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This dissertation, *Alchemical Fraud in the Middle Ages and Its Reception in Twenty-First Century Videogames*, examines medieval criticisms of alchemy as they appear in Middle English and Scots poetry from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries to highlight the importance of alchemical hermeneutics and literary alchemy as medieval forms of interpretation. The alchemical hermeneutics validate and seek to understand how medieval and early modern alchemists read alchemy into nearly everything they encountered, even when no alchemy was intended to appear in the text. Literary alchemy provides a useful and important framework for classifying and understanding medieval alchemical references and metaphors, especially from writers whose texts were not meant to convey alchemical knowledge. The earliest text of this dissertation, *Dame Sirith*, contains no alchemy, but it contains many of the most important features which an alchemist would recognize. Criticisms of the trickster have much in common with contemporary criticisms of alchemists. Alchemists, tricksters, conmen, and con-artists are synonymous when their tricks deal in illusion, power over matter, and transformation. Even in *Dame Sirith*, there is literary alchemy, and finding it through alchemical hermeneutics allows for a greater understanding of women's power, agency, coercion, and economic motivations during the rise of the merchant class in the medieval period. The other medieval texts all denounce alchemy in some form in their writings, even as they use alchemical references to strengthen their poetry. The final text is a videogame, *Pentiment*, which demonstrates a close association between alchemy and suspicion in its setting that straddles the late medieval and early modern periods. All together, these texts display the importance for alchemical metaphor and the presence of literary alchemy, even in texts not traditionally thought to have it.

ALCHEMICAL FRAUD IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND ITS RECEPTION IN  
TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY VIDEOGAMES

by

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Approved by

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Dr. Amy N. Vines  
Committee Chair

## DEDICATION

To Dad, who listened to my rants but left this world before I started writing.

To my wife, who agreed to share me with this document.

To my friends, who have asked to read it.

To my students, who gave me energy and grace.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Jesus, Matthew 6:5-6, NRSVUE

It is difficult to overstate the influence alchemy still has in the twenty-first century. We maintain several terms from alchemists, and literary alchemy still appears across our media and pop culture.<sup>1</sup> We call one of the metallic elements *Mercury*, rather than its native name “quicksilver,” after its alchemical association with the first planet from the sun. Chemistry’s own name comes from alchemy, diverging for chemists to distinguish themselves as those who study only the physical and chemical reactions in the laboratory. The unique types of materials are still “elements,” so named from the tradition of Aristotle’s four essential elements (Fire, Earth, Water, and Air), which alchemists took for granted and expanded, adding each unique metal they discovered as an “element.” Robert Eggers’s 2024 remake of *Nosferatu* features an alchemist Albin Eberhart von Franz, the Van Helsing equivalent, whose knowledge and willingness to accept a mystical or occult explanation is required to defeat the vampire Orlok.<sup>2</sup> Hip-hop producer and artist The Alchemist produced Kendrick Lamar’s 2024 diss track “Meet the Grahams,” leading to Lamar’s decisive victory over Drake in their brief but heavy rap beef,

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<sup>1</sup> Literary alchemy is the use of alchemical references as a literary device.

<sup>2</sup> Eggers, *Nosferatu*, Maiden Voyage Pictures, Studio 8, and Birch Hill Road Entertainment, 2024. The 1922 *Nosferatu* has no such character, and Van Helsing is not an alchemist in Bram Stoker’s 1897 *Dracula*.

which reached its climax in April and May 2024.<sup>3</sup> Alchemy has been a major mechanic focus of crafting videogames over recent years, from the online or mobile *Little Alchemy* (Recloak, 2012; its sequel Recloak, 2017) to the open world *The Elder Scrolls* series (Bethesda, 1996-) and the action-adventure *Alchemist Adventure* (Bad Minions, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Even the fairy-tale murder mystery *The Wolf Among Us* (Telltale, 2013) includes an alchemy lab in the secret lair of a crime boss, who uses the lab to produce black market magical objects. Taylor Swift released “The Alchemy,” which describes the unlikely and miraculous combination of two people in a relationship, on her 2024 studio album *The Tortured Poets Department*. Progressive metal band The World Is Quiet Here introduced “The Alchemist” as a world-shattering central character in their 2023 studio album *Zon*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Alchemist took that name because of its mystical connotation—the name implies that his production skill is so mysterious and so emotionally resonant that he could only be known as an occult scientist. And after surviving “Meet the Grahams” in May 2024, I’d believe he might actually have some sinister metals in his recording booth.

<sup>4</sup> These games tend to use “alchemy” only to mean “potion-craft,” but they nonetheless rely on an assumed fascination, otherworldliness, and mystical association by their audiences. Modern literary alchemy largely exists in fantasy across media, especially in videogames. *Little Alchemy* and *Alchemist Adventure* use combinations of basic elements to craft new potions. See Chapter Five for my discussion on the representation of late medieval alchemy in *Pentiment* (2022), which has no crafting mechanic and does not take place in a fantasy world in which alchemy works or has magical powers; it is set and based in real history.

<sup>5</sup> *Zon*, their sophomore record, continues The Vagrant’s mind-bending journey to the Sun that began in their debut release, *Prologue* (2018). *Zon* goes a step further and asks about “What lies behind the Sun / A void worth calling to,” or Chaos (“Heliacal Vessels II: In the Unity of The Lake,” 8:35). The Alchemist holds an incredible power in the story. He says, “I bring you light / I, who slows the sunset” to demonstrate The Vagrant’s need for alchemy in order to reach the Sun (“Heliacal Vessels I: Mothers of No Kin,” 2:25). Later, he claims, “Where all things end, I will remain” (“Heliacal II,” 10:59). In an impressive attempt at literary alchemy, The World Is Quiet Here employ consistent alchemical metaphor, mostly in service of their more internal, personal journey for the protagonist, The Vagrant. The lyric book for *Zon* uses alchemical symbols to denote which character is speaking is what time: The Vagrant is Salt or the Body (☉); The Alchemist is Quicksilver or Mercury (☿); The Thief resembles Gold or the Sun (☼ or ☀), but is missing the central dot or rays and so appears as a simple circle. Names and symbols I reference here are from the printed lyric book from the 2023 vinyl record release. Streaming services exclude the symbols and substitute “The Alchemist” with “Alkahest,” a reference to the mythical unifying primordial element, out of which all other metals are made. More on these symbols and the celestial relationships below.

Our fascination with alchemy as a potent combination of magical and physical worlds goes back further. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is fundamentally based on the myths of Nicholas Flamel, a supposed fourteenth-century alchemist whose tomb in Paris was found empty soon after his death.<sup>6</sup> Michael Scott's young adult series *The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel* is similarly based on the writings of that alchemist.<sup>7</sup> Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* series features a magic system in which characters drink trace amounts of metals and receive certain powers based on which ones they ingest. *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho became an international bestseller. The anime series *Fullmetal Alchemist* and its spinoffs are indebted to alchemical symbolism for their storytelling and characterization. In fact, the eponymous Dr. Frankenstein learned alchemy in Mary Shelley's foundational science fiction novel.<sup>8</sup> Characterizations of alchemists are even partially responsible for the modern "mad scientist" trope, due to their exposure to mercury and leaving an impression through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that they were mentally unstable.<sup>9</sup> No matter our interests or media

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<sup>6</sup> In the United States, the book is called *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, reinforcing its mystical implications but leaving out its connection to alchemy on the cover. Flamel was mythologized soon after death, some claiming that he indeed created the Elixir. Scholars are not united in thinking that the Flamel tombstone in Paris belongs to the same one to whom is attributed a seventeenth-century alchemical treatise, published by P. Arnauld de la Chevalerie. The tombstone belonged to a wealthy scrivener, no records about whom exist to confirm any interest in alchemy (Stanton Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 123).

<sup>7</sup> He has quite an auspicious name for someone writing novels about alchemists.

<sup>8</sup> As Frankenstein himself says, "It may appear very strange, that a disciple of Albertus Magnus should arise in the eighteenth century...I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life" (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Norton Critical Edition, Second Edition, ed. J. Paul Hunter, 2012, p. 23). Frankenstein's creation is born from his desire to cure humanity of disease and natural death. One of the first film adaptations, *Homunculus* (1916), from Germany, introduces other explicitly alchemical material, such as the "homunculus," a theoretical fully-formed fetus which alchemists like Paracelsus believed they could create.

<sup>9</sup> The "mad scientist," as a modern fictional archetype, is best documented in the novels, films, television, and videogames of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, its origins in literature are attributed to Frankenstein, whom Shelley fashioned after the reports of mad alchemists from the early modern period. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry for Frankenstein calls him "the prototypical 'mad scientist'" because of his alchemical approach to his work (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frankenstein>).

consumption habits, we have all encountered alchemy, even if we aren't aware of its history or implications.

Interest in alchemy goes beyond popular media and references—alchemy continues to capture academics and educational platforms as well. Dr. Justin Sledge's YouTube channel *Esoterica*, which covers topics in religion, history, and the occult from Bronze Age Yahwistic writings to Kabbalah, has 829,000 subscribers; his video "Alchemy - Where to Begin - Introduction to the Summa Perfectionis (Sum of Perfection) Pseudo-Geber" has received over 660,000 views.<sup>10</sup> Scholarship on the history and nature of alchemy has similarly seen a resurgence in the last few years: the greatest recent sources from historians and literature scholars for the whole of this dissertation are Eoin Bentick's *Literatures of Alchemy* (Boydell and Brewer, 2022), Curtis Runstedler's *Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry in Middle English Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), and Jennifer Rampling's *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300-1700* (Chicago, 2020). I similarly rely on the work of Stanton Linden, especially his compendium *The Alchemy Reader* (Cambridge, 2003), which provides primary sources and some of Linden's commentary, from Classical Greece through the Islamic Golden Age and the European Middle Ages into the Renaissance and Scientific Revolution.

Scholarship about medieval alchemy is as important as ever—both so that we can study medieval texts about alchemy with better precision and so that we can understand the alchemical references in modern media. This dissertation does just that. The first four chapters each deal with a single medieval story: Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the thirteenth-

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<sup>10</sup> This video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKDbXSgurys>. Numbers for *Esoterica* were received on 18 March 2025; his subscriber count has doubled in just the last two years. I include Sledge, though he is not the most popular person teaching about alchemy on the Internet, because his videos are scholarly in nature. The success of his channel shows that people are interested in the scholarly study of alchemy, even outside the academy.

century fabliau *Dame Sirith*, John Metham’s romance *Amoryus and Cleopes*, and Robert Henryson’s Middle Scots reinterpretation of Aesop *Moral Fables*. Each of these texts, in one way or another, portray or directly comment on medieval critiques of alchemy and represent those critiques in the habit of a trickster character. *Dame Sirith* and *Moral Fables* show no alchemist, properly speaking, but their trickster characters represent those major criticisms against alchemists just the same. My goal in those four chapters is to demonstrate the close relationship between alchemy and trickery—specifically, tricks that require a deception or illusion concerning some object’s material transformation. The fifth and final chapter does not examine a medieval text, but rather the murder mystery adventure videogame *Pentiment* (Obsidian, 2022), which takes place in early sixteenth-century Bavaria. One of the suspects for the murder in Act I is Prior Ferenc, a monk who has been practicing alchemy and other occult sciences in secret. I include such an analysis in order to discuss alchemy’s continued relevance and place modern medievalist texts like *Pentiment* in context with their medieval sources. Chapter Five is an extension of the same themes and topics from the first through fourth: it presents alchemical ideas as untrustworthy or otherwise as tricks.

### **Context: Alchemy**

“Alchemy” comes from the Arabic *al-khem*, which has an unknown origin. Foundational alchemy scholar John Reed, in his *Prelude to Chemistry* (G. Bell and Sons, 1936), argues that *khem* comes from the ancient Egyptian word for Egypt: *Kemet*.<sup>11</sup> Scholarly consensus today upholds that etymology but admits its uncertainty.<sup>12</sup> Our modern word “chemistry” comes from the same root word. In the Islamic world, *al khem* referred specifically to what we call today the

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<sup>11</sup> John Reed, *Prelude to Chemistry*, London: G. Bell and Sons, 1936, pp. 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Stanton Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 5.

Philosopher's Stone, the object whose influence could make base metals into gold. During alchemy's transmission and translation into the Latin West, beginning in the twelfth century, the word *alchimia* in Latin became synonymous with the entire process and with the method by which those medieval scientists conducted their experiments with metals. By 1300, "alchemy" was also known as the "Great Work," the process, as alchemists claimed, by which all human suffering can be cleansed (through medical elixirs of life), all poverty washed away (through the appearance of new gold), and all human disconnection from God wrought into reconnection and stability (through discovery and mastery of the ultimate nature of God's creation).

Due to the diversity of alchemical practice and variety of its definitions across cultures and time periods, not to mention the debate even within a single tradition, it is perhaps more appropriate to say "alchemies" than "alchemy" when referring to the study as a whole and in general.<sup>13</sup> Alchemies are pluralistic by their very nature—there never was a firm leading hand in that particular science, even when it was briefly taught in fledgling universities of the Latin West—spreading, diverging, encouraging debate and dissent, and breaking off into several traditions or schools. Even just in the High Middle Ages of central and western Europe, there was no centralized authority on alchemy or what its goals should be. Some focused on the classic prototypical alchemical goal: making gold out of base metals, primarily lead.<sup>14</sup> Others, however, focused more on medicine and the creation of an "elixir" of life. Others still were theorists and

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<sup>13</sup> I use "alchemy" regularly through the dissertation because my scope is fairly narrow. The specific alchemical concepts important for this dissertation are those common among the natural philosophers and theologians of the Islamic Golden Age and the European Middle Ages.

<sup>14</sup> Even among these alchemists, there was debate about whether they could truly create gold. These conversations led to the terms "aurifaction" for the creation of real, true gold, and "aurifiction" for the creation of something that only looked like gold for the purpose of deception.

enjoyed their studies of ancient manuscripts in order to discuss the nature of reality. I focus in this dissertation on the sources for alchemy that the authors I discuss read or would have read.

The tradition of alchemy that descends to the versions read shared in medieval Europe does not begin at any single moment or in a single place. Scholars generally place its origin in Hellenistic Egypt, sometime in the two or three centuries after Alexander's conquests. Alchemy's earliest surge is relatively scant in manuscript evidence, but several anonymous treatises on alchemy were written and widely copied by the reign of Constantine the Great. The early centuries of alchemical knowledge were mysterious even to its late antique and medieval writers—so much so, that several early alchemy manuscripts were attributed to “Hermes Trismegistus,” that is, Thrice-Great Hermes, a Greek name for the Egyptian god Thoth, whose domains were (among other things) knowledge, wisdom, and writing. Hence the term “hermetic” for writings about occult or mystical “sciences” which blend spiritualism and physical study. The hermetic school, or the tradition of hermeticism, began during a unique time in the ancient Mediterranean: Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Zoroastrian, and Jewish beliefs and practices were entering an age of increased dialogue and cross-cultural influence, including the emergence of Pythagoreanism, Neo-Platonism, Christianity (especially the Gnostics), and Stoicism. Around that time, the most famous ancient alchemist Zosimos wrote several influential treatises, earning the title Father of Alchemy from some of his followers and successors.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Muslim Conquests, the Islamic world led the Mediterranean in its study of alchemy.<sup>15</sup> During these centuries sometimes called

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<sup>15</sup> A separate but similar tradition of Chinese alchemy enjoyed some prestige from the Warring States Period to the Tang Dynasty (from the fifth century B.C.E to the tenth century C.E.), though its textual origins are still obscure. Chinese alchemy was more medicinal and cosmologically minded than its Western counterpart. Alchemy continued in China well into the Ming Dynasty, and its connection to Taoist beliefs remained well into the modern world.

Europe's Dark Age, scholars like Khalid ibn Yazid, ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Jabir ibn Hayyad (Geber) expand the scope and span of alchemical study. Their tradition kept Arabic translations of Aristotle and Zosimos, among other classical writers. As Europe entered the High Middle Ages, having recovered from Rome's fall and the subsequent Germanic invasions, trade with the Arab world increased. Despite the Crusades and souring religious tensions, knowledge and wisdom began to flow across the Mediterranean. The universities in Bologna and Toledo especially began translating Arabic manuscripts into Latin, opening up alchemy to the West. That explosion of Latin transmission led to some of the more famous scientists of the Middle Ages: Francis Bacon, Albertus Magnus, and Michael Scot all learned Arabic astrology and alchemy, advancing their own theories and applying those older manuscripts to the medieval Church. Alchemy by the year 1270 was popular and fully intertwined with theology, astrology, and medicine. Alchemical practice was studied in universities throughout Europe as a legitimate pathway to understand God and all Creation. By experimenting with metals in the laboratory, alchemists believed themselves getting closer to God. "Finding gold" became synonymous with cleansing the self and becoming worthy of meeting God face-to-face. Indeed, alchemy was truly a science—as concerned with objective study of the natural world as any other discipline of the Middle Ages.

