

Art, Anxiety, and Alchemy in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*

by Mark J. Bruhn

About the opus which contextualizes the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Chaucer scholars are surprisingly and revealingly in agreement. Stanton J. Linden, for example, emphasizes its "eclecticism in content and style," its "persistent tension . . . between truth and falsity, honesty and chicanery, and ethical idealism and depravity," and its "devices of concealment and disguise: cryptic imagery and symbol, fanciful simile and metaphor, pervasive allegory, arcane renderings of classical myths, biblical stories and fable and . . . a persistently analogical habit of mind."¹ Christine N. Chism gives a similar anatomy, and concludes that it is "a hermeneuticist's dream and a pragmatist's nightmare, superbly ambiguous and supremely alluring."² And Lee Patterson likewise finds that it "raises the problem of the verbal representation of truth with a special intensity and sophistication."³ Though the *Canterbury Tales* merits every word of such praise, it is not the contextualizing work these critics have in mind. They are describing, collectively, the literature of alchemy, a profuse and mystifying body of treatises that circulated widely in medieval England, and some of which were known to the fictional Canon and his Yeoman as well as to their real creator, Chaucer. What is striking in these comments is their focus upon the complex linguistic, generic, and representational features of alchemy's texts; so described, the literature of alchemy sounds as though it reproduces the very features that distinguish Chaucer's unfinished *Canterbury Tales* as the "superbly ambiguous and supremely alluring" masterpiece of Middle English literature. What is revealing is the notion that, like these modern scholars, Chaucer could hardly fail to recognize that the verbal discourse of alchemy mirrored in significant ways his own poetic discourse, and that one might therefore serve as a metaphor for the other. I would like to pursue here the probability of such metaphoric intentions in the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*, and to argue from them that this comparatively neglected tale is especially relevant to two central problems in Chaucer's studies: how do we locate Chaucer-the-poet

behind Chaucer-the-pilgrim? and what is the final moral disposition of both the *Canterbury Tales* and its author?

To these often-asked, encompassing questions I will add a third, more specific and unaccountably slighted one: why does Chaucer interrupt the pilgrimage and the very plan of the *Canterbury Tales* with the abrupt and apparently urgent introduction of the exogenous Canon and Yeoman, and the telling of a tale that is not properly part of the pilgrim's tale-telling contest? That we are not dealing with a simple matter of incomplete revision, of Chaucer not taking the time to compose *General Prologue* portraits for two late additions to the *Canterbury* scheme, is obvious from the outset of the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*, with its explicit link to the *Second Nun's Tale* and its brilliantly dramatic staging of the Canon's arrival on the scene:

Whan ended was the lyf of Seinte Cecile,
Er we hadde riden fully fyve mile,
At Boghtoun under Blee us gan atake
A man that clothed was in clothes blake,
And undernethe he hadde a whyt surpys.
His hakeney, that was al pomely grys,
So swatte that it wonder was to see;
It semed as he had priked miles three.
The hors eek that his yeman rood upon
So swatte that unnethe myghte it gon.
Aboute the peytrel stood the foom ful hye;
He was of foom al flekked as a pye.
A male tweyfoold on his croper lay;
It semed that he caried lite array.
Al light for somer rood this worthy man,
And in myn herte wondren I bigan
What that he was.

(G 554-70)⁴

The scene is fixed at once with exact temporal and spatial coordinates ("Whan ended was the lyf of Seinte Cecile," "At Boghtoun under Blee"): Chaucer-the-poet clearly means for these characters to enter the *Tales* just now, and with a tactile force of presence evoking no little "wonder." No less explicitly, Chaucer-the-narrator poses from within the dramatic moment the inevitable and crucial question it provokes: who are these unexpected interlopers? Astonishingly little critical energy has been spent answering this question, and the results are as we might expect. Manly, following Tyrwhitt, proposes a biographical solution: during the writing of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer himself lost money to a canonical alchemist, and resolved to insert the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* to satirize alchemy and exact

a literary revenge. This theory is not only extremely tenuous—might not Chaucer's debts be attributable to other, more probable causes, for example, his difficulty collecting his government salaries and annuities, or even his surely substantial expenditures on books and writing supplies?—but also, it seems to me, extremely trivializing with respect to Chaucer's artistic design, and in any case it fails to explain Chaucer's purposes in staging this arresting intrusion upon the pilgrimage and binding it so carefully with the *Second Nun's Tale*. Likewise, while the considerable scholarship devoted to the thematic, imagistic, and symbolic contrasts between the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (some of which is discussed below) does assume an artistic motivation for the tale and its placement, it generally fails to address the problem of the method and meaning behind the Canon's introduction. An important exception is Lee Patterson's "Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self," which immediately raises all the right questions of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.⁵

First, if this is a tale that represents all that must be rejected, why is it introduced into *The Canterbury Tales* with such a powerful sense of urgency and belatedness? At the beginning of the pilgrimage the order of tale-telling had been upset by the importunate Miller; now, as we near the end, Chaucer seems willing to revise his text again—or at least to *stage* an act of revision—to allow voice to a rebellious Yeoman. The end approaches, yet something of such importance remains to be said that Chaucer draws our attention to it by an ostentatious interruption. Second, if we dispense with unfounded biographical speculation, why alchemy? . . .

Finally, what is the point of the little drama that introduces the Yeoman's *Prologue*?⁶

Patterson's answers to these questions center upon the Yeoman's embodiment of the emergent ideologies of individualism, scientific rationalism, and technology, but they point as well to the self-reflexive argument I mean to advance here, with somewhat different but related conclusions. Because, Patterson suggests, "the analogy between the poet and his alchemical Yeoman is unavoidable," the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is not only "a final, extravagant instance of Chaucer's lifelong interest in the way subjectivity seeks to represent itself in language," but also an expression of "Chaucer's awareness of *himself* as a modern poet oriented toward a dynamic future."⁷ The analogy suggests, in other words, that Chaucer seeks in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* to represent his own subjectivity, and particularly his awareness and evaluation of his own poetics.

Chism also senses Chaucer's metaphorical self-reflexivity in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, and in terms that more directly anticipate my own argument. Concentrating, as does Patterson, on the complex verbal

conventions of alchemical texts, Chism too identifies "an implicit analogy between alchemists and poets":

To begin with, many alchemists were poets; countless late medieval alchemists wrote of their art in poetic allegories. The delightful fourteenth-century alchemical poem *Hermes Bird* makes the parallel even stronger. At the beginning of the alchemical allegory, the author writes: "Poyetys write wonderfull lyknes / And Covert kepe hemselfe full clos," a description of poetic strategy that is uncannily Chaucerian.⁸

For Chism, this analogy plays out most significantly not in terms of the Yeoman's self-representation, but rather in terms of the Canon's self-concealment:

Alone of all the pilgrims, the Canon is not given an opportunity to define himself. Rather, he is betrayed by his servant while he anxiously seeks to hide himself, his face, his voice, his practice, his history, and his tale. To a large extent, the only gesture of self-definition he makes is a gesture of dissimulation; he reveals only his need to keep himself secret. . . . This should alert us to potential links to Chaucer, himself a master of such gestures.⁹

Chism does not pursue these links, but she gives a fair sense of their implications in the questions she raises by way of conclusion:

We know that alchemy, the canonical life, and Chaucer's poetry are all concerned with interpretations of the written word. . . . We have seen that the first two practices had, by the fourteenth century, become infamous for their inability to balance the opposing imperatives ["the sacred and the worldly"] of their crafts—with an added sting of internal corruption. Is Chaucer passing a similar judgment on his own art? Did he place a tale about the impossibility of reaching a conclusion toward the end of his fragmentary collection of tales, because he knew he could never complete his original plan? Is he practicing deceptions similar to the alchemists' when he uses the strategic distances between author, narrator, teller, and tale, to revel in the space where the words are cousin to (and cozen) that which they describe? Does his language both delight and founder in its own "multiplicacioun" of "derke parables"? Is the poet like the alchemist of the Prologue, the helplessly addicted victim of an enchanting and frustrating art; or is he the diabolical cozenor of the tale itself?¹⁰

The short answer to the first four questions, I believe, is "yes," and to the last, "both at once"; together, they imply not merely that alchemy

functions in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as a metaphor for Chaucer's art, but further that the *Canon's* and *Yeoman's* imposition upon the pilgrimage may represent at some level a professional crisis in the poet himself, leading to a figurative recantation of poetic "multiplication" and thus the very project of the *Canterbury Tales*. Already in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, I mean to argue, the Retractions are in sight, and Chaucer's fictional rehearsal here announces the anxieties that motivate his all-too-real and final performance of literary penitence, and his abandoning of the *Canterbury Tales*.¹¹

I.

