

anon thou shal be blent!" — suggests that he has been lured by a similar covetousness into the world of alchemy.

Yet this covetousness is unlikely to be the only allure in his quest. If the Yeoman was attracted only by the desire to gain material wealth, he would have abandoned the quest long before he lost all the wealth he was longing for. Furthermore, if material wealth was his only temptation, the Yeoman could have used a confidence trick similar to the second canon's. But it is not probable that he performed such a markedly successful trick, for if he did, he would not live in the poverty he depicts in the *Prima Pars*. What should be noticed is the outbreaks of his passion described in the *Prima Pars*. This passion indicates that the Yeoman's covetousness has turned into a fascination. Within the framework of the fascination, as Donaldson has pointed out,<sup>19</sup> his desire to amass material wealth is incorporated into the desire for the emotional and intellectual satisfaction that success would afford.

Thus the Yeoman's initial desire for material wealth has become a fascination. The problem is that his fascination has brought him nothing but failure. An important point to note is the striking difference in reaction to failures between the Yeoman and his master. Whenever he fails, the Yeoman is dominated by frustration about and hostility toward the craft; on the contrary, his master remains calm in the face of the disaster in his laboratory. We assume that their different reactions derive from their different views and motives for undertaking alchemy.

According to the orthodox view of alchemy we have observed in the previous chapter, the alchemical quest is based on a paradox: the material transmutation is attained only as proof that the spiritual transmutation has been accomplished through abstinence. In this context, failure is understood as proof that one is still in a degenerated state of being. Supposedly the Yeoman's master comprehends what failure signifies. His remark that he is

responsible for the accident suggests his humility as an imperfect being and his encouragement of his disciples suggests his determination to follow the will of God. On the other hand, the Yeoman feels frustrated and disappointed when he cannot achieve his material end from alchemy. These feelings of the Yeoman indicate his incompetence at finding any spiritual meaning in the quest of Elixer. What is fatal about the Yeoman is that his quest, as long as it is continued only materialistically, becomes a manifestation of cupidity, that, according to Geber (c. 721-815), the founder of Islamic Alchemy, is the cause of failure in and frustration with the alchemical experiment. The Arab philosopher says:

... our *Art* is reserved in the *Divine Will* of *God*, and is given to, or with-held from, whom he will; who is *Glorious, Sublime*, and full of all *Justice* and *Goodness*. And perhaps, for the punishment of your *Sophistical Work*, he denies you the *Art*, and lamentably thrusts you into the *By-Path* of *Error*, and from your *Error* into perpetual *Infelicity* and *Misery*: because he is most miserable and unhappy, to whom *GOD* denies the sight of *Truth*. For such a *Man* is constituted in perpetual *Labour*, beset with all *Misfortune* and *Infelicity*, loseth the *Consolation, Joy*, and *Delight* of his whole *Time*, and consumes his *Life* in *Grief* without *Profit*.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, the Yeoman fails to attain the transmutation because of his failure to comprehend the allegorical meaning of the authorities. He knows that the dragon signifies mercury but does not comprehend that the killing of the dragon by his brother signifies the mystical death of the human soul. He says that divine aid is necessary for the success of transmutation, but has no idea how he can receive inspiration from God. For the Yeoman the authorities are not the means of solving the mystery of alchemy, but the means of denying the value of that craft.

## IV

As we have observed, the Yeoman, in order to relieve his inner tension, blames his master and the alchemical instruments and procedures while depicting the failures he has experienced. Throughout this, the Yeoman's attitude is consistent; he does not take responsibility for his words and actions. He attributes his failure to the impenetrability of the enterprise that even the most learned cannot master. He does not like to claim responsibility for the explosion caused by the fire, saying "Thanne was I fered, for that was myn office". According to his interpretation, his physical impairment is caused by the fire, and his spiritual blindness by the seduction of alchemy itself. Thus the Yeoman convinces his audience that he is a victim of the external world.