The common metaphors of alchemists are legion, and they appear throughout literature about and around alchemy. For one, each of the seven "planets" of classical astronomy was related to one of the fundamental metals known to the ancient world: Saturn with lead; Jupiter with tin; Mars with iron; Venus with copper; Mercury with quicksilver; the Moon with silver; and the Sun with gold. Most of these are somewhat intuitive. Mars is the god of war, so his metal is the material of warfare. Mercury moves quickly. Venus was also called "Cypris" or

“Cypriana,” for her most famous origin myth puts her origin on Cyprus, which was famous throughout the Bronze, Iron, and Classical Ages for its copper production. The Moon and Sun gain their associations from color and prominence in the sky.<sup>16</sup> Saturn and Jupiter are less obvious and rely on their astrological characteristics. Saturn has a caustic influence and, like lead, is quite heavy, gloomy, and indeed “saturnine.” Jupiter’s color in the night sky is similar to tin; tin is easily malleable and protects what it is combined with from decay, just as Jupiter protects his subjects and signals a change in the world (i.e., symbolizes change and working well with others).

Sulfur and mercury/quicksilver were the two most important alchemical materials, for most alchemists believed that all other metals could be fashioned from some combination of them. The Philosopher’s Stone had a particular and difficult composition of mercury and sulfur, but alchemists disagreed what exactly the combination was. Sulfur was often associated with a “body,” especially early on. Later, by the fifteenth century it came to be the “soul,” such as in Paracelsus’s work, and “body” was assigned to salt or solid non-metals in general. Mercury was the “spirit,” and combining these two in allegorical instruction manuals often took the shape of a spirit entering a body.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, alchemical processes were inconsistent and varied in their narration. Some texts are quite clear about what and how to combine in a laboratory, but others are intentionally obtuse. Bentick notes that the secrets of alchemy, hidden behind all those symbols, allegories, and obfuscating language, were usually mundane and practical advice.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It certainly didn’t hurt when English-speaking Christians began associating the Sun with Jesus as the Son of the trinity.

<sup>17</sup> This confusing and contradictory set-up affects how alchemical references should be read. See my third chapter about Metham’s *Amoryus and Cleopes* to see one such application.

<sup>18</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 140.

But where any new trend takes hold, there are parasites. To where any new knowledge is spread and acclaimed, there also will go those who abuse it. In 1317, tricksters and scam artists masquerading as legitimate alchemists were so wide-spread that Pope John XXII issued a Papal Bull *Non spondent quas exhibent* [They (Alchemists) promise that which they cannot show/provide], which denounced fraudulent alchemists for ripping off their customers and demanded that those alchemists pay into the public treasury every ounce of gold and silver which they had promised to create. By 1400, alchemists had a bad rap, and universities taught the discipline no longer. Chemistry, as its modern counterpart, had not quite risen yet, but it was on its way—the vast majority of those studying the elemental make-up of the natural world in the fifteenth century preferred to call themselves “natural philosophers” or even “physic philosophers,” or something to the same degree.

These conmen, these defrauding deceivers, are the focus of this dissertation.<sup>19</sup> Characters in all the stories which I discuss in each chapter abuse their elevated status as learned clerks in order to manipulate others. Other characters either trust these learned men implicitly or are depicted valiantly skeptical of their deceivers. All of the manipulations or tricks I examine share several key aspects of alchemical trickery: the trickster has a claim to knowledge or experience not accessible to the victim; the manipulation occurs through direct lying; the lie directly concerns the transformation of some physical object into something it is not and cannot be; there is an economic motive—at least, for a particularly greedy trickster—to commit fraud; and, most critically for the literary alchemy interpretation, there are ways to view characters or plot points

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<sup>19</sup> I will use several terms interchangeably: conman, trickster, fraudster, manipulator, scam artist, etc.

as representing a certain alchemical idea, providing a device for understanding the text without endorsing alchemy's practice.

### **Context: Alchemy's Secrets**

Jesus of Nazareth accidentally encourages medieval alchemists to hide the secrets of their craft away from general consumption or common knowledge when he, in the epigraph above, emphasizes God's omniscience. Jesus says that God "sees in secret," meaning that he will hear prayers even when not spoken out loud.<sup>20</sup> Encouraging his followers to be as unlike hypocrites as possible, Jesus recommends praying silently. The verse was applied outside of prayer, though, to include all human activity. God hears what we keep secret and sees in secret; therefore, he sees all, even what is hidden. None can hide from God. This was a comfort for those who did not wish to share their experiments with others, or who desired to keep their skills a secret from others who might have taken advantage of them. In the case of the fraudulent alchemist, those who knew the secrets could have outed the alchemist as the fraud he was. While earlier alchemists wanted to maintain solitude in their experiments and wanted to limit the people who had access to ancient alchemical manuscripts, by the fourteenth century, keeping the laboratory secret and exclusive was a business decision.

Alchemy never shook off its association with secrecy and privacy. One of the earliest and most influential Latin texts attributed to Khalid ibn Yazid, son of Umayyad caliph Yazid I, was *Liber secretorum alchemiae*, which means "The Book of the Secrets of Alchemy." It established

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<sup>20</sup> Not speaking prayers out loud was a major deviation from ancient religious practice, which otherwise (in general, across European and Near Eastern belief systems) believed that gods must hear a pray out loud in order to hear it. Otherwise, they can't hear you! Ancient Judaism held this belief as well: the story of Daniel is nonsense if he could have prayed to God silently instead of out his open window. There is only one example of a deity hearing a silent prayer before Christ's teaching: 1 Samuel 1, when YHWH hears Hanna despite her silence. That story is what later influenced diaspora Jewish and Christian communities to adopt silent prayer. See, for but one example, Pieter W. van der Horst's "Silent Prayer in Antiquity," *Numen* 41, no. 1 (1994): 1-25.

firm rules for keeping manuscripts safe and keeping laboratory knowledge hidden.<sup>21</sup> His most popular Arabic text, which we know was truly his, was *Masā'il Khālid li-Maryānus al-rāhib* [Khalid's Questions to the Monk Maryanus], translated into Latin as *Liber de compositione alchemiae* [Book on the Composition of Alchemy].<sup>22</sup> This *Liber* also included strict guidelines for alchemists to keep their experiments secret. From the seventh century on, the secrets of alchemy were a source of pride and exceptionalism. Only the chosen few could access and understand alchemy's deepest and most obscure metaphors. However, by the time Chaucer is writing, alchemy's secrets have taken on a more sinister light—to the point where Chaucer's canon's yeoman admits directly and aloud that the real secret of alchemy is that it does not work. Public trust of alchemy was breaking in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Of course, alchemists did not disappear: John Dee and Isaac Newton famously believed that alchemy could work, and early modern alchemy had its own boom due to the writings of Paracelsus, Agrippa, and others in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that alchemists took advantage of their esoteric, occult secrets during the Middle Ages in order to commit fraud. Ben Jonson's 1610 play *The Alchemist* is perhaps the most damning example of the trickster-chemist in literature, based on the real phenomenon of alchemists defrauding people—usually foolish gentry, but sometimes well-meaning innocents led on by alchemy's promises—and quickly moving town. Because alchemists kept their secrets

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<sup>21</sup> A separate codex titled *Secreta Alchimiae* was attributed to Thomas Aquinas. It was influential, but it was mostly based on Arabic sources like this.

<sup>22</sup> Remember, “alchemia” at this time specifically meant the Philosopher's Stone.

<sup>23</sup> The early modern period featured much more prominently the metaphysical and mystical associations with alchemy that we have today. Before the break-up of alchemy and chemistry, the physical and metaphysical sides were inseparable, but alchemy was primarily considered a physical science—or a scam—but not magic. Medieval alchemy presupposed that the alchemical process was achievable and repeatable within physical means; its detractors rarely compared it to any form of magic, and when they did it was only to point out both magic and alchemy as fraudulent. The belief that alchemy is magic only becomes popular after people stopped believing that alchemy's promise was possible without magic.

so close to their chests, caked in layers of metaphor and allegory so dense that even other alchemists had a difficult time interpreting them, and because self-proclaimed alchemists did in fact rip people off and leave town, this dissertation analyzes the alchemist and the trickster in one archetype.

Depending on our particular frames of reference, viewing secretive—even conspiratorial or pseudoscientific—alchemists in a framework of fraud might remind us of several different literary and actual ideas: the snake oil salesmen or traveling elixir hawker of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the craze of timeshares and multi-level marketing schemes in the later twentieth century; the wearing of tin-foil hats and declarations that all semi-mystical or unexplained events must be connected; more recently, the deepening fraud and shareholder-profit-motivations behind cryptocurrencies, non-fungible tokens (better known as NFTs), and even some uses of generative AI. I have found all of these useful analogies, in one way or another, for the way I view alchemists in this dissertation. The alchemists and tricksters of each story I examine over the next five chapters all promise something that is not true and which the trickster cannot show. They are charlatans, using clever rhetoric or visual illusions for profit.

### **Methodology: Literary Alchemy and Alchemical Hermeneutics**

“Literary alchemy” was first coined in 1971 by Jennifer R. Walters to describe the process through which authors invoke alchemical concepts or include alchemist characters without necessarily endorsing its practice.<sup>24</sup> Stanton Linden uses the term throughout his book *Darke Hieroglyphicks* (University of Kentucky, 1996), especially in his treatment of Chaucer’s *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. I continue its

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<sup>24</sup> Jennifer R. Walters. “Literary Alchemy: Review of Michel Butor’s *Portrait de l’artiste en jeune singe: capriccio*,” *Diacritics* 1, no. 2 (1971): 7-14.

use in this dissertation, and I argue at several moments in the chapters ahead that literary alchemy began earlier in the Middle Ages than previously thought. Linden puts its invention sometime in the late fifteenth century, but I argue in this dissertation that literary alchemy was established as a literary convention by the end of the fourteenth. An earlier emergence of the convention reevaluates our approaches to alchemy as it appears—obviously or not—in medieval literature. My biggest example for an earlier invention of literary alchemy is Chaucer’s *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, from around 1390. I find literary alchemy as well in John Metham’s 1449 romance *Amoryus and Cleopes*, and literary alchemy’s presence in Robert Henryson’s *Moral Fables* is undeniable.

Alchemical hermeneutics, as I use it, is the analytical process of finding alchemy in a text where none might have been intended by the original composer. Robert Romanyshyn originally coined “alchemical hermeneutics” in 2007 to describe a modern scholarly approach that necessitates the scholar admit precognitions, preconceptions, dreams, and neuroses that might affect their analyses.<sup>25</sup> Eoin Bentick borrows the term and applies it not to modern Jungian alchemy, as does Romanyshyn, but instead to the modern scholar trying to find purposefully obtuse alchemical references and metaphors in medieval texts. More than that, he also uses the term for the common practice in early modern Europe by which alchemists often reinterpreted works in order to insert an approval of alchemical experimentation into those texts.<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Rampling calls that reinterpretation a “practical exegesis,” which allowed alchemists to make someone else’s words endorse whatever the reader wanted.<sup>27</sup> Christendom was already prepared

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<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher: Research With Soul in Mind* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), 259-306.

<sup>26</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Rampling, “Transmuting Sericon: Alchemy as ‘Practical exegesis’ in Early Modern England,” *Osiris* 29, no. 1 (2014): 19-34.

for this sort of negotiation, contradiction-solving, and reinterpretation because of the Latin West's complex and evolving relationship with its Bible and other foundational philosophical and theological writings.<sup>28</sup> Alchemists, like religious writers, were unwilling to believe in a misstep in ancient wisdom or foundational paradigms. Contradictions had to be solved and reconciled because the Great Work required textual authority and affirmation, so they forced together contradictory information from different corpora. And indeed, alchemical hermeneutics can lead to seeing alchemy were none exists—and therefore playing the fool, or as Bentick puts it, using “the logic of the conspiracy theorist.”<sup>29</sup>

Alchemists wrote in their deep, contradictory, extravagant secret codes and allegories so that only the elect could read them, so alchemical hermeneutics should be an expected and natural extension of the interpretations of alchemical literature. In their attempts to conceal even the practical and simple parts of their laboratory practices, alchemists encouraged their readers to read into every word and phrase, into every symbol and metaphor. Bentick recommends that modern scholars could find incredible and useful knowledge about the reading habits of alchemists were they free to think like conspiracy theorists, like peddlers of pseudo-scientists.<sup>30</sup> Since their mundane and conceptual habits were “empty secrets that they wrapped up in layers of obscurity,”<sup>31</sup> spurred onward by Jesus's parables and the remark, “Let those that have ears hear,”<sup>32</sup> alchemists never wanted to be those without ears. There was an anxiety in reading alchemical texts, then, especially when the reader was not sure whether the writer had any

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<sup>28</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 135.

<sup>29</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 140, 145-7.

<sup>31</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 4:9 and 23.

alchemical intent.<sup>33</sup> The practice of finding alchemy everywhere seems like a hypercorrection, or a pre-industrial Tetris Effect, but it was in fact and in tradition the only way for the alchemist to ensure they read as much alchemical advice and wisdom as they could.

If a medieval text had any symbolic, thematic, or archetypal similitude with an alchemical text, alchemists would have read it as though it were alchemical itself. The line between the texts into which alchemists misread alchemy and the obscure texts in which alchemists accurately found alchemy is incredibly thin, and there is no firm, complete modern scholarly methodology for distinguishing the two. Scholars have so far gone on a case-by-case basis, and many famous texts along the line are still up for debate.<sup>34</sup> I apply alchemical hermeneutics throughout the dissertation, especially and most clearly to *Dame Sirith* in the second chapter. Despite not mentioning alchemy and having no alchemist character, the poem still concerns knowledge transmission, abuse of knowledge for the purpose of trickery, deception in the form of an illusion of transformation, and commodification—all essential aspects of alchemical literature.

### **The Structure of This Dissertation**

The main focus of this dissertation is the trickery of alchemists—and, along with it, the depiction of tricksters with critiques and language similar to the critiques of alchemists common in the Middle Ages. However, in order to establish alchemy's importance as a method of trickery in these texts, I also establish that, in order to take power away from real-life alchemists, these authors use alchemy as a rhetorical or literary device. Most of the medieval works are from the

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<sup>33</sup> Intent usually did not matter in practice. Alchemists turned the story of Jason and Medea into an alchemical allegory (Bentick, *Literatures*, 145-6).

<sup>34</sup> The chief example has long been none other than *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, which both includes accurate alchemical information and a clear denunciation of those alchemists as frauds.

fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and all are from Britain. The final chapter leaves the medieval for a medievalism: the videogame *Pentiment* as a case-study for authentic reception and representation of medieval alchemy and deception.

In the first chapter, I argue that Chaucer's *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (c. 1390) contains a literary alchemy steeped in practical, physical, and religious criticisms of alchemists. I compare Chaucer's rhetoric, which invokes the presence of Satan in the alchemy lab, to the criticisms of alchemy from specifically medieval Christian arguments by Dante Alighieri, Pope John XXII, and William Langland. I argue that Chaucer's depiction of alchemy does not condemn it as a form of black magic, but rather as a fraud.

In the second chapter, I argue that the fabliau *Dame Sirith* (written c. 1270, probably orally transmitted as early as c. 1150) contains all the hallmarks of alchemical hermeneutics. By reading fraudulent alchemy into Sirith's deception of Margery, I argue that Margery undergoes a transformation herself, producing a kind of literary alchemy. Margery, therefore, gains agency for herself and is not the simple or passive victim expected in trickster tales.

In the third chapter, I argue that Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes* (c. 1449) presents a literary alchemy in the deceiving "secretary of Venus" character. Metham imbues the romance with alchemical process language in order to reduce alchemy to a literary device, taking advantage of its metaphors but disavowing knowledge not used for the right reasons (for Metham, guiding people toward God).

In the fourth chapter, I argue that Henryson's *Moral Fables* (late fifteenth century, probably 1480s) associates alchemy with suspicion and with an ideal but impossible goal, perfect for use in literature but not in the lab. In fact, Henryson seems to assume deception and alchemy

to be a ready association in his audience, and he uses rhetorical manifestation and manipulation to represent that alchemy.

In the fifth and final chapter, I argue that the videogame *Pentiment* (Obsidian, 2022) likewise associates alchemy with distrust and suspicion, urging the player on in their murder investigation. The first act of the game, set in 1518 rural Bavaria, shows a world in tension between the medieval and the modern, depicting a flux and an uncertainty for the town of Tassing. The game-world—setting and audio-visual depictions together—demonstrate how early sixteenth-century religious characters would have reacted to alchemy: with the assumption that the alchemist must be hiding something, not necessarily that alchemy itself is magic.

## CHAPTER II: CHAUCER'S CRITICISM OF ALCHEMY THROUGH RELIGIOUS

### LANGUAGE IN *THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE*

Spondent quas non exhibent divitias, pauperes Alchimistae; pariter qui se sapientes  
existimant in foveam incident quam fecerunt.

[Alchemists promise riches which they cannot show, for they are poor; just the same,  
though they think themselves wise, they fall into the holes which they have dug.]