The similarities between alchemy and Chaucerian poetics may be briefly sketched. Alchemy was, as my opening quotations suggest, as much a textual and hermeneutic discipline as a scientific and experimental one. The literature through which the art was transmitted is enormous, diverse in provenance, rich in "auctoritees," profoundly intertextual, and elaborately encoded to protect the "secret of secrets," the recipe for the philosopher's stone; the first task of the adept was therefore the reception and interpretation of a complex textual tradition. His second task was laboratory experimentation, the application or "imitation" of the interpreted tradition, which was of course simultaneously an imitation of nature, an attempt to refine upon or distill creation through the artificial recombination of its elements. Substitute "Chaucer" for "the adept" and "poetic" for "laboratory," and the two preceding sentences concisely summarize what was no doubt the method of Chaucer's literary practice. Given the proliferation of alchemical manuscripts in medieval England,¹² the third task of the adept was evidently composition; as laboratories multiplied, so did the literature that inspired them. According to Patterson, this literature "displays in a hyperbolic form unacknowledged characteristics that typified medieval textuality as a whole. Its extravagant use of the citational mode blurred textual boundaries by folding one text into another; it treated authorship as an *ex post facto* construction rather than a pretextual given; and, above all, it collapsed an apparently unalloyed truth . . . into a morass of multiplicity."¹³

That the first and third of these characteristics are common to the *Canterbury Tales* should go without saying; the second, however, deserves further commentary. Insofar as he matches tales to pilgrims and dramatizes himself within the fiction, Chaucer does seem to see authorship in the *Canterbury Tales* at least partly as a "pretextual given," and not only, like medieval texts generally and alchemical ones specifically, as "an *ex post facto* construction." Yet, as Chism has shown, the anonymity or

pseudonymity of alchemical writers is to some extent generically and culturally regulated: this is a literature that trades in arcane knowledge, unorthodox experiments, and intentional enshroudments. Alchemists were unwilling to throw their gold or themselves before the uninitiated swine, particularly since their art and characters were by no means universally unassailable; just as they encrypted the recipe for the transubstantiating stone in a bewildering array of figurative, allegorical, and quasi-mystical jargon, so they typically concealed their own identities under the assumed ones of genuine and legendary authorities like Hermes, Geber, and Roger Bacon. Chaucer, with more playfulness but perhaps no less anxiety, is up to something remarkably similar in his deference to "Lollius" in *Troilus and Criseyde*; in the *Canterbury Tales*, he fabricates a smokescreen pilgrim-narrator and, for all but the most initiated, effectively disappears.

This desire for concealment is perhaps the most significant link between Chaucer and the alchemists, and in both cases it is motivated by an ambivalent disposition toward conventional and conservative Christian authority. With its emphasis upon a hidden essential truth of supernatural power, alchemy, though derived from the metallurgy and philosophy of pagan antiquity, was, like classical literature, easily susceptible to Christian reconstruction and allegorization. Through the Middle Ages, the elusive philosopher's stone came to be seen as metaphor for Truth, or Christ, the *Logos*; the experimental quest to understand and refine nature at the elemental level, with the possible reward of unbounded riches, became the material figure for the spiritual quest of the soul toward transubstantiation, immortality, and union with God.¹⁴ But, while the two aspects of alchemy—spiritual and material, Christian and scientific, orthodox and experimental—were in one sense analogically compatible, they were in another quite obvious and indeed final sense diametrically opposed. For some practitioners, like Chaucer's alchemical canons, the lure of fabricated gold was irresistible, and Mammon was served at the expense of God and fellow Christians. But even without the stain of fiscal corruption, alchemy in many ways prefigured the scientific rationalism and humanism of the Renaissance, and thus seemed to many to be dangerously counter-hegemonic:

Alchemy's challenge to medieval culture can be found most profoundly in its commitment to an applied science—a technology—capable of transforming the material conditions of human life. Beginning toward the end of the thirteenth century and gathering force throughout the next century, alchemy was attacked by the ecclesiastical authorities. The reasons for its censure were many. Clerics were forbidden alchemy because it violated their vows of poverty, because it brought them into contact with money, and

because it was a mechanical rather than a liberal art. The charge of necromancy was also frequently invoked: since alchemy could not produce its goal by natural means, it must have had recourse to demons. But the most important argument was that alchemy presumptuously claimed to be able to improve a God-given nature by the application of human art.¹⁵

In response to such charges, alchemical literature enjoined its enthusiasts not only to secrecy, but also to moral and Christian rectitude; entirely conventional is the language of Canon George Ripley's dedication to his *Compound of Alchymic* (1450), asking readers "only it use as may be to Gods pleasure" and "Gyving Counsell that ye live right, / Doeing to God no displeasaunce."¹⁶ Such prophylactic assertions of orthodox "entente" are curiously redolent of Chaucer's "postphylactic" conclusion about the meaning and purposes of the *Canterbury Tales*, and equally problematic. If "all that is written is written for oure doctrine," what exactly is it that needs to be foreclosed or erased, and why?

The answer for both alchemists and Chaucer could finally be nothing less than "the experiment itself," because by definition "the experimental" must serve to alter and even subvert established authority and prevailing ideologies. John Gardner's *The Poetry of Chaucer* defines the project of the *Canterbury Tales* as an experiment in "multiplicity" that does not reduce at last, even analogically, to unity; Chaucer therefore occupies, in Gardner's and many others' views, a "post-medieval or proto-renaissance" position. Like the alchemists of his day, Chaucer does not merely "manipulate traditional materials to crystallize and release the meaning which the Middle Ages conceives as inherent in all elements, real or fictional"; rather, "his manipulation *explores and finally denies* at least certain elements of the orthodox view."¹⁷ Stephen Knight agrees—"Chaucer's conventional Christian resolutions did not prevent him from realizing in art the emergence of formations which would, in their full development, overwhelm the features that made up medieval hegemony"¹⁸—and both readings square precisely with Patterson's thesis about alchemy's experimental investments in applied science and technology. What I want to emphasize here is that both Chaucer and the alchemists "realize" their new and potentially subversive formations in both senses of the word: not only do they make them manifest, real, but they know that they are doing so, and their shared rhetorical strategies—particularly the paradoxical combination of professing orthodoxy and yet concealing the authorial self—argue that this knowledge was anything but comfortable. The implicit notion in much of Chaucer criticism, that Chaucer was continuously the ideological master of his poetic "manipulation of traditional materials," that he was, for example, start to finish "a

good Christian and a good poet," "able to indulge in such daring literary experiments precisely because of his faith"¹⁹ is, it seems to me, contrary to the textual evidence of the final fragments of the *Canterbury Tales*. If Chaucer's faith was not itself overwhelmed, to use Knight's words, by these daring and experimental formations, then how do we account for "the tone of crisis in the Retracciouns and the collapse of the artistic form at the end"?²⁰

II.