When he places his own responsibility and culpability on the external world, the Yeoman fails to see one important facet of alchemy: alchemy is a search for the self. Interestingly the Yeoman himself refers to a key word essential to the understanding of that particular nature of the craft: *ignotum per ignocius* (VIII[G]1457). According to W. W. Skeat, this word literally means "an unknown thing through a thing more unknown; i. e. an explanation for a hard matter by means of a term that is harder still."<sup>21</sup> Carl Jung (1875-1961), likewise, finds in the alchemical quest the desire to explore the unknown within the self through an exploration of the unknown, that is, the matter of the external world, outside the self.<sup>22</sup> Jung argues that alchemy is a projection of the self onto the chaos of the external world. He finds that the idea of the projection of the psychic condition of the alchemical worker onto the arcane substance is suggested in the Harranite *Liber Platonis quartorum* written as early as the 10th century.<sup>23</sup> "Because of the intimate connection between man and the secret of matter", Jung maintains, "the operator . . . must accomplish in his own self the same process that he attributes to

matter".<sup>24</sup>

The Yeoman's failures in the alchemical experiments reveal to him the impenetrability of the external world. If he comprehended that alchemy was a manifestation of the self's quest for value, he could correct his misguided expectations by searching for the value projected in the external world. However, alchemy, for the Yeoman, is just a device to make the external world supply the value he seeks. His quest means nothing unless it gives him power to transmute the base metals into gold. Consequently his condemnation is directed to the external world rather than himself. The problem is that his condemnation is based on an assumption that the craft disappoints and deludes any practitioner through the power of its seduction. It is because of this assumption that he becomes puzzled about his own portrait of his level-headed master, which thwarts his attempt to shed the old bondage of his past.

In the *Pars Secunda*, the Yeoman attempts to bring the audience's sympathy over to his side by presenting a conscientious priest, his other self, who is destroyed by the seduction of a fiendish canon. But this attempt also fails when he finds the priest's fascination with the craft to be the crucial factor to complete the dramatic irony he has designed in the story.

The priest obviously has the seeds of a sin in his heart, which soon develop into covetousness in the course of his conversation with the canon. It is noteworthy that his concupiscence grows after the pattern of the birth of an actual sin, which is later illustrated by the Parson as follows:

The firste thyng is thilke norissynge of synne of which I spak biforn, thilke fleshly concupiscence./ And after that comth the subjeccioun of the devel — this is to seyn, the develes bely, with which he bloweth in man the fir of fleshly concupiscence./ And after that, a man bithynketh hym wheither he wol doon or no thilke thing to which he is tempted./ And thanne, if that a man withstonde and weyve the firste entisyng of

his flesh and of the feend, thanne is it no synne; and if it so be that he do nat so, thanne feeleth he anon a flambe of delit./ And thanne is it good to be war and kepen hym wel, or elles he wol falle anon into consentynge of synne . . . . And thus is synne acompliced by temptacioun, by delit, and by consentynge; and thanne is the synne cleped actueel./ (*The Parson's Tale* X[I], 349-56)

Like the sinner in this illustration, the priest is first tempted by the fiendish canon. Soon he becomes fascinated with the magic, i. e. "thyng that may chaunge and flitte" (X[I]368), a sign of "deadly synne" according to the Parson. At this point he should resist the temptation, subduing the concupiscence welling up within himself. However, the priest easily succumbs to the temptation and pleads with the canon for apprenticeship. Seen in this context the priest himself is responsible for having been tricked by the canon. True, the canon's temptation takes a part in developing the seeds of covetousness, but it is only after the Yeoman accepts the temptation that the seeds in his heart grow into a genuine sin. Ironically enough, the canon's confidence trick largely owes its success to the Yeoman's covetousness. Thus the Yeoman fails again in his second attempt to overcome his ambivalence due to his loss of control over the development of his other self, which is caused by his ignorance of the fact that covetousness is an actual sin to be committed only with the consent of the sinner.

## V

Chaucer presents his Yeoman as a materialistic alchemist whose mind is occupied with the metallic transmutation. In describing the Yeoman, the poet deliberates on his blame-shifting rhetoric that keeps him from leaving the world of alchemy. By that, the poet implies that the alchemical maze is a chaotic world fabricated by the Yeoman's own cupidity; therefore, he must shake off his fascination with the metallic transmutation in order to be



relieved from the hell. Alchemy in the end is an ambivalent *opus* consisting both of the material work of transmutation and the abstinent work of self-transformation.

Chaucer's view of alchemy, though only assessed through the Yeoman's statements, is considered ambivalent. While the poet stresses the vanity of the alchemical quest, he does not completely deny the significance of the search for the Philosopher's Stone (VIII[G]1467-71; 1472-75). The poet's ambivalence is reflected in his presentation of the serio-comical practitioners entrapped in the alchemical maze. There is no doubt that Chaucer is critical about such ignorant nonscientists, but his criticism is certainly blended with tender humor, which is a manifestation of his love and compassion for the suffering. The poet concedes that he might also be caught in the same inextricable maze, yielding to the irresistible temptation of alchemy. In the end, Chaucer accepts himself as a "sely innocent" who cannot eradicate human cupidity as long as he lives as a sinner in this world.