Pope John XXII, 1317.<sup>35</sup>

Scholarship on alchemy's appearance in medieval literature focuses largely on Geoffrey Chaucer's literary corpus, especially *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, in Fragment VIII (or Group G) of his *Canterbury Tales*. Late-twentieth-century works such as J.D. North's *Chaucer's Universe* (Clarendon, 1988) and Ann Astell's *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* (Cornell, 1996) set a standard for analyzing medieval texts with scientific material via medieval readers' beliefs on the workings of the world—that is, to take those texts within their scientific contexts. For instance, Astell reads Chaucer from the point of view of a clerk with some formal education, since those clerks made up a large portion of Chaucer's audience around the year 1400. She applies historical research about medieval science in order to read Chaucer's scientific material and astrological references as would a clerk: educated in the common principles in medieval astrology. Following from those scholars, Eoin Bentick's *Literatures of Alchemy* (Boydell and

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<sup>35</sup> Latin text from James J Walsh's *The Popes and Science: The History of the Papal Relations to Science During the Middle Ages and Down to Our Own Time*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1908; p. 414. My translation. This is the beginning of the main text of a minor papal bull usually called *Spondent quas non exhibent*, which banned fraudulent alchemy. Walsh argues that we should call it a "decree," not a "bull," because it was a relatively unimportant pronouncement. Most other sources call it a bull. *Alchemists...for they are poor, or Poor alchemists. Though they think...they have dug, or those who judge themselves [to be] wise fall into the traps which they have set.*

Brewer, 2022) and Alexander Gabrovsky's *Chaucer the Alchemist* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) have approached Chaucer with their attempts to understand the way Chaucer saw the world. Bentick argues that, in a medieval worldview, it is best to view Chaucer as believing that alchemy was good for little and run by fraudsters. Gabrovsky offers Chaucer a more forgiving stance on alchemy, arguing that Chaucer may have thought only certain alchemists to be frauds or even corrupted. Curtis Runstedler's new book *Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry in Middle English Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) compares Chaucer's rhetoric about alchemy to Gower's and to exemplary poetry. He argues that Chaucer uses the imperfect yeoman narrator in order to create ambiguity about his own position on alchemy. Also attempting to read Chaucer within Chaucer's scientific context, Stanton Linden famously argues in *Darke Hieroglyphicks* (University of Kentucky, 1996) that Chaucer believed alchemy was black magic. In this chapter, I add to Chaucerian scholarly conversation about the science of alchemy the perspective that Chaucer also belonged to his fourteenth-century religious context: one in which religious writers largely criticized alchemy as a pseudo-science and a scam.<sup>36</sup> Chaucer's religiously-charged imagery in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, such as the presence of the Devil in the alchemical process, is an argument—one that uses rhetorical hyperbole which we need not take literally—that alchemy is fraudulent in its core.

I argue in this chapter that Chaucer associated alchemy not with black magic, but with human deception.<sup>37</sup> If we read Chaucer's demonic imagery in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as a literary device and as hyperbolic religious language, and not as a literal telling of events, then we

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<sup>36</sup> The term "pseudo-science" for fourteenth century alchemy I borrow from Sheila Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology*, Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> "Black magic" is used sometimes in scholarship (see my discussions of Linden, Cannon, and others below) to describe Chaucer's belief, but the term was not coined until Spenser in 1590, so I avoid it.

can read his critiques of alchemy as a satire not of a devil's craft, but rather of deception—more similar to the Franklin's tale than to the Friar's. In this chapter, I draw on many contemporary accounts and inclusions of alchemy in other medieval texts, such as the papal bull in the epigraph above and William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, in order to demonstrate how Chaucer is responding and contributing to the medieval religious discourse critical of alchemists. Specifically, Chaucer employs the same sorts of critiques against alchemists as his more explicitly religious contemporaries and predecessors. I offer a brief explanation of Pope John XXII's bull and a new argument for reading Langland's use of the word "*fibicches*" in order to demonstrate their greater concern for physical, earthly deception than for mystical or magical associations with alchemy. That is, I believe that the rhetoric present in *CYT* that describes alchemists is remarkably similar to contemporary criticisms of alchemists coming from the clergy, who were particularly worried that alchemists were defrauding their customer base, not necessarily that alchemists were performing dark rituals. Based on that discourse, I find it likely that Chaucer likened alchemists to "the feend" (G.916) out of a literary connection to Satan's deception of Eve, not out of a genuine belief that alchemy came from infernal powers.<sup>38</sup>

Demonstrating Chaucer's concern for fraud within alchemy still allows for the ambiguity which Runstedler describes: Chaucer's tale attacks the fraudulent alchemists, and sincere experimenters ought not be offended. Believing that Chaucer thought alchemy was an evil use of black magic, as Linden argues, places Chaucer in a good-and-evil binary—within which all alchemy must be considered demonic and evil, but which therefore disallows nuance. I argue instead that

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<sup>38</sup> All quotations from Chaucer come from *The Riverside Chaucer*, Third Edition, ed. Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, Houghton Mifflin 1987, reprinted by Oxford UP, 2008. All Chaucer line numbers, unless otherwise noted, are from Group G of *The Canterbury Tales*, the group to which *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* belongs.

Chaucer's tale must remain open to that nuance, especially as we might consider the role of the canon narrator and the finale.

Characters appear across Chaucer's work who employ illusory—or performative—deception in order to further their own ends. Often, they gain the power to deceive other characters because of their education and the implicit trust those other characters afford the trickster. The tales offer three types of deceiving characters. The first type of Chaucer's deceivers (such as those about whom the Franklin and the Miller tell) depict the promise of “magick natureel” from formal education as an illusion or performance, apparent to the eyes but not real in essence.<sup>39</sup> The second type of characters (such as those about whom the Shipman, the Summoner, and the Friar tell) are tricksters who use deception and cunning to get their way, usually described in a satirical manner. The third type wield the ability to magically transform physical objects that seems to really work (the old woman's ability to make herself beautiful in the Wife of Bath's Tale). *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* uses the first two but not the third, housed within the alchemist and his assistant. The alchemists of the tale are educated and take advantage of the people's trust, either by accident (the first) or with ill intent (the second). Neither the eponymous canon nor the vicious alchemist whom the yeoman describes in *Pars Secunda* are able to create or affect any sort of transformation on the physical world, so they do not fit with the wise woman in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The trick of alchemy in *CYT* is in the illusory deception, persuasive because of the alchemist's supposed credible education, and in their cunning or lies. Though he presents in his tales the possibility for a magical story, Chaucer chooses to leave out such an option for the alchemists. The canons which the yeoman describes

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<sup>39</sup> The emphasis on illusion or performative deception is part of the medieval discourse criticizing alchemy as well. See Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*, 136 for more on that common objection against alchemy. Alchemists themselves disagreed on whether the gold they made was real or false.

only obtain power, to borrow the phrase from Pope John XXII, by promising results they cannot show (that is, by lying).

Over the last fifty years, most scholarly analyses of alchemy in *CYT* have tended to argue that Chaucer believed that alchemy was a magic wrought out of Hell. This camp of Chaucer scholars argue that Chaucer's references to "the feend" are literal depictions of Satan in the alchemy laboratory. The evidence for such a conclusion comes most strongly from the yeoman's admission that Satan worked with them in their craft: "I trowe he with us be, that ilke shrewe. / In helle, where he is lord and sire..." (917-8). For example, Stanton Linden argues that Chaucer's idea of alchemy was entirely based on black magic.<sup>40</sup> He claims also that alchemical metaphor as a literary tradition—rather than serving a practical or ideological purpose—begins well into the fifteenth century, even then only gaining popular toward the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>41</sup> Chaucer, according to Linden, could not have included a discussion on alchemy in *The Canterbury Tales* without an explicit endorsement or denunciation. Linden sides on denunciation, arguing that *CYT* is a satire about alchemy's status as a black magic ritual. Larry D. Benson's notes to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, align with this discourse. Benson describes Chaucer's narration as depicting the "demonic aspects of the laboratory."<sup>42</sup> Such arguments rely on the assumption that Chaucer wrote with literalism rather than with allegory, which both Marijane Osborn's *Time and the Astrolabe in The Canterbury Tales* (University of Oklahoma, 2002) and Derek Brewer's *A New Introduction to Chaucer*

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<sup>40</sup> Stanton Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008, 48. First printing, 1996, but my citations come from the 2008 edition.

<sup>41</sup> Stanton Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, 2, 37-8; *The Alchemy Reader*, 19. I argue throughout this dissertation that alchemy as a literary device, or literary alchemy, begins earlier. See especially Chapter Three on John Metham.

<sup>42</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, 20. Benson also writes in that short introduction that alchemy was "relatively new" and had not yet "appeared in literature" (20).

(Routledge, 1998) hold as well. In the view of these scholars, the infernal language in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is as literal in its condemnation as it is in its depiction of the laboratory: Chaucer believed that the process of alchemy included communing with the devil.

However, most medieval sources, including religious writings, criticize alchemy *only* for its deception and fraud. Modern historical and literary scholarship on medieval alchemy introduce a new perspective that presents the practice not as an inherently magical, spiritual, or feared ritual—but rather as part of the larger scientific and secret-unveiling discursivity in medieval Europe.<sup>43</sup> Of course, some writers and skeptics in the Middle Ages did believe that alchemy was demonic, but the denunciation of alchemy as unchristian, sinful, and (more rarely) demonic rested more often in the deceptive aspects of alchemical practice than in a literal demonic inspiration.<sup>44</sup> Some religious writers at the time, including William Langland, include alchemy in lists of untrustworthy endeavors alongside necromancy and sorcery, which may at first seem like a denunciation of alchemy on metaphysical or ritualistic grounds. While necromancy usually carried with it associations of demonic magic (it was not universally or always considered evil: Jesus raised Lazarus, and many hagiographies and romances included miraculous resurrection), alchemy was listed alongside necromancy not because it was equally

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<sup>43</sup> See Bentick's *Literatures of Alchemy* and Jennifer Rampling's *The Experimental Fire* (University of Chicago Press, 2020) for the best of these recent academic views. See my Introduction for more on medieval alchemical practice and the discursive scientific manuscript transmission tradition of the Latin West before print.

<sup>44</sup> For an example of medieval criticisms that claimed alchemy was magic derived from demons, see the 1376 treatise *Directorium Inquisitorium* by Nicholas Eymerich, an inquisitor. Eymerich equates alchemy with demonic ritual. This is one of the few religious texts to connect alchemy explicitly with demonic magic. For a more personal account, see the work of fifteenth-century alchemist Francois Prelati. While working for the infamous serial killer Gilles de Rais, Prelati claimed that his own alchemy could summon a demon named Barron. Prelati's experiments did not work, but his belief in his powers did not waver. The trial of Gilles de Rais lists alchemy very far down the list of Gilles' crimes, and only in association with demon summoning (understandably, the more important crime at his trial was the murder of over 100 children). Prelati was sentenced to prison, but he escaped sometime in the 1440s. He made a new career for himself as a swindler of alchemy until he was burned at the stake for unrelated crimes in 1446. See Lia B. Ross's chapter "Deviancy in the Late Middle Ages: The Crimes and Punishment of Gilles de Rais," in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough, de Gruyter, 2012, 359-401.

“evil,” but because it was equally “anti-Christian” in its immoral business practices.<sup>45</sup> The reasons authors like Langland give for including alchemy and necromancy in the same list are overwhelmingly practical and moral, not magical: in Langland’s case, he says that alchemy is guilty for its tricks as a false science.

Other scholars of medieval science argue that references to scientific knowledge and principles did not imply an endorsement of any certain practice outside of literary convention. Because their interpretations are more metaphorical across the board, this second group argues also that Chaucer was concerned with fraudulent practices of alchemists more than demons. Richard Kay has persuasively demonstrated this metaphorical line of argument with astrology in Dante, and Astell with astrology in Chaucer.<sup>46</sup> They present, that is, a literary astrology, one used for quick reference in a text but does not endorse its practice in real life. Bentick, Astell, Kay, Gabrovsky, North, and Rampling all follow this newer framework of scientific literary reference in the Middle Ages. This is the framework that births the conception of “literary alchemy,” or the use of alchemy in literature only as a literary device, a term which Linden uses as well, though in describing later literature, mostly of the seventeenth century. As the term pertain to Chaucer, though, Astell argues that Chaucer speaks about the canon and the yeoman as though they were alchemical tools and metals.<sup>47</sup> Bentick reads *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* as a grounded and practical argument against alchemy, suggesting that Chaucer believes that alchemy does not

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<sup>45</sup> The term “anti-Christian” I borrow from Delany (16).

<sup>46</sup> Dante and Chaucer did not believe in the literal influence of planets and conjunctions on human life (Chaucer says so explicitly in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, and Dante places astrologers who look to the planets for guidance in the *Malebolge*, alongside fortune tellers. Nonetheless, they still used astrological material in order to elicit certain ideas for their audiences. See Richard Kay, *Dante’s Christian Astrology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, and Ann Astell’s *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*, Cornell University Press, 1996.

<sup>47</sup> Astell, 136.

work.<sup>48</sup> Sheila Delany, in her 1990 book *Medieval Literary Poetics: Shapes of Ideology*, argues, “Those [clerics and priests] who did offer a critique of alchemy did so in a curiously moderated way, treating it as pseudo-science rather than as a seriously competing or subversive ideology...nowhere [in official Church documentation] is alchemy denounced as heresy.”<sup>49</sup> She claims that Chaucer’s “vitriolic attack” is indeed religious, presenting alchemy as a “rival, albeit unsuccessful rival, to the Pauline-Augustinian orthodoxy that the poet so pointedly emphasizes.”<sup>50</sup> Delany is not clear whether Chaucer’s criticism of alchemy, which “far exceeds” the Church’s, suggests a literal presence of demonic magic or a lack of moral fiber in the alchemist.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Britton J. Harwood argues that alchemy “is reduced to a medium for fraud” in *Pars Secunda*, suggesting that, for Chaucer, alchemy in a fuller real-life sense did not need to be associated with fraud—that is, for Harwood, Chaucer is criticizing the corrupt and false alchemists who had taken advantage of a genuine science.<sup>52</sup>

There is a gap in scholarship, therefore, that I fill in this chapter by applying a literary use of religious language to Chaucer’s depiction of alchemy. I take the religiously-charged rhetoric that Chaucer uses in a similar manner to religious writers as evidence that Chaucer participates in a larger discourse about the faults of alchemy. At stake is the nature of Chaucer’s criticism and whether we might find any hope for alchemists in *CYT*, despite their reputation. Where reading Chaucer’s position on alchemy as one of black magic locks out any possibility for Chaucer to approve of any sort of alchemy, reading his criticisms instead as primarily concerning fraud

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<sup>48</sup> Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy*, 46.

<sup>49</sup> Delany, *Medieval Literary Poetics: Shapes of Ideology*, Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Delany, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Delany, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Britton J. Harwood, “Chaucer and the Silence of History: Situating the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*”, *PMLA* 102, no. 3 (1987): 338-350. This from pp. 343 and 345.

allows for some nuance and ambiguity, which I believe we must keep in light of the Plato dialogue at the end and the fact that, as Astell puts it, “Chaucer declines in the end to condemn alchemy” explicitly and completely.<sup>53</sup> The ending is certainly open, and the dialogue with Plato is ambiguous to say the least. Were Chaucer criticizing alchemy for its association with actual demons, there is little doubt that his rebuke would have ended more definitively and explicitly. Since this ambiguity exists in the text, as Runstedler, Harwood, Bentick, and Astell have noted, my reading of *CYT* allows it to be ambiguous.<sup>54</sup> I read Chaucer’s text non-literally and take his religious critiques as statements on the virtue of alchemists, not indictments of Devil worship.<sup>55</sup> This alternate way of reading Chaucer’s position on alchemy changes the essence of his criticism of the practice dramatically: not literally demonic, but still a scathing accusation of moral lack, and far more scathing than it would have been without the religious language. Alchemists are not just liars, not just scam artists; they are so deep in their own deception that their only colleagues are each other and Satan himself. And yet, we are left wondering at the end whether *all* alchemists must be frauds.

*The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* begins with an interruption. A canon (alchemist) and his yeoman (assistant) burst onto the road and run into the pilgrims at Boughton-under-Blean, about five miles west of Canterbury and fifty miles east of their starting point in Southwark. The horses they ride are so “swatte” [sweaty] (560, 563) that the narrator believes they must be in some great hurry. The new arrivals are ragged, dressed poorly, and hardened with worry. The host

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<sup>53</sup> Astell, 135.

<sup>54</sup> See Bentick, 46-50.

<sup>55</sup> I use “virtue” here in order to bring to mind medieval Christian virtues (humility, patience, temperance, etc.) and in order to relate Chaucer’s moral argument (i.e., alchemists are acting immorally) to virtue ethics. I believe that Chaucer may have believed alchemists to be lacking in some fundamental virtues, especially generosity and humility.

notices their appearance and says, “His overslope [overcoat] nys nat worth a myte...It is al baudy and totore also” (633, 635). As the canon and yeoman join the party of pilgrims, the host also asks the yeoman, “Why is thy lord so sluttissh, I the preye, / And is of power better clooth to beye, / If that his dede accorde with thy speche?” (636-8). The yeoman at first explains their poverty away as perfectly reasonable, for they do not wish to rise above their station in life, but he quickly admits that they are not particularly good at alchemy. They have resulted to “doon illusioun” (673) because otherwise their attempts at the science “wole us maken beggers atte laste” (683). The canon takes offense at the yeoman’s characterization of their trade—that is, that they cannot make gold and scam people before leaving town. He does not outright deny the allegation, instead telling the yeoman to keep quiet: “Thou...discoverest that thou shouldest hyde” (695-6). Because of his “sorwe and shame” (702), the canon leaves the party. Relieved that he can now tell the whole truth without shame, the yeoman remains and tells two stories: one about his master, presented as a genuine but incompetent alchemist, and one about a different canon, who “practices” alchemy in order to commit fraud.