Chaucer's self-concealment behind his pilgrim-narrator has been widely discussed, but it will be worth reviewing before we turn to his metaphorical self-revelation in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The first premise about Chaucer's fictional double is that he is a man of "ful devout corage"; the second is that he is a faithful reporter of the real words of the real pilgrims accompanying him on a real pilgrimage to Canterbury. It is a brilliant strategy, and Chaucer's prefatory apology for the work of portage he is about to perform is masterfully disingenuous:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye,
Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this mateere,
To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
For this ye knowen al so wel as I:
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewre,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.

(A 725–36)

The speech is so polite, the diction so colloquial and intimate, the *sentence* so naturally and appropriately concerned with truth-telling and propriety, that interpretation must struggle at first to see through the "ful devout" persona to the doubly-deflected poet it conceals. In fact, of course, the words to follow are neither the pilgrims' nor even the narrator's, but Chaucer's, and the *Tales* throughout are "untrewre," "feyne[d] thyng[s]," nowhere more so than here. Most importantly, the passage in itself and the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* are constituted precisely by Chaucer's effort to "fynde wordes newe," to contrive a fictional imitation of the multiplicity of human reality and truth. Chaucer means indeed to speak

"never so rudeliche and large," but he is clearly already concerned about the potential "vileyne" of doing so.

The same anxiety surfaces with more intensity in the *Miller's Prologue*, where the narrator again prefatorily apologizes for his reporterly fidelity to the fictional "facts":

What sholde I moore seyn, but this Millere
 He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,
 But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.
 M'athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.
 And therfore every gentil wight I preye,
 For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
 Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
 Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
 And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,
 Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
 For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
 Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
 And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
 The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.
 So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
 And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
 Avyseth yow, and *put me out of blame*;
 And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.
 (A 3167–86; my emphasis)

The "game" here is Chaucer's, of course, not the Miller's, and the narrator's repeated imperative insistence that he should not be blamed for the ensuing "harlotrie" suggests that there is indeed some "ernest" concern on the part of the poet about the fiction he is constructing. As C. David Benson has rightly argued, Chaucer shows here that he was fully aware of "the questions of morality and taste" he "inevitably raised by juxtaposing such a scurrilous poem to the noble *Knight's Tale*": his apology cannot, therefore, "be dismissed as only ironic; he recognized, and so should we, that along with its ability to delight, the fabliau could also shock and unsettle by subverting the values that high medieval culture took most seriously."²¹

Indeed, the nature of Chaucer's subversion has already been announced in the Miller's drunken upstaging of the Monk. The Host, delighted with the Knight's opening performance, means to "werken thriftily," and so selects the Monk as the next teller. His logic, apparently, is that the highest ranking lay pilgrim, the Knight, should be followed by

the highest ranking religious pilgrim, the Monk; the "noble" and "worthy" secular romance of the *Knight's Tale* would thus be immediately "quited" by some "storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse," and the opening sequence of tales would then establish at the outset the full range of "values that high medieval culture took most seriously." But though the Host wants to proceed in an ideologically safe and orderly way, Chaucer, through the Miller, undermines him and redirects the "game" in "a devel way" (A 3134). Having summoned expectations for a tale of Christian virtue from a teller who should embody it, Chaucer delivers instead, through the "Pilates"—or Christ-condemning—voice of the Miller, "a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf" (A 3124, 3141–42). The strategy is not only subversive, but also nearly blasphemous, for, generically, the terms "legend" and "life" apply to hagiography, not the fabliau; properly, therefore, the tale of a "carpenter and of his wyf" should be the biblical story of Joseph and Mary and the virgin birth, not the lewd tale of John and Alisoun and adulterous mirth. Given the contextualizing terms of its introduction, Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* can thus readily be construed as an intentionally "devilish" and immoral parody of authorized Christian narrative and values.

Anxious about the perception, or detection, of such "yvel entente" in his less than "thrifty" work, Chaucer strategically falsifies his "mateere" by deflecting responsibility from himself to his pilgrim persona, who in turn deflects it to the churlish Miller and to the reader. We can, if we "list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale"; if we "chese amys," we must blame ourselves, not the narrator or the poet he conceals. Yet, even assuming that we could resist the promise of scandalous harlotry and skip ahead looking for tales of sanctioned "moralitee and hoolynesse," we cannot help but choose amiss. For example, passing over the fabliaux of the *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, and *Cook's Tales*, we come to the *Man of Law's Tale*, the ostensibly non-parodic legend and life of Custance. Derived from such canonically correct authors as Nicholas Trevet, Innocent III, and "moral" Gower, the tale of the extraordinarily long-suffering and submissive Custance exemplifies again and again how Christian constancy and self-denial can outface and finally overcome even the most extreme misadventures of worldly life. It is thus essentially, in Gardner's words,

a tale of Law in the widest medieval sense of the word: it defines the authoritarian basis of medieval Christian society. . . . Directly or indirectly the *Man of Law's Tale* treats at least five kinds of "authority": God's Providence . . . ; the authority of divine revelation; the rule of temporal and ecclesiastical lords; the authority of male over female and father over child . . . ; and the rule of right reason over the passions, desire, and will. These various kinds of

authority make up, together, universal Law as the Pilgrim Lawyer understands it.²²

We, and the poet, are thus in one sense on the safest of ideological ground, except for the fact that the Man of Law's understanding of authority—and significantly poetic authority—has already been exposed as misinformed even before he begins his tale.

In his contextualizing *Prologue*, the Man of Law endorses the Host's notion of appropriate literary work, or "thriftiness," and argues that Chaucer must necessarily be his precedent:

. . . But natheles, certeyn,
I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
On metres and on rymyng craftily,
Hath seyde hem in swich Englyssh as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man.

(B¹ 45–50)

Chaucer's game here is richly complicated. The Man of Law's argument in these and the following lines turns on the following implicit premises, all of which are ironically mistaken: 1) that the source of the tale he is about to tell is Chaucer; 2) that Chaucer is a more moral poet than Gower; and 3) that Chaucer's poetic style is incompetent and archaic. Logically, the first premise is nonsense, because Chaucer's version of the tale is the Man of Law's version, which, within the dramatic fiction, has yet to be told. The real English source is almost certainly Gower, whose *Confessio amantis* contains not only the tale of Custance, but also the "wikke" tales of Canacee and Tyro Appollonius that the Man of Law so deplures, and that he claims a poet of Chaucer's moral fiber would never pen:

And therefore he [Chaucer], of ful avysement,
Nolde nevere write in none of his sermons
Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions,
Ne I wol noon reherce, if that I may.

(B¹ 86–89).

The premise of Chaucer's well-advised and superior morality has, of course, already been seriously undermined by his staging of the Miller's drunken insurrection and his "rehercing" of the intervening tales' "abhomynacions"; it also flies in the face of Chaucer's own evaluation of Gower as the more rigorously moral poet. Furthermore, by comparison, it is certainly Gower's version of the tale, written in octosyllabic couplets, that reproduces the "lewd" meters and rhymes of "olde tyme" English literature, a point Chaucer underlines by having the Man of Law say, "I

speke in prose, and lat him [Chaucer] rymes make" (B¹ 96), and then delivering the tale in technically demanding and magnificently executed rhyme royal stanzas. The effect of the *Man of Law's Prologue* is thus twofold: by demolishing the poetic authority of the fictional speaker, it calls into question the "understanding" of cultural authority and universal law his tale is meant to advance, and it once again discovers in its layered ironies a poet who is both aware of and apprehensive about his own subversion of moral authority through artistic experimentation.

In the *Man of Law's Tale* itself, Chaucer further unsettles such authority through his original additions to his sources, most notably the descriptions and speeches which *humanize* the character of Custance by amplifying her real feelings about her otherwise ideal submission to sexual, political, and religious authority. Chaucer foregrounds, and solicits our sympathy for, the human costs of Custance's constant obedience, thereby opening up from within the tale a point of view that can, and indeed will, reverse its traditional logic and meaning. For example, Chaucer's lengthy addition to the scene of Custance's departure from Rome rewrites her traditionally silent submission to duty and self-sacrifice as, in fact, unwilling and compelled, so that it now illustrates, not virtuous Christian constancy, but a most lamentable form of ideological subjection and enslavement:

Custance, that was with sorwe al overcome,
Ful pale arist, and dresseth hire to wende;
For wel she seeth ther is noon oother ende.