#### NOTES

- 1 John Reidy ed., *Thomas Norton's Ordinal of Alchemy*, EETS 272 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 12.
- 2 John Webster Spargo, "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale" in W. F. Brian and Germaine Dempster eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 691-92.
- 3 References to and citations of Chaucer's text are made from L. D. Benson ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. based on *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
- 4 For critics who discuss the Yeoman's ambivalence, see R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), p. 231; Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 293-96; John Gardner, "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale: An Interpretation", *PQ*, 46 (1967), 1-17.

- 5 The problem of the unity within *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale* has caused controversy among several critics. See Edgar H. Duncan, "The Literature of Alchemy and Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman's Tale: Framework, Theme, and Characters", *Speculum*, 43 (1968), 633-34; Albert E. Hartung, "'Pars Secunda' and the Development of *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 12 (1977), 111-28; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 214. It is almost impossible to determine if the Yeoman's verbal performance was in Chaucer's original plan or it was the poet's afterthought. My reading of *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale* is based on the assumption that the tale, consisting of a prologue and two parts, operates as a coherent poetic whole.
- 6 Several critics have discussed the confessional nature of the Yeoman's speech, and its distance from true confession: Bruce L. Grenberg, "The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*: Boethian Wisdom and the Alchemists", *Chaucer Review*, 1 (1966), 53-54; Lawrence V. Ryan, "The Canon's Yeoman's Desperate Confession", *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1974), 297-310; Jackson J. Campbell, "The Canon's Yeoman as Imperfect Paradigm", *Chaucer Review*, 17 (1982), 171-81.
- 7 Norton says that an alchemical adept has the following characteristics:

And he that is constant in mynde to purswe,  
 And is not ambycious, to borow hath no nede,  
 And can be pacient not hasty for to spede,  
 And that in god he sett fully his trust,  
 And that in connyng be fixid al his lust,  
 And with al this he lyve a rightful lyfe,  
 Fa[l]shode subduyng, support no synful stryfe.  
 Such men be apte this science to atteyne.

(John Reidy, *op. cit.*, p. 20.)

- 8 David V. Harrington, "Dramatic Irony in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale", *NM*, 66 (1965), 162.
- 9 On the inappropriateness of the conclusion to the Yeoman, see Judith Scherer Herz, "The *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*", *MP*, 58 (1961), 236-37; Bruce A.

- Rosenberg, "Swindling Alchemist, Antichrist", *Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences*, 6 (1962), 580.
- 10 See Roger Bacon, *Opus Tertium* quoted from Serge Hutin, *A History of Alchemy*, trans. Tamara Alferoff (New York: Walker and Company, 1962), p. 25.
  - 11 F. Sherwood Taylor remarks that the figure of the serpent is identical with that of the dragon under the system of the alchemical symbols in the Middle Ages. (F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists, Founders of Modern Chemistry* [London: William Heinemann, 1951], p. 145.)
  - 12 *The Visions of Zosimos*, translation and notes by F. Sherwood Taylor, *Ambix*, 1 (1) (1937), 90.
  - 13 On the Arabic origin of the idea that the dragon is mercury, which is mortified only with his brother, sulphur, see Dorothee Finkelstein, "The Code of Chaucer's 'Secree of Secrees'", *Archiv*, 207, 262-66.
  - 14 F. Sherwood Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
  - 15 C. A. Browne, "Rhetorical and Religious Aspects of Greek Alchemy", *Ambix*, 3 (1-2) (1948), 20.
  - 16 Eric J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 152.
  - 17 C. A. Browne, "Rhetorical and Religious Aspects of Greek Alchemy", *Ambix*, 2 (3-4) (1946), 132-137.
  - 18 Kurt Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 92.
  - 19 E. Talbot Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1958), p. 946.
  - 20 *The Alchemical Works of Geber*, translated into English in 1678 by Richard Russell (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1994), p. 31.
  - 21 Walter W. Skeat ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Clarendon Press, 1894), Vol. V, p. 434.
  - 22 Carl Jung, "The Idea of Redemption in Alchemy" in *The Integration of the Personality*, trans. Stanley Dell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), pp. 205-81.
  - 23 Carl Jung, "Religious Ideas in Alchemy" in *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 262.
  - 24 *Ibid.*, p. 267.