In the *Pars Prima*, the yeoman describes in great detail the process he and his master undertook in the alchemy lab. After much work, the canon realizes that he cannot complete the job, that the experiment has once again failed and they cannot exactly figure out why. According to the yeoman, the Devil is present with them during the process, though “not in oure sighte” (916). Despite the acknowledgement that the devil is standing with them, though unseen, the story focuses far more on the physical steps of alchemical practice than the “feend.” The yeoman describes amalgamation, calcination, albification, citrination, fermentation, and mollification; he

does not describe a ritual for summoning the Christian Devil.<sup>56</sup> Instead, the alchemical process is itself the mode by which the devil enters their space. The practice of alchemy itself is “ynowe / To rayse a feend” (860-1). At the end, the yeoman emphasizes the foolish canon’s regret and says that the canon laments his inability: the canon says, “lat me han the wite [blame]” (953). The presence of the prince of Hell may well imply that Chaucer’s yeoman summoned a demon to assist them in their work, but the yeoman never says that. In fact, the presence of the Devil does not affect the process at all—it’s an additional mention, an extra description that represents the yeoman’s guilt. The conjuration is not the point of alchemy, even for the sincere but foolish alchemists who originally did not want to harm anyone else in their discoveries. It’s a collateral result of alchemical labor that stands in for the shame and the ignorance of the alchemist. Even with an admission that the narrator does not necessarily claim that all alchemy is fraudulent or vicious, *Pars Prima* demonstrates a lesson from the yeoman that well-meaning incompetence can still lead to deception and dishonor.

In the *Pars Secunda*, the yeoman tells a tale about a different alchemist, one who is explicitly evil and whose work results in the scamming of a well-intentioned priest. The yeoman denounces this second and more vicious “chanoun of religioun” immediately: “His sleights and his infinite falsnesse / Ther koude no man written...In all this world of falshede nis his peer” (976-7, 979). The false canon offers to “teche pleynly” (1057) his craft to the priest, his victim. There is no mistaking this second canon for the first foolish one: the second is a “feendly wrecche” (1158) about whom the yeoman implores, “the foule feend hym fecche!” (1159). The condemnation increases, echoing a punishment fit for the *Inferno*: “the devel out of his skyn /

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<sup>56</sup> Ll. 771, 804-5, 816-7, and 854. Chaucer’s “albificacioun” and “citrinacioun” may be neologisms for the processes of making something white and yellow, respectively. These processes are named in other alchemy texts, but they are usually called albedo and citrinitas or xanthosis.

Hym terve [flay]!” (1273-4).<sup>57</sup> Alchemy itself is called “false” and “cursed” in this section as well (1319-20), but there is no equivalent rhetoric to the presence of the Devil in the first part. Here, sin is placed solely within the false alchemist, who promises to the priest that which he has no intention to show. The yeoman calls this man “feendly” and likens the canon to Satan deceiving Eve in the Garden of Eden, for the canon “brynge folk to hir destruccioun” (1386) and is the “roote of al trecherie” (1069). The Fiend need not appear in *Pars Secunda* because Chaucer strongly associates this alchemist with Satan. The yeoman sets forth two types of alchemists, then, neither of which virtuous: the fool and the con-artist. The religious language, then, repeatedly describing Chaucer’s association of demons with alchemy, is entirely based on deception and not at all on conjuration or other magic. Alchemists are like demons, yes, but only insofar as they do the same things that demons do: deceive and tempt with no consideration for others.

It is better for our understanding of *CYT* to take Chaucer’s mention of “the feend” metaphorically. Still, some evidence suggests that both Chaucer and his contemporary religious discourse considered alchemy to, in part, participate in black magic. I spend the rest of this chapter arguing against that reading, considering the nature of “illusion” and the religious language of other writers. In the following section, I discuss the importance of illusion in the many deceptions on display in *The Canterbury Tales*. I claim that Chaucer creates that deceptive illusion through his rhetoric in *CYT*. I then set up how Chaucer’s language participates in the larger religious discourse criticizing alchemy. I end the chapter by bringing illusion, deception,

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<sup>57</sup> Dante does not have alchemists flayed exactly, but they do suffer from intense diseases of the skin, most notably the scabs which they scratch forever with no relief. The yeoman does say that this fiendish canon “wolde infecte al a toun” (973), reminiscent of Dante’s scabs and the association between alchemists and leprosy (or, more generally, metalworkers and skin diseases/deformities) elsewhere.

rhetoric, and religious expression together, arguing that Chaucer's criticism of alchemy—a dangerous, subversive, uncaring, and unchristian practice—rests in the alchemists' ability to create illusions and deceptions rhetoric alone, likening their practice of alchemy to Satanic influence to intensify his distrust. In the end, I align with the scholars who see Chaucer's alchemists as fundamentally fraudulent—this time with a specific literary and religious argument laid against them which I have not yet encountered in modern scholarship: Chaucer's alchemists are frauds not because they devoted themselves to the practice of black magic, but because they act the same way Satan acts. Left unspoken is the potentiality for other alchemists to act better, even when their science fails, and that is a potentiality which a literal reading of demonic summoning in *CYT* cannot afford.

Deception is often tied to illusion, or the presentation of some idea or object as something it is not, and Chaucer is no stranger to that exemplification of deception. The illusion is sometimes seen as magical—as in *The Franklin's Tale*—and sometimes it is the result of a ruse—as in *The Miller's Tale*. In *CYT*, Chaucer presents the alchemists' ruses in terms of “magical” demonic presence, but unlike *The Franklin's Tale*, the magic is not a special power held by a learned man: it is the power to bring “the feend” into the alchemy lab and the power to wield coercive and manipulative rhetoric over a potential victim. It is for these reasons that I speak about manipulative rhetoric, deception, illusion, and performance in the same breaths. For Chaucer as for all the authors and works covered in this dissertation, all of those aspects of trickery are bound by the ways that writers have depicted lies about an object's supposed transformation. The fraudulent gold of Chaucer's second alchemist fulfills the same narrative role, that is, as Dame Sirith when she tells Margery about her “daughter” now turned into a dog, which I discuss in the following chapter.

The magician's powers in *The Franklin's Tale* seem to work and rest on the trust of an educated background. Take this section from *The Franklin's Tale*:

He remembered hym that, upon a day,  
At Orliens in studie a book he say  
Of magick natureel...  
Which book spake muchel of the operaciouns  
Touchynge the eighte and twenty mansiouns  
That longen to the moone, and swich folye  
As in oure days is nat worth a flye  
...  
"My brother shal be warisshed hastily;  
For I am siker that ther be sciences  
By whiche men make diverse apparences,  
Swiche as this subtile tregetoures pleye."<sup>58</sup>

This passage emphasizes the dangers of trusting illusionists with true study, knowledge, and discovery. Astrology and books that teach it are not superstitiously evil, but rather misleading. Natural magic is the understanding of nature's powers and arts (common synonyms for magic in medieval and early modern texts), and the ability to harness that understanding for oneself. The Franklin demonstrates knowledge of the natural world used as an illusion for real magical power. A similar knowledge-as-illusion situation occurs in the *Miller's Tale*, in which a learned man lies about the coming of a second Flood. Both tricks—one disappearance of rocks, either through scientific knowledge or magical power, and one lie about the return of a global flood—are illusions at their core.

Illusions in Chaucer's corpus appear to be something that they are not, and that is precisely what we find in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. That appearance, in *CYT* as it is in *Dame*

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<sup>58</sup> *The Franklin's Tale*, V.1123-5, 1129-32, 1138-41. *Tregetour* probably means something like "illusionist" or even "magician" in a modern sense, implying sleight of hand and trickery. Others have glossed it "juggler," but the association here is clearly a trick on an audience's (or a victim's) sight. It fits better as well with the tale's theme of illusion.

*Sirith*, is based entirely on a character's lie about what something is, rather than a projection of some image of an object onto empty space or a conjuration of some spirit. In *CYT*, there is no reality within the illusion offered forth by the second alchemist because his illusion rests solely in his lying. By contrast, at the end of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, for all intents and purposes, the old woman who weds the knight really does change herself to become young and beautiful. It is an illusion, since the magic changes that which is seen, but it is just as true of an appearance for that woman to have; in fact, because her age changes as well, the magic is not merely illusory—something essential to her is changed. The illusion at stake in *CYT* has no essential change to it, and instead relies not on an actual, magical illusion, but a lie. The essence of that vicious alchemist's fraudulent illusion lies in his words, in his rhetoric, and those lies create the illusion as he speaks them. That rhetorical creation, that deception, is therefore a part of the alchemical process as the yeoman presents it. The presence of the Devil in *Pars Prima*, then, is informed by the rhetorical deception of *Pars Secunda*. The two moments (Satan entering into the lab and the alchemist lying to the priest as he makes false gold) fulfill the same narrational effect: they demonstrate how the illusion of alchemy is created, one through religious metaphor and the other through the telling of his lies.

If illusion is not created by magical means (such as conjuration) in *CYT*, but it still exists (the alchemists do not succeed in their alchemy), then the illusion must be wrought out of some other creative force, which I identify as rhetoric. The alchemists create their illusions through lies and, more sinisterly, through sustained verbal rather than physical manipulation. The yeoman expresses the worry of illusion in *Pars Prima*, after he reveals that his canon was unable to perform even simple alchemical recipes:

And whan we been togidres everichoon,  
Every man semeth a Salomon.

But al thing which that shineth as the gold  
 Nis nat gold, as that I have herd told;  
 Ne every appul that is fair at eye  
 Ne is nat good, what so men clappe or crye.  
 Right so, lo, fareth it amonges us:  
 He that semeth the wiseste, by Jhesus,  
 Is moost fool, whan it cometh to the preef,  
 And he that semeth trewest is a theef. (G.960-9)

The worry that what we perceive may be distinct or even contradictory to what is real is at the heart of *Pars Prima*. Chaucer through the mouth of the visiting canon's yeoman has continued his thematic attention to illusion and deception from the other tales. This ultimate lesson—not to trust alchemists, for they deal in deception—is the yeoman's impetus for *Pars Secunda* (970). He is concerned that he has not gotten his point across, promising to be perfectly clear in the second tale.

Illusion drives each step of *Pars Secunda*'s narrative. For example, the alchemist in *Pars Secunda* says to the priest in order to convince him to pay:

“What!” quod this chanoun, “sholde I be untrewē?  
 Nay, that were a thung yfallen al of newe.  
 Trouthe is a thing that I wol evere keep  
 Unto that day in which that I shal crepe  
 Into my grave, and ellis God forbede.  
 ...  
 I wol yow teche pleyedly the manere  
 How I kan werken in philosophie.  
 Taketh good heede; ye shul wel seen at ye  
 That I wol doon a maistrie er I go.” (1042-6, 1057-60)

The canon's words create an illusion in the mind of the priest, and he claims that proof of his alchemical abilities will come in the form of perception (“ye shel wel seen”). There is nothing in the real world to confirm the alchemist's claims about his craft, but the priest's lack of knowledge about the secrets of alchemy allows him to succumb to the alchemist's manipulation. At this point, the reader knows the true secret of alchemy, as the yeoman spilled it just before the

canon fled: the secret is that alchemy cannot deliver (yet) on its promises. As Bentick argues, the secret is that “alchemy is fundamentally useless.”<sup>59</sup> The illusion of alchemy in *Pars Secunda* is not supported by any spell or any magical transformation on the part of the alchemist. The alchemist provides no real proof, rather resting in a visual spectacle (1140-57). He uses his rhetorical ploys alone to create images of alchemy’s promises in the priest’s head, and he allows the priest’s imagination to do the work for him. When it is time to show off his work, instead of the real promise of the alchemical creation of silver, the canon creates an illusory performance.

So, unlike *The Franklin’s Tale*, the illusion in *CYT* is not an appearance of “magic,” nor is it like the genuine magical transformation in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, but scholars have claimed that Chaucer thought alchemy was magical.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, alchemists did not call themselves “magicians,” and they believed that the processes and effects of alchemy (elixir, Stone, creation of gold) were explainable in scientific, physical terms—secretive, but real and practical. They were far more likely to consider themselves philosophers (which today would include the term “scientist”) and theologians. Similarly, their critics, including Chaucer, did not call alchemists “magicians” either, instead preferring accusations like “fraud,” “deceiver,” or “souffleurs.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy*, 46.

<sup>60</sup> “Magic” as a term is difficult to discuss, but a full examination of how Chaucer would have thought about magic is the subject of a different project. I have stuck to “illusion” in this chapter, and even then specifically illusions that are not magical in nature at all. For more on how medieval writers viewed magic, see Richard Kieckhefer, “Rethinking How to Define Magic,” in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 15-25. He argues that magic, as an “aggregating term” for several different concepts (using talismans, summoning demons, prayer, writing a curse on a bowl, etc.) that can have little to almost nothing in common, is too vague for useful scholarly discussion (16-7). For more on alchemy’s place within the medieval concept of “magic,” see Sophie Page, “Medieval Magic” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Magic & Witchcraft*, 29-64.

<sup>61</sup> Delany, 15; Bentick, 44-7; *Spondent quas*.

With the absence of a literal conjuration, the lack of a clear denunciation of magic, and the emphasis on deception, I argue that Chaucer believed that alchemy did not work.<sup>62</sup> The yeoman himself says that, despite the presence of evil in their workshop, their physical manipulation of metals does not work. If the power of the alchemist is as true and as attuned to the Christian Devil as the yeoman claims, then surely their magic should also produce some real, physical results. I believe it is more important for us to see Chaucer's alchemy as useless rather than the result of demonic conjuration, especially because Chaucer's rhetoric of magic more generally—what to be wary of and what to trust in knowledge—is notably absent in *CYT* compared to other tales. Therefore, the type of illusion Chaucer presents in *CYT* is not conjuration, but rhetoric. The manipulation of other people through deception for the purpose of greed is the sin at the heart of alchemy, present in a lab, as though the king of deceivers himself were there.

The stance that alchemy is wrong because it is fundamentally fraudulent, practiced by illusionists, agreed with other widely accepted religious beliefs at the time. Below, I present several examples of religious criticisms of alchemists from the century before 1390 (about the date when *CYT* was written). Bentick puts it succinctly: “the discourse of public opinion and anti-alchemical satire laid bare the impotence of alchemy.”<sup>63</sup> It is certainly possible to read magic and dark summoning into Chaucer's criticism of alchemy—for some in the Middle Ages did think of alchemy as magical—but it is not necessary. The writings of Dante, Pope John XXII, and William Langland all depict alchemy as erected by falsification and deception.

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy*, 46, and Linden, *Darke*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 24.

Dante condemned the alchemist Griffolino of Arezzo to the tenth pit of the Eighth Circle because of fraud and treachery, not because of demonic ritual: “Ma ne l’ultima bolgia de le diece / me per l’alchimia che nel mondo usai / dannò Minòs, a cui fallar non lece” [But Minos, who does not err, judged me for the alchemy that I practiced in life and placed me in the final pit of the ten].<sup>64</sup> Griffolino tells Dante that he died by burning for committing fraud against a nobleman, a story which has no resemblance to alchemy except in deception. Dante presents Griffolino, therefore, as a con-artist first and an alchemist second: his story tells us his nature, and his assigned place in the afterlife (housed alongside counterfeiters and fraudsters, not sorcerers) punishes his alchemy, which went unpunished on earth.

Dante names two other interesting alchemists in *Inferno*: Michael Scot and Capocchio. Michael Scot, the famous thirteenth-century alchemist and contemporary of Albertus Magnus, Dante places in the fourth pouch of the Malebolge, reserved for astrologers and diviners. They are punished by having their faces turned around, his *contrapasso* to their desire to know the future.<sup>65</sup> Virgil tells the journeyman, “Quell’altro che ne’ fianchi è così poco, / Michele Scotto fu, che veramente / de le magiche frode seppe ‘l gioco” [That other, whose sides are so small, was Michael Scot, who truly knew the game of magic fraud].<sup>66</sup> Scot’s alchemy is not mentioned, only his interest in medieval sciences that tried to predict the future. No one else in this pouch was an alchemist or is called one in the poem. Capocchio is called an alchemist, however, and Dante presents him in the same pit as Griffolino: the final and tenth, for the falsifiers. Capocchio

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<sup>64</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, XXIX.118-20. My translation. The Italian text is as it was printed in Allen Mandelbaum’s paperback edition of *The Inferno* through Bantam, 1982.

<sup>65</sup> *Inferno* XX.10-5.

<sup>66</sup> XX.115-7.

identifies himself in terms of an apparent association with Dante, both disliking people from Siena:

Ma perché sappi chi s'è ti seconda  
contra i Sanesi, aguzza ver' me l'occhio,  
sì che la faccia mia ben ti risponda:  
sì vedrai ch'io son l'ombra di Capocchio,  
che falsai li metalli con l'alchimia;  
e te dee ricordar, se ben t'adocchio,  
com'io fui di natura buona scimia.