Allas, what wonder is it thogh she wepte,
That shal be sent to strange nacioun
Fro freendes that so tendrely hire kepte,
And to be bounden under subjeccioun
Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun?
Housbondes been alle goode, and han ben yoore;
That knowen wyves; I dar sey yow na moore.

"Fader," she seyde, "thy wrecched child Custance,
Thy yonge doghter fostred up so softre,
And ye, my mooder, my soverayn plesance
Over alle thyng, out-taken Crist on-lofte,
Custance youre child hire recomandeth ofte
Unto youre grace, for I shal to Surrye,
Ne shal I nevere seen yow moore with ye.

"Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun
I mooste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;
But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun

So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfille!
 I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille!
 Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,
 And to been under mannes governance."

(B¹ 264–87)

Chaucer's depiction of Custance as pale, weeping, and wretched; his narratorial pre-iteration of her despairing "Allas"; his penetrating observation, rendered in Custance's own voice, of her paradoxical status as both a lovingly fostered child and a dispensable, because female, adult; his diction, which implies that Custance's "penance" is her "thraldom," her sin, being born a woman—everything about this passage exposes the tale's inherited ideology as patriarchal, antifeminist, and inhuman. This may be a tale of "moralitee and hoolynesse," but Chaucer's treatment of it, assigning it to an authority on everything but Chaucerian poetics and then elaborating it in unorthodox directions, serves primarily to destabilize those values and open them up to criticism and resistance.

Chaucer then delivers such criticism and resistance immediately and explicitly in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, which dramatically, generically, and ideologically requite the *Man of Law's Tale*, just as it had requited the *Miller's* and *Reeve's Tales*, and they the *Knight's*. No doubt provoked by the Man of Law's precepts that "housbondes been alle goode" and that "Wommen are born . . . to been under mannes governance," the Wife of Bath counters his hagiographical legend of "universal" authority, first with a confession based on both her own exuberantly transgressive personal experience and a willfully subversive misreading and misapplication of patriarchal "auctoritees," and then with an Arthurian romance; the revisionary theme of both is that "wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above" (D 1038–40). And once again, Chaucer prefaces his countercultural text with an apology designed to diffuse its threat and deflect his authorial responsibility. Echoing the very words of the pilgrim-narrator, the Wife of Bath petitions

" . . . al this campaignye,
 If that I speke after my fantasye,
 As taketh not agrief of that I seye,
 For myn entente nys but for to pleye."

(D 189–92)

Collapsing the fictional distinction between Chaucer, the narrator, and the Wife of Bath, we can read these lines as Chaucer's tacit admission that, here and throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, he is a poet speaking after his own fantasy, playing freely not only with his literary sources

but with the foundational truths and values of medieval society. He admits, too, through his ironic manipulation of personae, displaced confessions of "entente," and careful deflection of moral responsibility and consequence, that his experimental art is also an uneasy one.

I would thus agree with Robert Jordan that "Chaucer's poetry exhibits many forms of ambivalence about 'truth' and considerable self-consciousness and anxiety about its own validity as an instrument of truth";²³ by the time he was assembling fragment G of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's self-consciousness and anxiety seem to have reached critical proportions. What he had produced thus far was a text whose multiplication of competing characters, genres, themes, and truths could issue in no single conclusion, except possibly the nominalist and relativistic one of post-medieval thought, which the *Canterbury Tales* uncannily prefigures. Though he undertook his great poetic experiment confidently, even with a sense of bravado, the problem of moral intent, the great touchstone of medieval literary theory and evaluation, haunted him unceasingly and, apparently, increasingly. At an advanced stage of the *Canterbury* game, and late in his own Christian life, Chaucer came to consider more earnestly and urgently the conflict between his poetics and his faith, to recognize that, in some essential ways, the two were antithetical and irreconcilable, and that the salvation of his soul might well depend upon the revocation of his art. Like an alchemist abandoning his laboratory and renouncing his failed craft, Chaucer surrendered his original plan and began "dismantling the Canterbury book."²⁴

III.

Out of nowhere, the Canon and his Yeoman "atake" (G 556, 585) the Canterbury company, and the question raised at once by the narrator—"in myn herte wondren I bigan / What that he was"—remains the central and significantly unresolved problem of the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*. The narrator's own answer, provided immediately, is so qualified it can be nothing but a Chaucerian feint:

. . . til that I understood
 How that his cloke was sowed to his hood,
 For which, whan I hadde longe avysed me,
 I demed hym som chanoun for to be.

(G 570–73)

To begin with, one of the great themes of the *Canterbury Tales*, embodied in its dramatic competition of voices and genres and reiterated explicitly from start to finish, is the questionable truth-status of any individual

"deming" or interpretation: "diverse folk diversely they deme."²⁵ Second, despite the Canon's black-and-white dress and canonical hood, the narrator, humorously in character, required long reflection to read these indices and "deme" their meaning; conceivably, Chaucer means to imply that this is a retroactive reading, produced not prior to the *Prologue's* dramatic action and the Yeoman's subsequent tale-telling, but rather after these facts. Third, this hard-won reading of the character is, for the moment at least, singularly unhelpful, because the prologue and tale do not directly explore the Canon's character as Canon; rather, the immediate interest lies in his alter-ego as alchemist. Finally, and by far the most important evidence that the narrator's identification is insufficient, an ironic miscue rather than a complete delineation, is Chaucer's teasing ambiguity in revealing his real interest and the exact nature of the Canon's hidden identity. The whole drama of the *Prologue*—the Host's at first ingenuous, then skeptical, and at last overcurious quizzing of the Yeoman, and the Yeoman's artfully evasive replies—turns on the notion that the Canon's apparently religious front conceals a much more complex, crafty, and even diabolical character, a true self that will "dar nat shewen hi[s] presence" (661). Well over one hundred lines of the *Prologue* will pass before we get, in the Yeoman's admission that "I am nat wont in no mirour to prie, / But swynke soore and lerne multiplie" (667–68), the first explicit indication of the Canon's ulterior vocation; in the meantime (and persistently thereafter), the equivocal presentation of the Canon is surcharged with a variety of allusions, images, and diction that link him unmistakably to Chaucer's own oft-deflected "presence," which likewise dares not show itself *in propria persona*. Though "nat wont in no mirour to prie," Chaucer, the first English master of negative capability, of self-erasure in a multiplication of personas, is here doing exactly that, holding up the mirror on himself and his own art, and judging both in precisely the terms with which he judges the Canon and his secret science.

The first clue that the Canon and Yeoman are metaphorical doubles for the double-natured poet comes but six lines into the *Prologue*, in the description of their sweaty horses, which is phrased to recall Sir Thopas's mad "prikyng" of his "steede gray":

His hakeney, that was al pomely grys,
 So swatte that it wonder was to see;
 It semed as he had priked miles three.
 The hors eek that his yeman rood upon
 So swatte that unnethe myghte it gon.

 For he [the Canon] hadde riden moore than trot or paas;
 He hadde ay priked lik as he were wood.

(G 559–63, 575–76)

Sire Thopas fil in love-longynge,
 Al whan he herde the thrustel synge,
 And pryked as he were wood.
 His faire steede in his prikyng
 So swatte that men myghte him wryng;
 His sydes were al blood.