[But if you would know who joins you  
against the Siennese, bring your eyes to me,  
so that to you my face can answer well;  
then you'll see I'm the shade of Capocchio,  
who falsified metals with alchemy;  
and remember, if I gaze well to you,  
how good an ape I was of nature.]<sup>67</sup>

In typical manipulative fashion, Capocchio places himself squarely on the same side as Dante after the traveler speaks his dislike of the Siennese. Once he makes it clear that they are allies, that he is nothing like those others from Siena, he tries to connect to Dante. By invoking his eyes directly (bringing to mind that which the falsifiers primarily do: deceive by illusion) and asking Dante to come face-to-face with his own shaded complexion, Capocchio desires to be understood. He wants Dante to trust him, to respect him, so that he can name himself and Dante can recognize him that way. He is also brutally honest about why he is being punished with permanently-peeling skin. That is, it seems that Capocchio knows that Dante will remember him, and so he tries everything he can, with language that sounds as much like a scammer's sales pitch as a cry for help, for Dante's memory to focus on his imitation, or aping (*scimia*), of

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<sup>67</sup> XXIX.133-9. *Gaze well to you, or know you well. An ape*, literal and has the same connotation in English, or *an imitator*.

nature.<sup>68</sup> He lied about his creations, and he never succeeded in his goal, but instead he displays in both rhetoric and content that his fraud brought him to this final resting place.

While Dante is more famous today, at least as affecting during the fourteenth century was the Vatican decree that alchemists, poor and fraudulent, refrain from selling fraudulent metals. Pope John XXII issued *Spondent quas non exhibent* around the year 1317, forbidding alchemists from tricking people into buying their fake gold or philosopher's stones. I do not know whether Chaucer had read this bull or knew it in full, but he must have been aware of it in some form, at least in its effects on regulations and laws. The characterization and criticisms of alchemists in *CYT* are too similar to be coincidence; either Chaucer was referencing this bull, or he was referencing the discourse to which this bull belonged. The bull has sometimes been glossed and used as evidence for the religious banning of alchemy, for it was a religiously-motivated ban. Its text describes a failure of alchemists to abide by the commandments of the Church and to produce real gold. It begins:

Alkimiae hic prohibentur, et puniuntur facientes et fieri procurantes: quoniam tantum de vero auro et argento debent inferre in publicum, ut pauperibus erogetur quantum de falso et adulterino posuerunt.

[Alchemies are hereby prohibited, and their craftsmen and those who allow them to be done are punished; to that end, they (alchemists) must present to the public as much real gold and silver, as it is asked for by the poor, as the false and forged they have put before us.]<sup>69</sup>

Though we might expect a papal bull to implicate alchemists in the practice of evil, John XXII only discusses the fraudulent nature of alchemical practice. The specific failures of alchemists

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<sup>68</sup> Chaucer uses “ape” in the same manner: the vicious canon of *Pars Secunda* made “the preest...his ape” (1313).

<sup>69</sup> Latin text from Walsh, 414. My translation. *Craftsmen, or those who practice. Must present to the public, or are bound to bring out for the benefit of the public* (Walsh trans.: “must forfeit to the public treasury”). *As it is asked* is a causal statement: alchemists have ripped off many people, and therefore they must pay for the poor in general to be better off, not necessarily their victims individually.

mentioned in the decree are their unwillingness to uphold Christian virtues, choosing greed and pride instead. The faults of alchemists are their economic fraud, and the punishments proscribed are fines to the amount which they had falsified. That money, when paid back, was to be used for the poor. These were religious ideals, but they were only superstitious insofar as the Pope distrusted alchemists to make good on their promises.

John XXII describes the way alchemists were able to commit fraud and keep their secrets. He claims that they “make fun of” one another (*ludificant*, to make a game out of someone) and criticizes their secret-keeping, claiming also that they are “surprised” (*admirentur*) when another alchemist claims to know anything.<sup>70</sup> Being ignorant or willfully deceptive is necessary for an alchemist, according to John XXII. He says that “quod non est in rerum natura, esse verum aurum vel argentum sophistica transmutatione confingant” [They fabricate into true gold or silver by sophistic transmutation what does not exist in nature].<sup>71</sup> That is, even though the alchemical process does not work, and such gold and silver cannot exist in nature as having emerged out of base metals, alchemists continue to pretend that their laboratory procedures work. The heart of alchemical deception is, therefore, the willingness to lie so that one’s work looks more lucrative, more effective, and more profitable than it really is. When true transmutation (which John XXII does not write about) fails, alchemists present their materials in ways that make them *appear* transmuted. The alchemical trick, worthy of hefty fines and extreme social disconnection, is illusion.

And finally, Pope John XXII ends his minor bull with a brutal punishment for those who practice alchemy and, knowingly or unknowingly, produce counterfeit money. They are

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<sup>70</sup> *Ludificare* comes to mean “to deceive” by connotation. Alchemists are so untrustworthy that they cannot trust each other. This is the root for the word Metham uses for a deception, “*ludyfye*” (see Chapter Three).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* *Sophistic*, or *deceptive*, playing the part of a self-proclaimed wise man.

punished whether they made that alchemic gold or silver or not. This section has often been cited to argue that John XXII halted chemistry's advancement for superstitious and religious reasons, but he nowhere criticizes experimentation or science.<sup>72</sup> He declares:

Illos vero qui in tantae ignorantiam infelicitatis proruperint, ut nedum nummos vedunt, sed naturalis juris praecepta contemnant, artis excedant metas, legumque violant interdicta scienter videlicet adulterinam ex auro et argento Alchimico cudendo seu fundendo, cudi seu fundi faciundo monetam; hac animadversione percelli jubemus, ut ipsorum bona deserantur carceri, ipsique perpetuo sint infames.

[Those who may have sent forth those [metals] as true in ignorance of so much misfortune, not only selling monies but also despising the principles of natural law, exceed the limits of art and violate lawful prohibitions by knowingly coining or casting forged money out of alchemic gold and silver, or by making others coin or cast (this is clear to see); we command that they also be struck down by this punishment, their goods be forsaken to the prison, and they be considered disreputable forever.]<sup>73</sup>

Here John XXII addresses alchemists like from *Pars Prima* of *CYT*, the “fool” alchemists who believe genuinely in their craft and yet still harm their customers and unintended victims. John XXII does not mince his words: these men are just as much falsifiers as their intentional counterparts, and legally just as culpable. The alchemist's effect on community and Christendom, therefore, is at stake, for it is not separate from the reality of their immoral business practices. Whether well-intentioned or not, John XXII seeks to punish all alchemists because they spread misfortune (*infelicitas*) and they break natural laws. Notice the use of *Alchimico*, “alchemic,” to describe false metals, used in this description for specificity and for the reader to associate forgery with alchemy. For John XXII, alchemists are both liars and over-reachers: in their deceptions, they make victims of the innocent, and in their attempts to create gold, they pass over the bounds of their humanity. They seek to be like gods by trying to wield

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<sup>72</sup> Walsh, 124-8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* Be struck down by, or be included in. *Disreputable*, or *criminals*, or *infamous*, i.e. known widely not to be trusted again, in a sense, *blacklisted*.

the means of creation as only God can. The bounds are not a prevention of magic, though. John XXII's distrust of alchemists comes not from the belief that they might succeed in making real gold and surpassing their roles as humans, but rather from the belief that the alchemists' attempts to make real gold have already diminished their virtue, their inner moral standing. That is, the sins of Satan in the Christian tradition map very well onto alchemists as presented in *Non spondent quas exhibent*. They are prideful, and in their greed they deceive others.

This specific type of condemnation aligns well with the way Chaucer presents his alchemists, that their intentions have cast them into their own fires, as the yeoman describes himself. Where Satan can be found by association in the declamations of Pope XXII, Chaucer places Satan in the lab and in the alchemist's own being. The yeoman condemns both the incompetent alchemist (his own canon) of *Pars Prima* and the malicious alchemist of *Pars Secunda*. The condemnation of the first might seem extreme—that canon is trying to be a scientist, not to scam people—until we read it in context of Pope John XXII's decree. The foolish alchemist, like he of *Pars Prima*, is still guilty of attempting to overstep his abilities as a human being, and worse: he does not repent of having turned to fraud. He believed he could not be forgiven and so committed a worse crime, becoming a fraudulent alchemist almost by accident. Intent to defraud others is incidental, though. The true crime, believing himself a “Salomon” (961), was pride.

Similarly, William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, written in several drafts over the latter decades of the fourteenth century, includes alchemy in a list of unchristian practices—and yet again, alchemy's position in the list was because of fraud, not demonic magic as many scholars have argued. In Passus X of the B-text, Dame Studie tells Will to say to Clergy:

Ac Astronomye is a hard thing, and yvel for to knowe;  
Geometry and Geomesie is gynful of speche;

Whoso thynketh werche with tho two thryveth ful late—  
For sorcerie is the soveryn book that to the science longeth.  
Yet ar ther fibicches in forceres of fele mennes makynge,  
Experiments of Alkenamy the peple to decyve;  
If thow thynke to dowel, deel therwith nevere!

[But Astronomy is a difficult matter, and evil to know;  
Geometry and Geomancy are full of treacherous speech;  
They who seem to work with those two will prosper afterward  
Because sorcery is the primary teacher of those sciences.  
Yet there are tricks in chests of many men's making,  
Experiments of Alchemy that deceive people;  
If you want to do well, never deal with it!]

(X.209-15)<sup>74</sup>

In the B-text, alchemy appears near “sorcery” and “geomancy,” unambiguously magical practices in the Middle Ages.<sup>75</sup> Some manuscripts of the B-text and the A-text, which Linden quotes in *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, include references to necromancy and pyromancy in the line after alchemy.<sup>76</sup> Linden argues that “in the popular mind [alchemy, necromancy, and pyromancy] were thought to rely on black magic.”<sup>77</sup> Similar to his argument that Chaucer considered alchemy to be demonic, Linden argues here that Langland considered alchemy to be demonic because he presents it in a list with magical processes, such as necromancy. Linden’s argument also relies on a particularly mystical interpretation of the noun Langland uses for the tricks which alchemists play on their victims, “*fibicches*.” However, Bentick argues that Langland dismisses the “worldliness of alchemy” more than he condemns it as a magical practice.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, alchemy in a list of unvirtuous subjects of study is hardly evidence of its

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<sup>74</sup> The Middle English is the B-text in Everyman’s 1978 edition, edited by A.V. C. Schmidt. The primary manuscript is Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17, or the “W” text.

<sup>75</sup> Geomancy is to geology what astrology is to astronomy. It is the mystical study of rocks, stones, and their formations for the purpose of divination.

<sup>76</sup> Pyromancy takes here the older meaning of fire-divination.

<sup>77</sup> Linden, *Darke*, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 24.

ascription to black magic, and as I argue below that word “*fibicches*” is probably a more neutral word for “tricks” than Linden argues for. I believe that Langland is, like Chaucer, far more concerned with deception in alchemy than with black magical practice, if he even thought of it in that term.

Langland, true to the allegorical form, does not wish to leave his lessons up to interpretation: he explains that alchemy is sinful because of its tricks (*fibicches*). The whole of *Piers Plowman* is quite heavily concerned with “worldly” ideas and the ethics of Christian lives, and in this sense alchemy is a danger to the poor. It is likely, then, that Langland’s denunciation of alchemy as something that deceives the people should be concerned with the people’s economic outlook. It is important to take the list as Langland offers it: alchemy is to be avoided because it is based in the practice of deception (“the peple to decyve”). It is only “demonic” insofar as it engages in the same sin as Satan (a connection Linden readily makes, but thinks of in magical terms, not in terms of avoiding sin).

Another sign that Langland’s reference to alchemy is about sin, not magic, is the unique word “*fibbiches*,” which he uses to describe what alchemists do. The word occurs in the line, “Yet ar ther fibicches in forceres of fele mennes makyng” / “Yet there are tricks in chests of many men’s making” (X.213). Linden argues that this word is an esoteric reference to an Egyptian alchemist, and its use in the sentence indicts alchemists for their unique magical trickery. However, by reexamining this word’s origin and reconsidering its use in context, I seek to remove that implication and argue that Langland was primarily concerned about alchemy as a fraud.

The etymology of “*fibicches*,” is uncertain. The term is a true *hapax legomenon*; the only Middle English Dictionary entries for “*fibicches*” and related spellings come from Langland.<sup>79</sup> Most glosses agree that the usage is something like “tricks,” and I have translated it so above.<sup>80</sup> The MED defines it as “?Some kind of alchemical manipulations or tricks.” The MED still lists a question mark on the entry, and their source is an R. Quirk who first suggested the connection in the 1950s. Linden takes it a step further and argues that it means a specifically magical trick which Langland believed alchemists could create.<sup>81</sup> The etymology Linden cites in *Darke Hieroglyphicks* is the same one that the Middle English Dictionary currently offers: the term is taken from the Hellenized name of an Egyptian alchemist Pebichios.<sup>82</sup> Linden admits to not being able to find any other reference to Pebichios. I take issue with the present accepted etymology for two reasons: first, that I can find only one manuscript reference to any Pebichios; and second, that believing this word comes from an alchemist’s name grants Langland more mystery and more experience with alchemical texts than scholars tend to think. That single manuscript reference comes from the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana (BNM) gr. Z. (graecus Zosimos) 299, probably written in the tenth century.<sup>83</sup> I have found no intermediary word

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<sup>79</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, “*febicches*,” n. [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED15403/track?counter=1&search\\_id=65395498](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED15403/track?counter=1&search_id=65395498) The difference in the first vowel, *i*, *e*, or *y*, is insignificant; it must have been a short front vowel. The most important orthographic information is that every manuscript includes the *ch*.

<sup>80</sup> For example, Schmidt’s gloss is “tricks” (p. 151). Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd translate it “claptrap” in their Norton Critical facing translation from 2006. The manuscript they work from, Oxford Bodleian Library MS Laud misc. 581, otherwise known as the “L” text, has “fybicches” and in the following line name-drops Albert the Great. It also changes “the peple to decyve” to “the Pouke [Devil] to raise” (X.218). The reference to the Devil has the same effect as Chaucer’s: it poetically tells the reader just how deceptive alchemists are.

<sup>81</sup> Linden, *Darke*, 54-5.

<sup>82</sup> Linden, *Darke*, 55.

<sup>83</sup> Also called the Codex Marcianus graecus 299. It is held at the San Marco Library in Venice. It briefly mentions a treatise, claimed to have been written by Zosimos but now lost, which names a fellow alchemist Pebichios. See Alexandre Roberts’ “Hierotechnicians by Name and Their Middle Byzantine Fame,” *Journal of Late Antique, Islamic, and Byzantine Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 167-199.

attested between *Pebichios* and “*fibicches*.” Such a gap is not unheard of, but the evidence for the present etymology is scant nonetheless. Standard shifts for Greek loanwords into Middle English are absent, such as intervocalic Gr. *ch* taking on the pronunciation of English *k*, often spelled *ck*, *c*, or *cc* in MidE, all pronounced [k]. Rare or even unique shifts would have had to occur for *Pebichios* to be the source, such as Gr. *p* to MidE *f* and Gr. *ch* to MidE *cch*, [tʃ].<sup>84</sup> That problem is better seen in a possible singular form which we do not have attested: “*fibicch*,” rather than an expected “*pebick*.” The absence of expected shifts in favor of other unexpected shifts is highly unlikely.

Furthermore, if “*fibicches*” indeed were an esoteric alchemical reference, Langland would have had to come across it in some alchemy-related text, and his audience would have needed some exposure to alchemical texts that use the word to recognize the word or interpret it easily. It would then also require all those possible alchemical texts to now be lost to us. Langland may have encountered a few texts on alchemy due to his lay-clergy status, but he is interested in the science only to denounce it as fraud. Additionally, if the word were as alchemically-derived as the MED’s entry implies, then it would be an odd word to use. Indeed, the current scholarly understanding of “*fibicches*” is unsatisfying and unconvincing, but none have so far presented an alternative.

I offer such an alternative, one which assists me in arguing that Langland’s reference to alchemy is much more grounded and much less esoteric than Linden claims. “*Fibicches*” comes from *fib* (shortening of “*fable*”) with the suffix *-icche*, a variant spelling of the Old French suffix

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<sup>84</sup> There is a sound shift between Greek *p* and English *f*, but only for native cognate words that both descend from Proto-Indo-European (e.g. *pter* and *feather*; *pater* and *father*). The sound shift does not occur in loanwords. For one example, *Pericles* was never written *Fericchles*. Lydgate writes his name “*Pericles*” in the *Fall of Princes*, 3.3306 (some manuscripts have “*Perioles*,” but that is a simple scribal error).

-age; that is, fibbage, the property of being a lie. The attachment of the French suffix *-age* to the ends of words occurs as early as the thirteenth century, and the alternate spelling Langland uses for that suffix is attested in other words from the late fourteenth century and across several Middle English dialects, including his own. The suffix's derivation from voiced *g* to voiceless *ch* is attested in words that share the *-age* origin and modern spelling, like marriage, *maryache*, hermitage, *harmitache*, and even cabbage, *caboche*.<sup>85</sup> Combining affixes from different original languages was not uncommon, and the attaching of this suffix specifically was common in Middle and Modern English alike: see *wordage*, *blockage*, and *orphanage*, which all attach a suffix *-age* to a word not borrowed from French during the Norman period. The beginning part of the word is trickier, however: there is no attestation of “fib,” according to the OED, until 1611. Even so, this is a more likely origin and meaning, especially given the alliterative verse constraint for *Piers Plowman* and Langland's penchant for wordplay. When we consider “*fibicches*” a neologism for “trickery,” Langland is less concerned with some specific alchemic magical illusion than he is with alchemists committing fraud wherever they go, spreading false knowledge and deception. Even one of the best examples Linden and others use for the argument that medieval religious writers believed alchemy was black magic does not hold water. It rather supports my argument that those very writers were engaged in a discourse about the fraudulent tendency of alchemists, with little emphasis on or association with the more mystical side of alchemy.

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<sup>85</sup> MED, “marriage,” n. [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED26911/track?counter=1&search\\_id=677007](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED26911/track?counter=1&search_id=677007); “hermitage,” n. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED20565/track?counter=1>; and “caboche,” n. [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED6439/track?counter=1&search\\_id=65395498](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED6439/track?counter=1&search_id=65395498).

Chaucer enters this fourteenth-century discourse criticizing alchemy as fraud when he writes *CYT*. With the context of that discourse in mind, I now examine several instances of *CYT* in which Chaucer uses religious language and imagery very much like Dante, Pope John XXII, and Langland. I argue that Chaucer offers up some of the most damning criticisms out of that discourse, always keeping his focus on the deception, and never on what we might call “black magic.” With that focus on deception is also the presence of literary alchemy in *CYT*—the use of alchemical frameworks and references as a literary device. Chaucer’s true opinion on alchemy remains ambiguous—whether wholly and inherently fraudulent as Dante and Langland portray it and only useful as a literary device, or both a useful literary device and a potentially fruitful discipline, but one full of so-called “craftsmen” who have chosen to defraud instead of discover. Both options rely on my argument that Chaucer primarily criticizes alchemists for their deceptive business practices.

In the Prologue to the tale, the yeoman and canon interrupt the pilgrims when they are only five miles away from their destination.<sup>86</sup> Within two hours at a standard walking speed, they will have reached the Canterbury Cathedral and completed the first leg of their pilgrimage. However, the party is forced to pause, and the narrative is brought to a stop. The newcomers arrive in a hurry, and the canon announces, “Faste have I priked!” (584), forcing the Host’s attention away from the tale-telling and onto the alchemist’s and yeoman’s practices and careers. The poetic interruption in the *Tales*’s pacing allows Chaucer to comment that alchemy’s supposed journey to God through their art prevents the pilgrim’s actual journey to Canterbury. As R. Allen Shoaf argues, “Chaucer interrupts the *Canterbury Tales* with the *Canon’s Yeoman’s*

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<sup>86</sup> They approach at Boughton-under-Blean, about five miles west of Canterbury. The yeoman evidently speaks and leaves within the space of an hour. The next temporal reference is the beginning of the Manciple’s Prologue, at which point they are only two miles from Canterbury.

*Tale* probably to explore the similarities and differences between the ‘pilgrimage’ of alchemy and the pilgrimage of the various characters he has invented. In a sense, then, they [the canon and yeoman] can be seen as ‘metals.’”<sup>87</sup> Just as the alchemist is the reason why the pilgrims pause on their physical journey to Canterbury, alchemy is the reason some people don’t quite make it to God. They stop short of discovering the machinations of God’s Creation and are instead tempted by greed (if they play the con-artist) or the false promise of power (if they play the fool). Despite their claims of devotion, then, Chaucer casts our alchemists into suspicion and distraction upon their very arrival.

Following in the footsteps of Pope John XXII, Chaucer describes his alchemists as living in poverty. Their clothes are torn, unwashed, and too light for April (565-8). Their appearance is evidently so unexpected that, after the yeoman claims they can turn all matter into silver and gold, the Host asks directly, “Why is thy lord so sluttish, I the preye, / And is of power better clooth to beye, / If that his dede accorde with thy speche?” (636-8). That is, they do not look like they are men who can create gold. They seem barely able to afford anything. Their depiction matches exactly the version of lying alchemist John XXII had in mind.

Pulling also from John XXII’s claim that alchemists make fun of and deceive each other and do not ever reveal their laboratory work, Chaucer sets up the yeoman to tell alchemy’s secrets at the derision and despair of his canon. The yeoman avoids answering exactly what they do, why they look poor, and how they actually earn a living, but eventually he admits:

“Peter!” quod he, “God yeve it harde grace,  
I am so used in the fyr to blowe  
That it hath changed my colour, I trowe.  
I am nat wont in no mirour to proe,  
But swynke soore and lerne multiplie.

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<sup>87</sup> R. Allen Shoaf, *Chaucer’s Body*, University Press of Florida, 2001, 58.

We blondren evere and pouren in the fir,  
 And for al that we faille of oure desir,  
 For evere we lakken oure conclusioun.  
 To muchel folk we do illusioun,  
 And borwe gold...  
 That of a pound we koude make tweye.  
 Yet is it fals, but ay we han good hope  
 It is for to doon, and after it we grope.  
 But that science is so fer us biforn,  
 We mowen nat, although we hadden it sworn,  
 It overtake, it slit away so faste.  
 It wole us maken beggers atte laste.” (G.665-83)

The curse “Peter!” may be a pun, since the name means “rock” or “stone.”<sup>88</sup> The use of “used” in line 666 has a double meaning, both of which are attested elsewhere in Chaucer: the first, ‘used’ in the past tense of ‘to utilize’ (I have been used in the fire, like a metal in a laboratory), and second, ‘used’ as in ‘to become accustomed’ (I have grown used to blowing in the fire). The yeoman is speaking about himself as if he were an alchemical process. The alchemy is in the rhetoric right from the beginning, especially considering Shoaf’s reading that the canon and yeoman are acting as metals. Chaucer is engaging in a literary alchemy here, one which asks his audience to be somewhat familiar with alchemical metaphors. Astell found alchemical metaphors used as literary devices in *The Man of Law’s Tale* and *The Second Nun’s Tale*, and she further argues that Chaucer’s use of those alchemical references makes explicit what Dante in the *Paradiso* had left unsaid.<sup>89</sup> She concludes that Chaucer’s demonstration that the physical workings of alchemy do not work problematizes his alchemical and astrological references throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, arguing that Chaucer’s alchemy is a literary device—a device which he uses to exemplify “the ongoing academic [medieval] debate

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<sup>88</sup> The Latin name for the Philosopher’s Stone was more often *lapis philosophicus* or *philosophorum* than *petra*, but the latter word does appear in some manuscripts related to the Stone.

<sup>89</sup> Astell, 120-4.

concerning *quaestiones* about the materiality of the soul” and other issues.<sup>90</sup> I follow Astell and Shoaf that Chaucer is certainly capable of using alchemy in his poetry as a metaphor without endorsing its practice. Such an interpretation keeps the nuance of *CYT* without sacrificing the intensity of Chaucer’s criticism.

Next, the yeoman admits that he and his canon are not good at alchemy; they blunder, and they rely on borrowing money which they cannot repay—for they have promised to multiply that money, a promise which they cannot keep. Finally, since they are not able to repay what they had “sworn” (681), they have become beggars and frauds. Even if indirectly, Chaucer is in conversation with John XXII. The yeoman is even giving away the secret: all their attempts at alchemy have not worked. At the beginning of *Pars Prima*, the yeoman describes his current state as a fall from previous relative wealth: ‘And where my colour was bothe freesh and reed, / Now it is wan and of a leden hewe— / Whoso it useth, soore shal he rewe!’ (727-9). The yeoman was once fresh and red—a color associated with the creation of gold in an alchemy lab—but now is like lead; he by practicing alchemy has actually regressed along the alchemical process. When they are bound by agreement to repay what they borrowed, they must give an amount of real gold and silver which they had promised, which they cannot afford (735-6), echoing John XXII’s punishment. That is, Chaucer features the restitutive punishment from *Spondent* in the backstory of these alchemists in order to at once demonstrate the work as fraudulent but the metaphors as useful.

A hyperbolic, satirical reading fits the *CYT* better than a literal one. Late medieval and early modern alchemists believed that Chaucer’s knowledge and re-creation of alchemy (along

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<sup>90</sup> Astell, 137.

with his consistent use of “craft” and “science” to describe the process) proved he was an alchemist.<sup>91</sup> Scholars today are more likely to believe that Chaucer fits better within the anti-alchemical tradition—that is, a tradition of medieval writings that criticized alchemy—than within the alchemical tradition.<sup>92</sup> Where modern scholars are torn is in the essence of that alchemy which Chaucer criticizes. Bentick argues that Chaucer’s “interest in the art was linguistic rather than practical. Chaucer was not interested in alchemy *per se*, but rather in hidden knowledge, or the pretense of hidden knowledge, and how this knowledge could be used to manipulate others.”<sup>93</sup> While I agree that Chaucer was interested in hidden knowledge and manipulation (traits common across the other texts I analyze in this dissertation), I do think that Chaucer was also interested in discussing alchemy itself, and inclusion of alchemy in his writing demonstrates a true disdain for the practice. Chaucer’s mentions of the “feend” are rhetorical, or linguistic (to borrow Bentick’s usage), so our attention should be drawn to that language.

The final section of this chapter examines the lines from *CYT* which Linden and others use to argue that Chaucer thought that alchemy was black magic. However, taken from the angle of fourteenth-century religious rhetoric, these lines all still focus attention on deception. Chaucer refers to alchemy as “elvysshe nyce loore” (842), and later the yeoman says, “Though that the feend nought in oure sighte hym shewe, / I trowe he with us be, that ilke shrewe!” (916-7). The first phrase seems at first glance to indicate some supernatural or magical power; we can be forgiven for thinking that “elvysshe” must pertain to mysterious beings, associated by medieval

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<sup>91</sup> See Bentick, *Literatures*, 25, 142, 144. Linden, *Darke*, 43. Among these were Thomas Norton (1532-1584), Francis Thynne (c. 1544-1608), and later Elias Ashmole (1617-1692).

<sup>92</sup> The fact that Chaucer read alchemical treatises and included their recipes, instructions, and references in the *Canterbury Tales* and yet still wrote a story about a yeoman giving away the secret (that it does not work) only further proves, for me, that Chaucer did not associate with alchemists.

<sup>93</sup> Bentick, *Literatures*, 30.

Catholics with demons. However, in its context, this passage is not all that mysterious or magical: the yeoman is explaining the experiment and the failure through physical and observable means. The term “elvysshe” here better fits the (b) definition in the Middle English Dictionary: mysterious or strange.<sup>94</sup> Alchemy is a famously esoteric and secretive science; Chaucer raises the issue of its “pryvetee” himself (701). The yeoman is using “elvysshe,” then, to demonstrate alchemy’s separation from normal experience, not for demonology. The second quote, I admit, is much closer to black magic. It may resemble, in diction, a summoning—except the yeoman also says that the devil is not actually in the room with them. The epithet, “that ilke shrewe,” also suggests that what is at stake here is not magic but deception. The feature of the “feend” important in the scene is not his demonic status or hellish home, but the fact that he lies.<sup>95</sup> An invisible Satan does not have the same power that an apparent one would. He is with them in his influence, tempting them to deceive, not physically summoned. That is, even in these supposedly magical words of the canon’s yeoman, we can follow a more moral interpretation: all who fib serve the fiend.

Other lines which Linden argues support a magical view of alchemy include references to the Devil: “roote of al trecherie” (1069); “Swiche feendly thoghtes in his herte impresse” (1071); “This false chanoun – the foule feend hym fecche” (1159); and “the devel out of his skyn / Hym terve” (1273-74).<sup>96</sup> Of course, none of these references explicitly say that alchemy is a real and magical practice that involves invocations of Satan or demons in order to gain the transmutative

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<sup>94</sup> MED, “elvish,” adj., [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED13328/track?counter=1&search\\_id=359533](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED13328/track?counter=1&search_id=359533)

<sup>95</sup> MED, “shreue,” n. [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED40106/track?counter=1&search\\_id=359575](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED40106/track?counter=1&search_id=359575) The word was not yet gendered and carried the meaning of “evil-doer” or, more directly here, “a devil” in association with playing tricks.

<sup>96</sup> Linden, *Darke*, 49-50.

or coagulative powers. It is poetic language; the repeated mention of infernal influence is a signal that Chaucer believed something sinister occurred in alchemy labs. However, I argue that these phrases align with the hyperbolic and metaphorical language common in religious texts of the time. The root of all “trecherie” should recall the “root of all evil” from 1 Timothy 6:10: the love of money or covetousness, of which alchemists were certainly guilty. The circle of lesser treachery is where Dante places alchemists. Saying someone had “feendly thoghtes” is hardly a reference to demonic possession or invocation, but is instead a description of falling into sin, especially deception. The canon has been tempted by alchemy’s rich allure and promises, and now he either unknowingly (the canon in the first part of the tale) or knowingly (the canon in the second part) engages in deception and trickery, which are the domain of the “devel.”

In the yeoman’s own words, the “feend” is present with alchemists in their labs as they work, and Chaucer uses “feend” and “devel” consistently through the Tale. It is hard to miss that we should be imagining Satan’s influence across both of the Tale’s alchemists. Satan’s influence here is sin, not conjuration: sin fits the discourse surrounding Chaucer better, and it gives his criticism of alchemy a new and potent valence. Chaucer’s description of alchemy reflects on the virtue (or lack thereof) of alchemists and casts alchemy as merely rhetorical, disregarding the possibility of alchemy in the real world in favor of reducing it to its rhetorical moves and use as a literary device. As Roger Dalrymple argues about Metham’s use of pagan imagery in *Amoryus and Cleopes*, relating events in terms of the influence of a god “reduces that deity to a literary device rather than an autonomous god.”<sup>97</sup> In this case, Chaucer reduces the power of alchemy by subsuming it within rhetoric alone: the alchemist has no tricks but lies. He is, in a sense, rescuing

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<sup>97</sup> Roger Dalrymple, “*Amoryus and Cleopes*: John Metham’s Metamorphosis of Chaucer and Ovid,” 2002, p. 157.

what he can out of failed alchemical experiments and fraudulent practices, allowing nuance in discussions on the nature of alchemy while clearly criticizing those who use it for their own greed.

Therefore, Chaucer's depiction of alchemy is devoid of magic. Unless, of course, we are willing to argue that rhetoric, or deception, is itself magical. And perhaps it is. Lying does in fact create that which cannot exist (for those lies are not true). Though Chaucer's work is not especially religious, his rhetoric throughout the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* reflects and repeats religious rhetoric criticizing alchemy during the fourteenth century. That religious rhetoric largely dismissed alchemy as an avenue for fraudulent business practices; the Church did not condemn alchemy as a heresy in the Middle Ages. Chaucer's language is hyperbolic in order to establish his great disdain for what he saw as a foolish practice, in effect taking away alchemy's power in the real world and transferring that power to its use in literature. Literary alchemy is alive in Chaucer, and that allows him some nuance with the science. In the following chapter, I discuss the trickster character in the twelfth-to-thirteenth-century fabliau *Dame Sirith*, itself a probable influence on Chaucer, in order to establish a mimesis with Chaucer's representation of alchemists' fibbages.

CHAPTER III: THE ALCHEMICAL FRAUD OF SIRITH AND THE AGENCY OF

MARGERY IN *DAME SIRITH*

Penne bigon þe clerlc to wiche,  
And shop mi douter til a biche.  
Pis is mi douter þat Ich of speke:  
For del of hire min herte breke.

[Then began the clerk to cast a spell  
And shape my daughter into a dog.  
This is my daughter that I speak of:  
For her pain, my heart breaks.]

*Dame Sirith*, ll. 353-6<sup>98</sup>

We do not need to apply alchemical hermeneutics<sup>99</sup> in order to argue that the Middle English poem *Dame Sirith* discusses three of the central facets of alchemy as medieval detractors saw it: trickery, false transformation, and economic motive. The Anglo-Norman subtitle to the poem announces: “Ci comence le fabel e la cointise de dame Siriz” [“Here begins the short tale and the trickery of Dame Sirith.”]<sup>100</sup> In the crux of the poem, which I quote above, Sirith shows

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<sup>98</sup> All quotations from *Dame Sirith* come from its printing in *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, edited by J.A.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers, Clarendon Press, 1966, pp. 80-95, with my own slight adjustments according to its single appearance in the manuscript MS Digby 86. The MS has “breke” where Bennett and Smithers have “brekeþ” in line 356. I keep the MS for rhyme and the potential reading of subjunctive mood. Smithers defends their addition of the -þ because the word “can hardly be a preterite here, among the series of presents in 355-8” (279). He blames a scribe unfamiliar with the habit of Old and Early Middle English to commonly drop final unstressed syllables, especially in poetry (311). I am not wholly satisfied with such explanation, but for simplicity I translate it as the third-person singular present indicative “breaks.” The subjunctive “might break” or “might have been broken” should also be considered. That is, even though it may have been a scribal mistake, the fact that Sirith’s sentence here might rest on a subjunctive form creates a subtle and cunning salesperson technique out of an outright lie.