(B² 1962–67)

The repetition of phrases such as "pryked (lik) as he were wood" and "so swatte that" instantly contextualizes the Canon and Yeoman in terms of Chaucer-the-narrator's bumbling hero, Sir Thopas; already, Chaucer-the-poet is signalling that these urgently introduced characters are somehow also his own. Another allusion to *Sir Thopas*, within the Yeoman's tale proper, clarifies the metaphorical ground of this opening one: alchemy, the Yeoman twice asserts, is an "elvysshe craft" (751, 842). The adjective "elvysshe" appears three times in the *Canterbury Tales*, twice here, and once in the Host's description of Chaucer himself, in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*: "He semeth elvyssh by his contenance, / For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce" (B² 1893–94). In a single word, Chaucer captures the very essence of his poetic strategy in the *Canterbury Tales*, his impishly mystifying self-concealment and self-removal from the ingeniously deceptive faces and fictions of the pilgrim company; applying this salient term to the alchemical canon, whose "craft," or "art" as it's repeatedly called (see 716, 877, 1424), is likewise "elvysshe," Chaucer effectively serves notice of his own underlying presence.²⁶

Following the *Prologue's* opening allusion to *Thopas*, the metaphorical identity of the Canon and Chaucer is next suggested when the Yeoman introduces the Canon, quite ironically it turns out, as a man who "loveth daliaunce," and who therefore promises to be the very antithesis of our narrator, who "unto no wight dooth . . . daliaunce." Such a promising introduction instantly gets the attention of the Host, and he begins questioning the Yeoman as to the Canon's character, an inquiry he pursues in something of the same key as his earlier and much briefer regaling of Chaucer-the-pilgrim ("What man artow?"). Naturally, the first of the Harry's questions is whether or not the new arrival has any talent for tale-telling, and, significantly, the first thing we learn in the Yeoman's reply is that tale-telling is, perhaps, his "lord's" leading genius:

"Freend, for thy warnyng God yeve thee good chaunce,"
 Thanne seyde oure Hoost, "for certein it wolde seme
 Thy lord were wys, and so I may wel deme.
 He is ful jocunde also, dar I leye!
 Can he oght telle a myrie tale or tweye,
 With which he glade may this compaignye?"

“Who, sire? My lord? Ye, ye, withouten lye,
 He kan of murthe and eek of jolitee
 Nat but ynough; also, sire, trusteth me,
 And ye hym knewe as wel as do I,
 Ye wolde wondre how wel and craftily
 He koude werke, and that in sondry wise.
 He hath take on hym many a greet emprise,
 Which were ful hard for any that is heere
 To brynge aboute, but they of hym it leere.”

(593–607)

The Host’s initial judgments of the Canon are certainly tentative, as the “seme/deme” rhyme insists, and quite likely ironic given his subsequent raillery about the Canon’s “sluttish” (636) clothing; and the Yeoman’s reply—“if you knew who you were speaking of, you wouldn’t ask such a silly question”—is clearly leading, for us as well as Harry, whose response once again reiterates the interpretive demand Chaucer poses throughout the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue* and *Tale*: “Wel, . . . I pray thee, tel me than, / Is he a clerk, or noon? Telle what he is” (615–16).

The implication at this point is that the Canon is a clerk, a learned man, “wys” indeed, and especially gifted and crafty as a “werker” in tales, of which he’s made “sondry” kinds, undertaking “many a greet emprise” in the field and also “nat but ynough” of literary “murthe and . . . jolitee.” This interpretation, which of course links the Canon directly to Chaucer-the-poet, arises from Chaucer’s ambiguous use of “werke” and “clerke,” words that function much like “crafte” and “art” in later passages, casting the Canon’s secret identity in terms that, in the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, will refer much more readily to the discipline of poetry than to the as-yet-unnamed discipline of alchemy.²⁷ In the *Clerk’s Prologue*, for example, the pilgrim Clerk speaks of Petrarch, his source for the tale of patient Griselda, as “a worthy clerk, / As preved by his wordes and his werk” (E 27–28). “Werk” here clearly means the literary work at hand, and it proves the worthiness of the worker—whether Petrarch or his imitator, the “worthy Clerk” of the pilgrimage—precisely to the extent that it authorizes the traditional values of medieval culture.²⁸ Worthy literary practice, in other words, should embody what Chaucer calls in the Parson’s portrait “hooly thought and werk” (A 479), a collocation that is reinforced throughout the *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer’s frequent repetition of the rhyme “wirche/chirche” (A 3307–08, 3429–30, 3663–64, B¹ 566–67, D 1977–78, 1383–84, etc.). Literary work will be “thrifty,” as we’ve heard the Host and Man of Law put it, insofar as it proceeds in a morally ordered and sensible way, which is to say, in a manner consonant with church authority, as expressed in the “hooly thought and werk” of

“worthy” Clerks and “povre” Parsons. Notable in this regard is Chaucer’s alchemical pun in his *General Prologue* portrait of the Clerk, which links him through poverty to the Parson and, ironically, to the Canon: “But al be that he was a philosophre, / Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre” (A 297–98). Like the Canon, the Clerk is a “philosophre” whose work has produced “but litel gold”; unlike him, however, but very much like the Parson, the Clerk intends to work only in religiously sanctioned ways, speaking

Noght o word . . . moore than was neede,
 And that was seyed in forme and reverence,
 And short and quyk and ful of hy sentence;
 Sownyng in moral vertu was his speche,
 And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.

(A 304–07)

Chaucer’s anxiety, reflected in the duplicitous Canon, is that, as a “worthy clerk” himself, he has indeed spoken or performed “moore than was neede,” has experimented in a poetics subversive of the “forme and reverence” of medieval values, has worked, in short, in ways “sownyng” not into “moral vertu,” but rather, as he confesses in his Retractions, into “synne.” Where the Canon is literally “clothed so unthriftily,” Chaucer is metaphorically so in the literary disguises of his pilgrim personas, and both for the same reason: “if that they espied were, / Men wolde hem slee by cause of hir science” (893–96). The apparent material poverty of the Canon and the ironic artistic poverty of Chaucer-the-pilgrim are equally false fronts, self-protective “games” that conceal an “earnest” and clearly illicit “science,” one that runs directly counter to the exemplary “thought and work” of the Clerk and Parson.

An even more immediate context for interpreting the Yeoman’s equivocal use of “werke” is the *Second Nun’s Prologue*,²⁹ where the term again denotes both Church-sanctioned, or “leveful,” “bisynesse” in general and, more specifically, the “faithful bisynesse” of the Second Nun’s act of literary translation (G 5, 24). The word “werk,” in one form or another, appears eight times in the *Prologue’s* 119 lines; four of these appearances are compressed in the final twenty-one lines of the Nun’s *Invocacio ad Mariam*:

And, for that feith is deed withouten werkis,
 So for to werken yif me wit and space,
 That I be quit fro thennes that most derk is!

 O havene of refut, O salvacioun
 Of hem that been in sorwe and in distresse,
 Now help, for to my werk I wol me dresse.

Yet preye I yow that reden that I write,
 Foryeve me that I do no diligence
 This ilke storie subtilly to endite,
 For bothe have I the wordes and sentence
 Of hym that at the seintes reverence
 The storie wroot, and folwen hire legende,
 And pray yow that ye wole my werk amende.

(G 64–66, 75–84)

Rhetorically, the passage is start to finish Chaucerian, except that, in this case, there is not the slightest hint of irony or duplicity. The Second Nun's genuine concern is with "translacioun right" (25–26); she invokes both Mary's salvific inspiration and her audience's best moral judgment to ensure the success of her faithful "entente" (6), and then proceeds to deliver what Kolve rightly calls the finest saint's life in Middle English verse.³⁰ Indeed, if we take the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* to be, as has been suggested, early work of Chaucer's that he transposed into the *Tales* at a fairly late date (an argument that explains both the Nun's anonymity as a pilgrim and her gender-confused self-description as an "unworthy sone of Eve"), this invocation may well retain the echo of Chaucer's own voice, in an earlier and apparently more earnest key, derived from another of Italy's worthy clerks, Dante. Whether it belongs to early Chaucer or late Second Nun, however, the theory of work proposed here and then enacted, again with no trace of irony, in the translation of Cecilia's legend itself, represents an ideological standard against which both Chaucer's literary work in the preceding *Canterbury Tales* and the Canon's apparently similar work in the ensuing tale may well be judged.