<sup>99</sup> The concept of “alchemical hermeneutics” which I use comes from Eoin Bentick’s new book *Literatures of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern English*; it is the analysis practiced by those who read Middle English alchemical texts entirely theoretically, without access to laboratories, experiments, or other physical manifestations of alchemical practice (136). It is the desire, the calling, the *requirement*, to interpret texts (and the world), assuming there is hidden meaning (ideally, alchemical symbolism and metaphor) where none was intended or apparent. Since reading alchemical texts at face value was not possible, alchemists attempted also to read non-alchemical texts with the same vigor of discovery. See my Introduction for a longer discussion of alchemical hermeneutics.

<sup>100</sup> Gabriel Ford, in “‘Wose is onwise’: *Dame Sirith* in Context,” *Studies in Philology* 114, no. 2 (2017), translates AN *cointise* to ModE “trickery,” but the word also bears more neutral or positive meanings like

the innkeeper's wife, Margery, a crying dog, claiming that this dog was Sirith's daughter before a clerk, unnamed, transformed her—such was the daughter's supposed punishment for refusing to have sex with him. Margery connects Sirith's story to her own life, for she had just refused the sexual advances of a clerk named Wilekin;<sup>101</sup> Sirith did not name the clerk in her story so that he may or may not be Wilekin. In Margery's view, the clerk's ability and willingness to exert his power over her is not in question. Margery, with Sirith having lied to her, is now afraid of a similar transformation being inflicted upon her. Margery chooses a different sort of transformation: outwardly from faithful wife to an adulteress, but inwardly from one who controls herself, to one whose body is, by threat of violence, under the control of another. The poem explicitly presents economic themes, rather than only hinting at them through coercion and bodily autonomy: Margery's husband leaves on a business trip, and Sirith says that everyone and everything has a "pris," (18, 446) which in this case is a threat.

Explicit alchemy is absent in *Dame Sirith*, but I argue that the poem produces and executes its themes such that alchemists might find plenty of references to alchemy within it.<sup>102</sup> The composer of *Dame Sirith* did not include alchemical metaphors for an audience to observe or to dig up out of the text. However, because alchemists would have seen the same themes in this work as they saw in fiction that *did* include alchemical metaphors, this present chapter is

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"shrewdness," "cunning," and "foreknowledge" (Anglo-Norman Dictionary, s.v., "cointise," <https://anglo-norman.net/entry/cointise>). *Cointise* is cognate with ModE "quaintness." Susanna Fein translates it as "sexual cunning" (*Interpreting MS Digby 86: A Trilingual Book from Thirteenth Century Worcestershire*, Boydell & Brewer: York Medieval Press, 2019, 185).

<sup>101</sup> The -kin suffix is a diminutive from Middle Dutch. The name means "Little Will." C.f. "Malkin" in the *Interludium*, 47, "Little Mary," used to mean "girl."

<sup>102</sup> Finding alchemy where none exists was common in the Middle Ages. More importantly for this work, alchemy has been found where scholars used to believe it did not exist. As Stanton Linden remarks, scholars of the last hundred years have been "discovering a high level of alchemical and hermetic interest where previously it had not been suspected or at least readily admitted." Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader*, "Introduction," 1.

dedicated to applying alchemical hermeneutics to it, so that the poem can demonstrate for us the level to which alchemy's power can distort the texts in front of them. Reading *Dame Sirith* with alchemy in mind provides historical context and a new situation for analysis; this sort of lens has been increasingly popular among medieval scholars in many disciplines over the last couple decades. For this chapter, reading *Dame Sirith* with alchemy in mind centers my conversation on transformation, both false (the dog) and true (Margery changing her mind).

*Dame Sirith* begins with a traveling clerk and an innkeeper on a business trip passing each other on the road. The first speaker, glossed as “T,” perhaps for “Testator” or “Witness,” is our narrator. He introduces us to Wilekin the traveling clerk first: “Wis he wes of lore, / And gouplich vnder gore, / And cloped in fair sroud” [Wise he was of lore, / Very well was he clothed in his robe / And in his cloak] (4-6). He had no “reste” because he loved “wedded wimmon” “so strong” (11, 8, 12). The Testator then announces that the “louerd wend away / Hon his marchaundise” [The lord went away, / Being concerned with his goods], the “louerd” or Lord being the innkeeper whose wife is now alone (18-9). Margery—whom the narrator calls the innkeeper, the innkeeper’s wife, or even just the wife—welcomes Wilekin warmly and offers to him:

If I mai don aniþing  
þat þe is lef,  
þou miȝtt finden me ful fre:  
Fol blepeli will I don for þe,  
Wiþouten gref.

[If I can do anything  
That is dear to you,  
You would find me very free:  
Very blithely will I serve you,  
Without regret.]

(32-6).

Wilekin takes her offer of unconditional service (as a woman in the service industry) for her personhood as well as her profession, and he immediately states his intention to take her “to þe bede” (40). She says his name, without him introducing himself, implying they must have known each other already, and rebukes him, “Nai, iwis, Wilekin!” (43). They argue in long speeches until she entirely reverses her first promise: “Þat wold I don for non þing, / Bi houre Louerd, heuene-king, / Þat ous is boue!” [I would not do that for anything, / By our Lord king of Heaven, / Who is so good for us” (88-90). She likens the “Louerd” to her “louerd,” her husband, and then spits Wilekin’s own wordplay back at him: she will not only not take him to her bed, she will sleep with him neither “On bedde ne on flore” (102)

Rejected, with Margery having stood her ground, Wilekin the “drerimod” [dreary-minded] clerk seeks the help of Dame Sirith (149). He promises her, “Þou shalt haue, þat þou shalt se, / Ful riche mede” [You will have, as you’ll see, / A large reward] if she helps (165-6). She welcomes him in and calls him “leue sone” [dear son]. She asks Wilekin if he truly loves Margery, and he affirms. After some convincing and a promise of “twenty shiling,” Sirith agrees to help him (270). Sirith gives her dog mustard while Wilekin watches; Wilekin asks why Sirith would do such a thing. She does not share her plan with him, instead saying, “I shal mit þis ilke gin / Gar hire loue to ben al þin” [I shall by this manner begin / To gain her love all for you] (289-90). While he waits, Sirith goes to Margery with her dog, now crying from the mustard. Margery accepts her, welcomes her in, and promises to feed her. They compliment each other, and unprompted, before Margery can tell her about Wilekin, Sirith tells Margery the story of the weeping dog. It is in fact her daughter, Sirith says, who was once married. One day, a “modi

clarc” [proud/lusty clerk] came to town and promised her his love.<sup>103</sup> She refused, and he in retribution turned her into a “biche,” who now weeps in sorrow: “On hire cheken þe teres meten” [On her cheeks the tears fall] (354, 358). Margery needs no assistance: she applies that story immediately to her own life and thinks the same threat on her as it was on Sirith’s “daughter.” She asks Sirith to fetch Wilekin for her in exchange for “giftes” (388). Sirith retrieves Wilekin and brings him to Margery, who speaks:

Welcome, Wilekin, swete þing!  
þou art welcomore þen þe king.

Wilekin þe swete,  
Mi loue I þe bihete,  
To don al þine wille!  
Turnd Ich haue mi þout,  
For I ne wolde nout  
þat þou þe schuldest spille.

[Welcome, Wilekin, sweet thing!  
You are more welcome than the king.

Wilekin the sweet,  
My love I give to you,  
To do everything you wish!  
I have turned my thought,  
For I would never wish  
For you to harm yourself.] (425-32).

Wilekin then asks Sirith to leave so that he and Margery can be alone. Sirith gives the last two stanzas, closing the poem by offering her services to any man wanting such intervention, for everyone has a price.

*Dame Sirith* is extant only in one late-thirteenth-century manuscript, Bodleian MS Digby 86. It is not the only story of its kind. The farcical play *Interludium de Clerico et Puella*

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<sup>103</sup> It is the same sort of characterization as the Testator gives Wilekin on line 3.

(Interlude about a Clerk-Student and a Girl), found in British Library MS Additional 23986, tells another version of the story. However, where Sirith agrees to help Wilekin sleep with Margery, Mome Elwis, the Sirith-equivalent in *Interludium*, refuses to help the student trick the girl. The “weeping bitch” tradition,<sup>104</sup> in which a woman is coerced into sleeping with a learned man by the implied threat of his power, likely originates from India and entered the Latin West via textual translation and existing in oral and written traditions sometime after William conquered England.<sup>105</sup>

What trickery, transformation, and economics offer the audience of *Dame Sirith*—both past and present—is a fundamental question on the nature of consent, namely: If someone is lied to, and if they agree, do they truly give consent? Few modern scholars would say so. Similar to the medieval texts I discuss in other chapters, *Dame Sirith* creates a fool/trickster dichotomy that invites critique of abusive men with perceived knowledge and power. Usually that dichotomy is set up to ridicule economic parasites (the conman), but here the dichotomy is a commentary on the sexual parasite (Wilekin). One woman, the lady Sirith, tricks another woman, the innkeeper Margery, in order to earn 20 shillings from Wilekin, thus making Margery a fool, just as the canon in the second part of Chaucer’s *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* tricks the priest for his own economic profit. While *Dame Sirith* has been considered a humorous poem, that attribution comes from two sources: (1) its existence in the Middle Ages as a fabliau descending from a

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<sup>104</sup> Bennett and Smithers, 79. Another weeping bitch story is *Disciplina Clericalis*, a parable that turns similar events as *Dame Sirith* into a lesson a teacher gives to a student. The tradition was present in Old French poetry as well, including the *Exempla* of Jacques de Vitry, *Fabliau D’Auberee la vielle maquerelle*, and *Richeut*—the oldest extant weeping bitch tale in the West, c. 1170 (77-79). Alongside *Dame Sirith* in MS Digby 86 is the Anglo-French *Le Romaunz Peres Aunfour*, a translation of the Latin *Disciplina Clericalis*.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. Smithers says that *Dame Sirith* was “probably on Indian origin” and was “preserved in independent form as well as in the comprehensive medieval translations of Oriental story-collections” (79). See also *Early Middle English Texts*, edited by Bruce Dickins and R.M. Wilson, Norton 1951: in the introduction to *Interludium de Clerico et Puella*, they argue in agreement that *Dame Sirith* and the *Interludium* descend from the same fabliau/performance tradition (132).

translation tradition of supposedly funny poems, called “weeping bitch” stories, so named after the crying dogs they often feature, and (2) for modern readers simply the fact that early male commentators called it funny. Margery is persuaded to sleep with Wilekin through deception and a gullibility which scholars have referred to as naïve, or even fulfilling the “dumb blonde” modern archetype who has “little” in her mind.<sup>106</sup> For those analyses, the fact that Margery can be convinced a woman can be turned into a dog is the source of their comedic reading. Victims of alchemy’s subtle salesman receive like treatment in the seventeenth-century play *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson: victims who come into their victimhood through their own folly have long been made fun of. Unlike *The Alchemist*, though, *Dame Sirith* does not portray a man lying to a victim in order to make money before quickly leaving town. Nor does Margery in any way deserve the situation she is put into. Even more complexly, Margery does not pay her deceiver in money; instead, because of the trick, she offers up her body to one who did not deceive her, like a bribe or a fee of extortion.

The trickster character is a woman herself, and Wilekin (the other one who benefits from the trick, and the archetype who tends to play the trickster in other fabliaux) has no control over her plan. Sirith’s threat to Margery happens without Wilekin’s foreknowledge or approval. This distinction in *Dame Sirith* breaks our expectations for who the trickster is and turns the poem into a warning against the so-called “wise,” typically learned men like clerks who use their power and apparent knowledge to manipulate others. In the world of *Dame Sirith*, the people willing to put profit over others are just as dangerous as the people willing to pay them. Not concerning oneself with the well-being of others and still accepting, or swindling, their money is

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<sup>106</sup> John Hines, *The Fabliau in English*, Longman, 1993, pp. 50-1. Theresa Hamilton, in *Humorous Structures of English, 1200–1600*, Cambridge Scholars, 2013, p. 104, says that Margery is “easily deceived.”

the conman's goal. So too, according to medieval texts critical of alchemy, was the goal of the alchemist.<sup>107</sup>

Scholarship has recently begun looking into the issues of coercion and consent in *Dame Sirith*, moving away from the previous work (like Hines's) that depicts Wilekin neutrally and Margery negatively. Recent scholars, like Alice Raw, have argued for nuanced readings of the story and Margery herself, rather than reading it simply as proof that the Middle Ages were misogynistic.<sup>108</sup> In fact, the poem is a complex text for its contemporary audience and for modern readers alike. The version of the text that was preserved in Digby 86, either originally or as a copy, seems to have been used as a script for a single minstrel to perform out loud to an audience.<sup>109</sup> As Ford argues, much of the narrative tension and supposed humor in *Dame Sirith* comes from its numerous instances of commodification: Margery's husband leaves on a business trip and therefore Wilekin's pursuit can begin; Sirith agrees to lie for a fee; Margery exchanges sex for keeping her body in human form.<sup>110</sup> Ideas, actions, and objects not usually priced or bought enter into an economy. Fidelity and sexual intercourse are for sale, for everyone has a price.

In this chapter, I expand upon Ford's notion of commodification found in the poem and combine it with Raw's argument concerning the role of coercion in the text in order to argue that

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<sup>107</sup> See my Introduction and the previous chapter for more on trickster alchemists.

<sup>108</sup> Alice Raw, "Readers Then and Now: Coerced Consent in *Dame Sirith*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 44 (2022): 307-14; this on p. 307. Some scholars, like Susanna Fein in her "Introduction" for *Interpreting MS Digby 86*, and Marilyn Corrie in her chapter "Misogyny in MS Digby 86" in the same book, still find plenty of misogyny within *Dame Sirith*—and certainly women are not particularly portrayed well, considering Sirith the 'good woman' is a trickster who sells her morals in order to subjugate a fellow woman.

<sup>109</sup> The MS contains marginal notes indicating who is speaking when. See Susanna Fein's "Introduction" in *Interpreting MS Digby 86*, and her introduction to her translation of the poem, 185-6, and Bennett and Smithers, 77-80 and 305, for more background on *Dame Sirith*'s provenance—what little scholars can piece together. I discuss it in brief below.

<sup>110</sup> Gabriel Ford, "'Wose is onwise,'" 230 and 240.

*Dame Sirith* should be read as an alchemical text, and then in order to argue that viewing the poem in this way opens up another layer to its discussion of commodity: not just of the body, but of the will as well. After all, the will is the most prized possession among the scammers and the tricksters: the best customer is a willing and repeating customer. The humor which readers have found in *Dame Sirith* has a similar source as the humor in other texts that feature alchemists or that medieval alchemists believed were about them. Neither Sirith nor Wilekin are alchemists, but they do not need to be: for a medieval alchemist to believe that the text discusses alchemy, even in secret, it is enough that a character claims, fraudulently, to engage in transformation. Claiming that alchemy did not work and only had use as a trickster's spectacle was a common criticism of alchemy throughout the High and Late Middle Ages, so alchemists were vigilant of texts that may have called them liars. Especially notable is when the transformation concerns the nature of things, the inner workings of the world, or elemental manipulation. Sirith's lie, that a woman was turned into a dog, participates in all three. There is more than enough alchemy in *Dame Sirith* for alchemists to find.

Alchemical hermeneutics describes the process by which medieval alchemists found alchemy where none was meant by the author, the speaker, or the character. The modern reader, if interested in how medieval alchemists read and studied, must be willing to identify alchemists where normally we would call them swindlers and tricksters. I apply to *Dame Sirith* the ways in which medieval alchemists interpreted trickery, transformation, and economics in every text they read—explicitly alchemical or not—in order to provide the modern reader the necessary context for understanding *Dame Sirith* in terms of alchemy. Finally, by examining *Dame Sirith* as alchemists would have, I argue that Margery allows not only her body to become a commodity, but also her will. If the secrets of alchemy can be interpreted into *Dame Sirith*, then the trickery

of Sirith is not just the fraudulent transformation of her dog. It is also the real transformation of Margery's desires. The transformation in Margery's character is alchemical, and she claims agency for herself through it.

*Dame Sirith* with alchemical hermeneutics offers up a new lens on Sirith's deception about physical transformation and Margery's reaction. The titular character engages in a supposed transformation of matter, the prime execution of alchemy's art, and she does so in secret with intent to deceive. Wilekin is a clerk, a learned man whom medieval writers normally cast as the trickster.<sup>111</sup> Wilekin is the beneficiary of Sirith's secret machinations, and his request to Sirith is secret and economic in itself: he exchanges money for her service. Margery believes the lie told to her—a lie that includes elemental transformation wrought by a learned man—with such vigor that she changes her mind about sleeping with Wilekin. The alchemist can see Margery's journey through a metaphorical, idealized alchemy, like one we might encounter in Gower or MS Harley 2407. The alchemist begins with individual metals, unmet and stable; Margery's initial state was one of peace and matrimony, without incident. The alchemist then combines metals together, almost always with nothing to show for it, the metals worked, damaged, or evaporated; Wilekin arrives and Margery denies him, stressed but unharmed. After experimentation and trials, with an investment of new materials or funds, some reactions begin to create powerful alloys; Wilekin approaches Sirith and pays for her service, which is successful. The metals are now combined, forever changed; Margery has changed her mind and sleeps with Wilekin.