Against this contextual background, the Yeoman first introduces the Canon as one who can "werke" in "sondry wise," and Harry sensibly asks if he is therefore a clerk; this fictional drama of implication and interpretation both mimics and guides the reader's own negotiation of Chaucer's intentionally ambiguous design. "Can this late-comer to the Canterbury pilgrimage 'telle a myrie tale or tweye'?"³¹ is, through Harry, the *Prologue's* first interpretive demand, and the Yeoman's leading answer—effectively, "Is the pope Catholic?"—invites us to read this character as not only a canon, a lay person charged with the official business of the Church, but also a master tale-teller, someone who, as the Yeoman further hints, is "gretter than a clerk" (G 617). In this light, the Yeoman's initial claims about his lord's "subtle workings" (620–22) are especially revealing. The Canon, he says, "hath take on hym many a greet emprise, / Which were ful hard for any that is heere / To brynge aboute, but they of hym it leere"; the Canon could, if he wished, "al clene turnen up-so-down" "al

this ground on which we been ridyng, / Til that we come to Caunterbury toun" (605–07, 623–25). For us, the referents of "any that is heere" and "al this ground" leading "to Caunterbury toun" are the fictional ones of Chaucer's creation, the pilgrims and their pilgrimage; the only "greet emprise" we've seen the pilgrims take on is that of tale-telling, hard indeed for them to bring about but that they "it leered" of Chaucer, the one "werker" we know who could literally up-end the road to Canterbury and pave it "al of silver and of gold" (626). Indeed, that is precisely what Chaucer is up to just now, staging with the Canon and Yeoman an intervention that will turn the original scheme of the pilgrimage "up-so-down" and pave the way to the *Parson's Tale*, which emphatically forecloses the *Canterbury* fiction by opposing to it its authorized type, "thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial" (I 50–51), and which in turn prompts the literary penitence of Chaucer's Retractions. That penitence is, I am arguing, already under way in the metaphorical action of the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* and *Tale*, and the Yeoman's further comments about the Canon and his elyvshe art amplify Chaucer's reasons for abandoning his greatest and most experimental "emprise."

What the *Prologue* sets up is, in effect, a double-image of Chaucer's double-image: the Canon is to Chaucer-the-poet as the Canon's Yeoman is to Chaucer-the-pilgrim. Like the Canon, Chaucer-the-poet conceals himself, "lurkyng in hernes and in lanes blynde" "for suspecious / Of mennes speche," rightly deeming that, as he "gilty is," "alle thyng be spoke of hym, ywis" (658, 686–89). Like Chaucer's pilgrim persona, the Yeoman is a front-man, whose duty is to "hyde" what he here "discover[s]" (696): the true identity of the Canon and the metaphoric secret of his craft (696).³² The Yeoman's connection to Chaucer's narrator is again and again announced in his *Prologue* and *Tale*, through allusions not only to *Thopas*, but to the Chaucer-the-pilgrim's much more self-referential speeches in the *General Prologue* and the *Miller's Prologue*. For instance, the Host's suspicion that the Canon's deeds do not accord with the Yeoman's speech (638) recalls Chaucer-the-pilgrim's prefatory apology that his "woordes moote be cosyn" to the pilgrim's "dede[s]" (A 742). Metaphorically, however, Chaucer is now reversing the direction of verbal reference: before, the narrator's words strategically deflected responsibility from his "lord" Chaucer-the-poet outward to an illusory company of personas, a motley group of literary disguises; here, Harry demands that the Yeoman reconcile his lord's "baudy" and "sluttish" disguise with his alleged command over the whole road to "Caunterbury toun," that he un-cover the Canon, and metaphorically Chaucer, by explaining how and why such clothes befit so "passyng" a man. And though he cannot "tellen al that longeth to that art," the Yeoman vows

that "natheles yow wol I tellen part" (G 716-17), and he represents himself and his motives for turning-tail in terms that again link him to Chaucer-the-narrator. He is, for example, equally unable to set things in their proper order, and for exactly the same reason:

Though I by ordre hem nat reherce kan,
By cause that I am a lewed man,
Yet wol I telle hem as they come to mynde,
Thogh I ne kan nat sette hem in hir kynde . . .
(G 786-89)

Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde.
My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.
(A 743-46)

Insofar as it paraphrases Chaucer-the-pilgrim's apology, the Yeoman's draws an implicit analogy between the many "things" ("hem") pertaining to the art of alchemy and the diverse folk pertaining to Chaucer's art; alchemy is here implicitly equated with Chaucer's fictional "game." The same analogy informs the Yeoman's previous statement of his motivation in exposing his master:

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 . . .
(G 708-10)

Metaphorically collapsing the distinction between the Canon and Yeoman on the one hand, and Chaucer-the-poet and Chaucer-the-pilgrim on the other, the passage may be read as an authorial announcement of a change of heart: the "game" of literary alchemy has become "ernest" to Chaucer, *by his faith*, and he is announcing here his plan of penitence, his intention of acknowledging his "sorwe" and "shame" "er that he dye."

That alchemy is a metaphor for Chaucer's poetry is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the following passage, where the Yeoman emphasizes the bookishness of its practitioners and the inevitable failure of their experiments:

Ascaunce that craft is so light to leere?
Nay, nay, God woot, al be he monk or frere,
Preest or chanoun, or any oother wyght,
Though he sitte at his book bothe day and nyght
In lernyng of this elvysshe nyce loore,
Al is in veyn, and pardee, muchel moore.

To lerne a lewed man this subtiltee—
Fy! Spek nat therof, for it wol nat bee.
And konne he letterure or konne he noon,
As in effect, he shal fynde it al oon.
For bothe two, by my savacioun,
Concluden in multiplicacioun
Ylike wel, whan they han al ydo;
This is to seyn, they failen bothe two.

(838-51)

Given the textual emphasis of this passage and the occurrence of the rare terms "elysshe" and "letterure," we should have no difficulty in construing the ground of the metaphor between Chaucerian letters and alchemical multiplication: they are, "in effect, . . . al oon"; they both fail, and that by the standard of "savacioun." Even the term "multiplicacioun" should put us onto Chaucer and alert us to the cause of his anxiety, for it is one of the keywords in his instruction in the effects of speech in the *House of Fame*, a poem about poetics which abruptly terminates with the unresolved problem of "fals and soth compounded" in a house "ful of shipmen and pilgrimes, / With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges" (2108, 2122-23).³³ The *Canterbury Tales* is just such a house, a literary site where the multiplication of speech has confusingly compounded the truth with falsehood, with *scripts* brimful of lies; as a result, Chaucer metaphorically implies through the Yeoman, "in oure werkyng [mowe] no thyng us availle, / For lost is al oure labour and travaille; / And al the cost, a twenty devel weye, / Is lost also, which we upon it laye" (780-83).³⁴

As I said earlier, the *Second Nun's Tale* provides an ideal and authorized model of "werkyng," which stands as an immediate context for interpreting the problem with both alchemical and Chaucerian multiplication. Joseph Grennen, perhaps the most thoroughgoing commentator on the structural and symbolic links between the two tales of Fragment G, has convincingly demonstrated their essential thematic contrast:

The mystical fancies of the "philosophers" and their emphasis on the *one*-ness of the alchemical opus did not prevent Chaucer from seeing that the alchemists were (in their own term) "multipliers"—but multipliers of words, treatises, recipes, ingredients, anything, in short, but the gold, health, or virtue they imagined themselves to be seeking. It is no accident that the term "multiplye" is the keynote of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, but it is to be understood against the background of unity and integrity which the legend of St. Cecilia displays.

On the simplest and most abstract level the two poems play out the theme of "unity vs. multiplicity."³⁵

As the Yeoman bitterly reiterates, multiplying forever lacks any conclusion, or, if it has one, it "refereth to . . . confusion" (1083); it fails to arrive at unity, the "perfection," "simplicity," and "economy" of "absolute truth," which finds its most authoritative statement in the *Canterbury Tales* in the "exemplary saint's life" of St. Cecilia.³⁶ From start to finish, the *Second Nun's Tale* is about the unity and singleness of the truth: the point is underscored in the metaphorical multiplication of etymologies for Cecilia's name, which reduce at last to an image of her heavenly wholeness (G 85–119); in St. Paul's statement to Valerian of the Christian creed—"O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo, / O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also, / Aboven alle and over alle everywhere" (207–09)—and Valerian's response that "sother thyng than this, I dar wel say, / Under the hevene no wight thynke may" (214–15); in Cecilia's explanation to Tiburce of the multiteity in unity that constitutes both the Trinity and the human mind (338–41); and even in the "o voys" and single "sentence" of the converted Roman ministers (417–20). Above all, this is a tale about having the "grace / To knowe the trouthe," which exposes the diversity of the human world as illusory, mere "dremes"; such grace demands the "weyving" of the world, the "reneying" of worldly "ydoles," the casting away of "the werkes of derknesse" (268–69, 276, 384). St. Cecilia repeats this point emphatically just before she is sentenced to the fire-bath by Almachius, the tale's chief example of a worldly "werker" and, significantly, an implicit double of both the Canon and Chaucer.³⁷ In her final indictment of Almachius, the single-minded Cecilia and her Truth-confirming tale arrive at the *conclusion* that will shortly be urged by the Yeoman against alchemy, and then by Chaucer himself against his own literary work:

"For comunly men woot it wel overal
That myghty God is in his hevenes hye;
And these ymages, wel thou mayst epsye,
To thee ne to hemself mowen nocht profite,
For in effect they been nat worth a myte."

(507–11)

Like the stony "ymages" of Almachius, the alchemist's craft and Chaucer's art are "nat worth a myte" *in effect*; they "mowen nocht profite" because they fail at last to embody or reduce to essential truth, the "commune" conclusion "That myghty God is in his hevenes hye."

Using the *Second Nun's Tale* as a foil and the characters of the Canon and Yeoman as metaphorical doubles, Chaucer implies that worldly multiplication of any kind, whether in chemical elements or literary images, concludes "everemoore amys" in something akin to the spiritual blindness of idolatry. What's worse, the consequences of such experimentation are not merely personal, but public and perennial; Chaucer's anxiety is that,

"thurgh his madnesse and folye," he has both "lost his owene good" and "excite[d] oother folk therto, / To lesen hir good as he hymself hath do" (742–45). The reader who invests in Chaucer's poetic multiplication is thus potentially like the priest of the Yeoman's tale, a trusting soul "sotted" by a "slidyng science," "bijaped and bigyled" to his own eternal "destruccion" (732, 1341, 1385–87). This danger is announced nowhere more explicitly than in the opening verse paragraph of the second part of the Yeoman's tale, which, with its emphasis upon the contagiousness of *false speech*, once again exemplifies how Chaucer's deliberate ambiguity throughout the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* virtually compels the metaphoric equation of Chaucer and alchemists:

There is a chanoun of religioun
Amonges us, wolde infecte al a toun,
Thogh it as greet were as was Nynnyvee,
Rome, Alisaundre, Troye, and othere three.
His sleightes and his infinite falsnesse
Ther koude no man writen, as I gesse,
Though that he myghte lyve a thousand yeer.
In al this world of falshede nis his peer,
For in his termes he wol hym so wynde,
And speke his wordes in so sly a kynde,
Whanne he commune shal with any wight,
That he wol make hym doten anonright,
But it a feend be, as hymselfen is.
Ful many a man hath he bigiled er this,
And wole, if that he lyve may a while;
And yet men ride and goon ful many a mile
Hym for to seke and have his aqueyntaunce,
Noght knowynge of his false governaunce.
And if yow list to yeve me audience,
I wol it tellen heere in youre presence.

(972–91)

Immediately striking is the passage's concluding emphasis on the "presence" of the speaker and his "audience"; the Yeoman's explicit consciousness of "you" and "I" retroactively confirms that he uses the first-person plural advisedly in the first two lines, and literally means that there is a third hidden presence "amonges us." In the dramatic moment, "us" is the pilgrim company, from which the Yeoman's master has already fled; this "chanoun of religioun" may literally be understood to be one of the *Canterbury* pilgrims, thus far masterfully disguised. Outside the fiction, of course, the pronouns of this passage do a double duty, with "you" sliding toward the factual referent of Chaucer's real audience, the reader, and

"I" and "me" signalling the poet himself, who "heere in *oure* presence" intends to expose the "false governaunce" of his own poetic project and the ideological infection it may spread through space (a "toun" as great as seven empires) and time ("a thousand yeer"). Even here, Chaucer is "spek[ing] his wordes in so sly a kynde," "wynd[ing]" himself in "termes" of a "chanoun of religioun" and his repentant Yeoman, indulging in the "sleightes" and peerless "falshede" of multiple personas that characterize the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole and that "Ther koude no man writen, as I gesse," but Chaucer himself. Yet the "game" now is for the first time being played for the "earnest" purposes of self-revelation and confession, rather than the "elvysshe" ones of self-disguise and deflection, and the metaphorical warning to readers is clear: we have "ride[n] . . . ful many a mile" through the *Canterbury Tales* communing, perhaps unwittingly, perhaps not, with a poet of almost "infinite falsnesse," who "semed freendly to hem that knewe hym noght, / But he was feendly bothe in werk and thought" (1300–01).

The self-judgment revealed by Chaucer's metaphors in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is harsh and no doubt creatively exaggerated, but it is, I think, entirely consonant with the sorts of attitudes about literary work that are expressed both immediately before and emphatically after it, in the fictional *Second Nun's*, *Manciple's*, and *Parson's Tales*, and in Chaucer's surely metafictional, and quite possibly factual, *Retractions*.³⁸ Chaucer is not accusing himself of being a fiend, but of working and thinking in a "devel" (or "elvysshe," as you will) way, in a "bitter sweete" artistic experiment that finally fails, in his own view, because it "kan nat wexen sadde" (877–78), cannot come to any conclusion except one that runs counter to the "sadde," stable, and authorized truth of revealed religion. In terms of its artistic design, its coherence as work of art, Chaucer appears neither to have quit the *Canterbury Tales* nor to have concluded it, but rather to have intruded upon it a series of authoritative (both deriving from the author and culturally authorized) counter-statements, which hold together as an antithesis to all that's come before. The *Second Nun's Tale*, the first in the series, states both the truth of Christianity and an ideal of Christian art; assigned to an anonymous pilgrim, free of irony, yet wonderfully dramatic, compressed, and intelligent, the tale is itself "perpetually a cherche In which, into this day, in noble wyse, / Men doon to Crist and to his seint servyse" (546, 552–53).³⁹ Chaucer then follows with the arresting intrusion of the Canon and Yeoman, and in perhaps the most original and certainly the most self-reflexive of the *Canterbury Tales*, offers a metaphoric recantation of the poetics of multiplication. After that comes the *Manciple's Tale*, another metaphoric and self-reflexive tale about a hell-bound crow whose sin lies in his ability to "countrefete the speche of every man / . . . whan he sholde telle a

tale"; the resounding moral is that "thy tonge sholdestow restreyne / At alle tymes, but whan thou doost thy peyne / To speke of God, in honour and preyere" (H 134–35, 329–31). The Parson then "make[s] an ende" with his disquisition on penitence, which he prefaces by reproving, through St. Paul, "hem that weyven soothfastnesse / And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse" (I 33–34). Finally, as an ultimate intrusion upon his fiction, Chaucer-the-poet himself steps forward, and revokes, among other of his works, "the tales of Caunterbury, tilke that sownen into synne" (I 1085). Unwilling to multiply to its intended scope the unorthodox experiment of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer instead forces the moral issues of his art and performs a stunning and moving self-reversal, the insistence of which is perhaps the best testimony to its earnestness. "Thanne conclude I thus," he directly announces through the Yeoman, and effectively implies throughout Fragments G-I:

"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."

(G 1476–1480)

Regis University

1. Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphics: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington, 1996), 14, 27, 32.

2. Christine N. Chism, "I Demed Hym Som Chanoun For To Be," *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Laura C. and Robert T. Lambdin (Westport, 1996), 350.

3. Lee Patterson, "Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self," *SAC* 15 (1993): 25–57, 39.

4. All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987).

5. In "The Canon's Yeoman as Imperfect Paradigm," *ChauR* 17.2 (1983): 171–81, Jackson J. Campbell raises the same question: "With plenty of pilgrims who have yet to tell their first tale, why does Chaucer introduce two new characters to the pilgrimage?" But he compromises his argument by answering it in terms only of the Yeoman and his dramatic characterization. He disappointingly surrenders the question of the function of the Canon's character almost at once: "The precise nature of the Canon himself remains cloudy. . . . His few actions before disappearing from the scene give us material for only vague and doubtful interpretation. This fact does not matter much, for Chaucer was more interested in the Yeoman." Despite the obscurity and ambiguity of the Canon's character, Campbell somehow determines that "The Canon will not suit [Chaucer's] purposes—he is too old and committed to his way of life—so he is sent on his way." In addition to being contradictory, these assertions beg the question of why Chaucer presents the Canon at all, never mind with such singular violence to his fiction.

6. Patterson, 29–30.

7. *Ibid.*, 55, 31.

8. Chism, 351.

9. *Ibid.*, 354.
 10. *Ibid.*, 354.
 11. Taking alchemy more specifically as a metaphor for Ovidian poetics, Michael A. Calabrese ["Mercurious Mixtures: Gold, Dung, and the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale," *Chaucer* 27.3 (1993): 277-90, 278] advances nearly the same thesis: "The imagery . . . reveals a fascinating and biting perspective on Ovidian art that allows us to see the work of the Canon and Yeoman as part of Chaucer's exploration of the tension between art and morality that engaged him throughout his poetic career." What's lacking, or rather erased, here is precisely the dramatic urgency of Chaucer's construction, his willingness, as Paterson puts it, "to stage an act of revision"; this is not merely an "exploration" of a poetic theme but rather an emergency in Chaucer's poetic practice.
 12. See Linden, 38; "Dorothea W. Singer's *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts* . . . contains entries for over 1,100 manuscripts of original treatises, copies, translations, and commentaries at present in England and Ireland and dating from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries."
 13. Paterson, 47.
 14. The discussion of this and the previous paragraph is generally indebted to Linden, 6-36.
 15. Paterson, 50.
 16. Quoted in Chism, 345.
 17. John Gardner, *The Poetry of Chaucer* (Carbondale, 1977), 222.
 18. Stephen Knight, "Chaucer and the Sociology of Literature," *SAC* 2 (1980): 15-51, 22.
 19. C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 148-49.
 20. Knight, 33.
 21. Benson, 85, 102.
 22. Gardner, 273.
 23. Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley, 1987), 1.
 24. James Dean, "Disamantling the Canterbury Book," *PMLA* 100.5 (1985): 746-62.
 25. This refrain-like *sentence* is, perhaps, the irreducible meaning of the *Canterbury Tales*: see A 2513ff., 3857, B 211, D 257ff., 919ff., E 1469ff., F 202ff., as well as the dramatic "demings" that frame the tales of Fragments C and B², most notably the Host's interruption of Chaucer-the-pilgrim's "drasty" *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the Knight's similar interruption of the *Monk's Tale*.
 26. The Yeoman's later warning that "though ye looken never so brode and stare, / Ye shul noþyng wyne on that chaffare" (1420-21) again characterizes alchemical practice in terms that reiterate the Host's characterization of Chaucer: "For evere upon the ground I se the stare" (B² 1887).
 27. Indeed, the Canon's secret discipline is nowhere explicitly named as "alchemy"; the word "alkamystrye" does crop up once (1204), some 650 lines after the Canon and Yeoman first appear on the scene, and halfway through the second part of the Yeoman's tale.
 28. This authorization, of course, depends on the allegorical interpretation of Criseida's tale, which the Clerk summarizes by way of conclusion (E 1142-62). Needless to say, Chaucer unsets this allegorical reading, much as he had the authorized reading of the *Man of Law's Tale* through his original additions to the narrative, particularly the narratorial judgment upon the excessiveness of Walter's testing (449ff., 617ff.) and the many passages that humanize Criseida and win our sympathy for her (554-67, 646-49, 852-61, 902-03, 1079-1106). Once again, the literal and dramatic dimension of the tale opens the way for a critique of the allegory and the values that support it, a point which is delightfully underscored in *Leunoy le Chaucer*, where the Wife of Bath again stands as an experiential standard directly opposed to the authoritative one.
 29. For further relevant discussion of the use of "werke" in Fragment C, see Joseph E. Grennen, "Saint Cecilia's Chemical Wedding: The Unity of the *Canterbury Tales*, Fragment VIII," *JEGP* 65.3 (1966): 466-81, 475, and Bruce A. Rosenberg, "The Conyary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman," *Chaucer* 2.4 (1968): 278-91, 282.
 30. Quoted in *Riverside Chaucer*, 942.

31. Notably, Chaucer is the only pilgrim to tell "tweye."
 32. Campbell, 174-75, senses this identification of the Yeoman and Canon, but not its metaphorical logic: "The Canon's most frequent appearance in this monologue, in fact, occurs in that 'we,' wherein the Yeoman cannot separate his own experiences and thoughts from those of the Canon. His acute sense of disillusion and futility is repeatedly stated in terms of this 'we': 'we lakken oure conclusoun,' 'we faille of that which that we wolden have,' 'oure labour is in veyn,' and the like."
 33. For "multiplication," see especially the *House of Fame*, lines 782-822. Among the many other relevant parallels in this poem, see the imagery of Chaucer "at his booke bothe day and nyght" (614-60), of him sweating (1042), and of his literary sources as base metals and elements that combine to support the golden castle of Fame (1419-1519). See also Jordan, 22-50, for an extraordinary analysis of the "theoretical poetics" of the whole.
 34. Like his alchemical doubles, Chaucer too has worked and spent himself in "a twenty devel way," a phrase that recalls the Host's resignation to the Miller's "devel way" of tale-telling. In fact, through Fragment B², Chaucer has told precisely twenty tales.
 35. Grennen, 472-73.
 36. Dean, 747-48.
 37. Almachius, too, is a "philosophre" and, like both the Canon and Chaucer, "the dissimuleth here in audience; / He stareth, and woodeth in his advertece" (C 466-67, 490). A number of commentators discuss further links between Almachius and the Canon; see particularly Grennen, 478, and Rosenberg, 283-85.
 38. This closing sequence of Fragments C-1 has been frequently discussed in terms parallel to my own. Donald R. Howard, for example, argues that "the movement of this sequence . . . is degenerative. . . . The tales collapse the structure that has gone before" (*The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* [Berkeley, 1987], 304). Helen Cooper has likewise shown how the final tales "first . . . question and then . . . destroy the whole foundation on which imaginative literature is built" (*The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* [Athens, Georgia, 1977], 195). See also Dean, passim. For an excellent recent discussion of the likely sincerity of the Retractions, see Melissa Furrow's "The Author and Damnation: Chaucer, Writing, and Penitence," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 33.3 (1997): 245-57.
 39. Surely this is one of the "translacion[s]" of "bookes of legendes of seintes" that Chaucer excludes from his Retractions.