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<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale*, which I discussed in Chapter One.

Now, Margery's decision should not be taken lightly. Indeed, having been pressured, Margery changes her desire in her own words, providing the fodder for some scholars to claim that she wanted to cheat on her husband all along or that she may have been lying either at the beginning or the end. I rather claim that Margery's change in desire is true, as she herself says, and therefore that *Dame Sirith* demonstrates not only a commodification of Margery's body and Sirith's labor, but also a commodification of Margery's will. Because she is forced to consider her new options (be turned into a dog or sleep with Wilekin), the decision she comes to (to sleep with Wilekin) is a change of her will. Since Margery is actually choosing *not* to be turned into a dog, it is tempting to claim that she merely reacts and has no agency in the poem. I argue instead that Margery shows agency in her speech to Wilekin at the end. Her mind being changed is emblematic of alchemical narratives: a character changes as metals change. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss in greater specificity the alchemical and economic background to the time when *Dame Sirith* in English was first composed and performed. Then, I discuss how Margery gains agency for herself despite the situation put upon her in terms of that alchemical background.

Scholarship of the last twenty years has interpreted the phrase "secrets of alchemy" to mean one of two things in medieval Europe. The first is in the physical experiments themselves: alchemists wanted to restrict alchemy only to alchemists, inaccessible to outsiders, so they couched their writings with metaphors, analogies, and cryptic hidden messages. The second, however, comes from medieval critics of alchemy: the "secret" of alchemy is that alchemy doesn't work. Eoin Bantick argues that Chaucer says, through *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, that

the true “secret of alchemy” is that alchemy itself “is fundamentally useless.”<sup>112</sup> Dante places alchemists in the deepest ditch of the Eighth Circle, the pouch of the Malebolge dedicated to those who made their livings out of deception, doomed now to scrape scabs off their skin, huddled and crouched in misery. The first one to talk to Dante says:

“Io fui d’Arezzo, e Albero da Siena,”  
rispuose l’un, “mi fé mettere al foco;  
ma quel per ch’io mori’ qui non mi mena.  
Vero è ch’i’ dissi lui, parlando a gioco:  
‘I’ mi saprei levar per l’aere a volo’;  
e quei, ch’avea vaghezza e senno poco,  
volle ch’I’ li mostrassi l’arte; e solo  
perch’io nol feci Dedalo, mi fece  
ardere a tal che l’avea per figliuolo.  
Ma ne l’ultima bolgia de le diece  
me per l’alchimia che nel mondo usai  
dannò Minòs, a cui fallar non lece.”

[“I was of Arezzo, and Albero from Siena,”  
one responded, “had me put to the fire;  
but why I died is not what brought me here.  
It is true that I said to him, as a joke:  
‘I would know how to fly through the air;’  
so he, who had curiosity but little sense,  
wished that I show him that craft; and only  
because I made him not into Daedalus, I was  
burned by one who held him as a son.  
But this final pit of the ten is my home now  
for the alchemy that in life I employed,  
So Minos judged me, who does not err.”]<sup>113</sup>

This shade, Griffolino, led a life of fraud. He lied to many, even those in power, in order to cheat them out of their money. His lie to Albero in this passage rests, like alchemy, on a promise of impossible power. The fact that his punishment is for alchemy specifically and not his other escapades means that, according to Dante, alchemy includes the act of lying about one’s abilities

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<sup>112</sup> Eoin Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy*, Boydell & Brewer, 2022, p. 46.

<sup>113</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, XXIX.109-20. My translation. The Italian text is as it was printed in Allen Mandelbaum’s paperback edition of *The Inferno* through Bantam, 1982.

for monetary gain. In *Inferno*, the type of person who had become an alchemist on earth is also the type of person who had scammed the vulnerable (and, in Griffolino's case, the not-so-vulnerable).<sup>114</sup>

According to Chaucer, alchemical experiments were performed either by fools, who believed they could work and always failed (the first way we can interpret the "secrets"), or by con-artists, who only pretended their craft in order to swindle the money or labor of other fools who fell for the lies. According to others, though, including many noble and royal houses and academics, alchemy was the discovery of the inner workings of nature.<sup>115</sup> It was the study of God's creation as much as it was the study of mineral qualities. It dealt with practical realities of the real world. Bentick argues in his Introduction:

[A]lchemy's mystical reputation lingers because its literature is not only read by the *sapientes* [the wise/knowers], those who have the chemical acumen to decipher its operations, but it is also read by the *fatuos*, [the fools/simpletons] ... It was these readers, alienated from the practice of alchemy but interested in its language nonetheless, who would go on to foster the myths surrounding the art.<sup>116</sup>

Medieval alchemy was primarily physical, not mystical in the modern sense.<sup>117</sup> The medieval context in which *Dame Sirith* was written did not acknowledge the same separation between metaphysical and physical as the modern world, but we must be clear: association with the occult, dark practices, and magic as we imagine them did not enter alchemical discussions until

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<sup>114</sup> His punishment in life came from cheating a rich person specifically, not from cheating people broadly. His suffering in the afterlife completes the punishment for his other deeds, i.e. falsifying his abilities and metals. Compare also that Dante places Michael Scot, an alchemist, in the fourth Bolgia, reserved for lying sorcerers and fortune tellers.

<sup>115</sup> Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus contributed massive strides in the early days of what we may call the proto-scientific revolution—and both were fervent theologians and alchemists as well.

<sup>116</sup> Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy*, 2. I cannot speculate as to why he chose to represent the Latin *fatuos* in its accusative plural form rather than the nominative *fatui*.

<sup>117</sup> It also was not largely considered "magic" or "black magic," though some critics believed so. See my chapter on Chaucer's tales for more.

after the fourteenth century, and even later alchemists Newton and John Dee believed in alchemy's physical and economic solutions.<sup>118</sup>

Alchemy, then, is considered to be a physical science during the medieval period, and its experiments were physical with material costs and potential benefits.<sup>119</sup> The secrets of alchemy were physical and practical in nature; as Jennifer Rampling describes it, they were laboratory guides, cleaning instructions, and alloy recipes as often as they were philosophical poetry about the philosopher's stone. They were intended to keep out the people who had no expertise.<sup>120</sup> I argue that texts that contain no mystical element and no grand claim about the creation of gold can still be alchemical in nature. Indeed, the practice of alchemy was scientific: it required tests, repeated tests, blind discovery, and attempts to make in a lab what previously was considered the domain of Nature. The serious study of alchemy—as long as the alchemist was genuine in his craft—took guesswork, extensive trials, and luck. While much of their tradition came from late-antique texts, much also came from their willingness to experiment. Alchemy was concerned with all matter, transformation, and experimentation.<sup>121</sup>

Therefore, not only may Sirith herself be read as an archetypal alchemist trickster in a comedic story—she *must* take on that alchemist's role. She uses a physical reaction, one which

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<sup>118</sup> A practice of turning objects into gold meant increasing one's (or a country's) wealth.

<sup>119</sup> When I say "physical science," I mean that our modern language would classify it so. During the medieval period, the distinction between physical and metaphysical was not as clearly defined as it is today. There also was not exactly such a thing as being entirely non-religious; the secular world was still deeply dependent on the organized Church, and few things happened without some invocation to God. Alchemy had significant and indiscrete theological and religious implications, even though its quotidian practice was almost entirely physical and mundane.

<sup>120</sup> Jennifer Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300-1700*, Chicago, 2020. I am similarly indebted to Lynn Thorndike's work that initiated modern scholarship into the more material and physical analysis of alchemy: see her *History of Magic and Experimental Science* eight-volume series through Columbia University Press, 1922-58.

<sup>121</sup> For more on the recent scholarship that views alchemy in terms of its physical practice and effects, see Linden's Introduction, Rampling, and Bentick.

only experimentation can show to happen, in order to further her own ends and make money from her service to Wilekin. That the mustard seed she gives to her dog will cause the dog to cry is not an intuitive or *a priori* fact about dogs; it must have been experienced by someone—perhaps Sirith herself—before it could be used as foundational knowledge. In fact, Wilekin calls her insane when she feeds her dog the mustard in the first place: “Wat! Nou const þou no god! / Me þinkeþ þat þou art wod— / 3euest þou þe welp mustard?” [What! You aren’t doing any good! / It seems that you’re crazy— / You’re giving mustard to your dog?] (285-7). Neither the dog’s reaction nor the idea that it be used in a trick is common knowledge, even for an educated man, so then Sirith’s plan came from her own trials, knowledge, and imagination. As the alchemist must perform experiments in order to test lab equipment and ancient authors’ principles, so too did Sirith need empirical knowledge that her dog would cry when given mustard.

Dame Sirith has a secret, one which alchemists would have been unwilling or unable to admit publicly despite all evidence, one which the uneducated innkeeper’s wife does not suspect: the changing of matter from one essential form into another is not possible by physical means available during the Middle Ages. As Bentick argues about Chaucer’s treatment of alchemists, “the secrets of God, unattainable by humankind, are manipulated by those who have a command of language for worldly ends.”<sup>122</sup> Sirith gains Margery’s trust through speech, through graciously playing the role of a good guest, through sympathizing with Margery’s work, and finally through the vulnerability she shows in telling the story about her daughter-dog. Sirith then pretends to have physical proof: she shows the result of a power which no one can control. Sirith’s method

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<sup>122</sup> Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy*, 44.

of persuasion—that is, cunning rhetoric followed by a coercive threat through the guise of magical ability—is not possible on anyone who understands the true secrets of alchemy. Secrecy (the fact that alchemy-like transformation does not work being kept secret) is a required pretense for Sirith’s success. Alchemists were primed to hear critiques of their work. Someone lying about a material transformation was expected in texts that make fun of or critique alchemy. *Dame Sirith* is even more offensive, too, since Sirith is persuaded by monetary reward from both parties.

*Dame Sirith* is a quintessential text to analyze when considering physical transformation. The poem itself had been transformed many times before being recorded in MS Digby 86. Performers and writers changed it over time in the same manner in which an alchemist changed the makeup of metals.<sup>123</sup> It descends from a translation and oral tradition, crossing thousands of miles, hundreds of years, and multiple speakers even after it arrived in England. It was a living text, fluid and reactive to the desires of its composer and the demands of its audience. When it changed hands, it could not remain the same story. Different performers would emphasize different sections, assign different tones and emotions, and even rewrite different lessons. The study of such a text, then, is the study of the *changing* of that text and how that process of change influenced the story as it has survived. The study of an object having been transformed is also the job of the alchemist. As I said in the Introduction, alchemy is best known for being concerned with turning lead, or other base metals, into gold. Alchemy in the Middle Ages was concerned far more, however, with the elemental makeup of reality, with the physical nature of things and what that nature might teach us about God. As wisdom and experiment had taught for

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<sup>123</sup> But not by the same faculties or means: one with word and quill, another with heat and sulfur.

thousands of years, ever since humans began manipulating fire, heating kilns, and smelting ore, no solid object is permanent, and its component parts can become part of some new object. According to the alchemist, if humans could control the means by which those changes occur—whether by heating or burning, freezing or cutting, or any other process—then we would understand the world that God had created, and we would be able to make cures and elixirs, potions and poultices. Alchemy was the study of the transformation of matter, the medieval precursor to modern chemistry.

Because of *Dame Sirith*'s complex transmission history, with multiple sister-stories and no clear or precise origin in English, the poem becomes for medieval and modern readers alike a textual representation of alchemy itself. Several drafts, translations, adaptations, and reframing devices must have transformed this story over its centuries before it was copied into MS Digby 86, so alchemists coming across the text would have been familiar with the tropes, archetypes, and formulas within its genre: the so-called “weeping bitch” tales. Scholars do not know the exact date when English speakers would have encountered the “weeping bitch” tale earliest, but it must have been before 1270, the estimate for MS Digby 86's compilation, and later than the middle of the twelfth century. There may have been as many as five generations of performances of this story.

The deception of physical change in *Dame Sirith* is the crux of the climax, but transformation also makes up the setting, conceit, inciting incident, and central motivation for each character in the story. Sirith is the “female go-between” archetype in the “weeping bitch” tradition, one who negotiates and gains agency for herself in the new capital-centered economy. These tales usually include the intercessor's lie and, as Ford argues, the commodification of the victim's body. Ford states:

In fact, Dame Sirith's ruse is so successful and her offer so compelling that Margery requests her procuratory services in returning the rejected clerk to her and even volunteers to reward her with "Giftes" (388) as an incentive for rendering this service.

With this transaction complete, Dame Sirith has succeeded in commodifying Margery's chastity and has received promises of payment from both partners in the arrangement. She has indeed become the most effective agent within the mercantile ideology under which the latter portion of the narrative operates.<sup>124</sup>

The setting of *Dame Sirith* and the world in which it was written is one of transition: as the thirteenth century progresses, the power of markets and trade increase. This setting is common to other forms of the "weeping bitch" tradition, as well. For Margery—or her equivalent characters—there is a price to chastity: her humanity, or, more specifically, her humanness insofar as she has a human body to control. She must give up either the humanness of her body or her control over it. Coercion and Sirith's trickery are responsible for Margery admitting that her body, like all objects, is for sale. The sale in this case is not monetary: Margery's price for her chastity is the implicit promise not to alter her physical being.

The concern for the changing world and the transition of objects is not as clear in other stories in the tradition, though similar they may be, like the *Interludium de Clerico et Puella*, the first secular<sup>125</sup> farcical play in English. While dating the poem is more difficult than *Dame Sirith*, its orthography, diction, and provenance suggest it was based on and therefore written after *Dame Sirith* in the North of England.<sup>126</sup> The *Interludium* shares many rhymes and a lot of its diction, especially in speeches, with *Dame Sirith*. Smithers writes in his Introduction, "There are remarkable verbal correspondences...and even identical rhymes at certain points... *Dame Sirith*

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<sup>124</sup> Ford, "'Wose is onwise,'" 240.

<sup>125</sup> Calling it secular, as Bennett and Smithers do, seems unwise. The climax of the story rests in an invocation to "Godis loue" and saying the "pater noster" and "Avy Mary" (lines 67, 71, and 73 respectively).

<sup>126</sup> See Bennett and Smithers, 371, for more.

cannot derive from the *Interludium*. The converse cannot be ruled out.”<sup>127</sup> The *Interludium* is a short farcical play adaptation of the minstrel-performed *Dame Sirith*. It is likely that a read-aloud piece be continued aloud but with multiple speaking roles, this time with a more explicit moral lesson at the end. The *Interludium* was transformed in order to show a good “aly” (holy) woman, Elwis, refusing the bribe from the clerk, who declares:

Hi sal gef þe of my nayct,  
So þat heuer, al þi lyf,  
Saltu be þe better, wyf!  
So help me Crist—and Hy may spede,  
Riche shaltu haf þi mede.

[I shall give you some of my wealth,  
So that forever, all your life,  
You shall be better off, woman!  
If Christ help me, then I’ll succeed.  
You shall have your rich reward.]

(*Interludium* 58-62)

Elwis refuses in no uncertain terms and brands the clerk’s request as a “syn and scam” (65). The message has changed. No longer is the go-between praised for having fooled another woman. Nor is the final speech about the virtue of such a scheme. Rather, the intended dupe, Elwis, ends the play with a stern and firm monologue that rebukes the clerk and defends her Christian morality. The composer of the *Interludium* may have been troubled by the ethical implications of other versions of the story and made a virtuous woman in power to set things right. Therefore, *Dame Sirith* must be more concerned with other issues and themes. Reading the poem insofar as it represents a fossilization of a story that changed many times, then, suggests the *Sirith*-composer cares about the world it is set in, as a world moving toward capital. Where Elwis

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<sup>127</sup> Bennett and Smithers, 197. Dickins and Wilson believe that neither story could come from each other and instead share a common fabliau ancestor (132).

rejects a reward in order to retain her holiness, Sirith abandons her holiness in favor of economic gain.

*Dame Sirith* is unique among its sister stories in reflecting the slow transition from feudalism to a market economy in every appearing character, not just in Sirith. Margery's husband, the innkeeper, leaves town on a business trip: "Þe louerd wend away / Hon his marchaundise" [The lord went away / On business] (17-8). His trip leaves Margery alone, thus technically and physically able to sleep with Wilekin without her husband ever finding out. Other fabliaux feature the husband leaving on pilgrimage or else simply being dimwitted or unobservant.<sup>128</sup> By situating market or economic issues at the heart of the beginning of the story, the *Dame Sirith* poet places an implicit value on the encroaching power of *money*—rather than feudal power sources, like land, birth, piety, or fighting prowess—in character motivations. Additionally, Sirith herself is convinced to persuade Margery for Wilekin because he pays her 20 shillings:

'I shal kenne hire sulke a lore	F
Þat hoe shal louien þe mikel more	
Þen ani mon in londe.'	
'Al so haui Godes griþ,	C
Wel havest þou said, dame Sirip,	
And goder-hele shal ben þin!	
Haue her twenti shiling:	
Þis Ich zeve þe to meding,	
To buggen þe sep and swin.'	

Sirith said: "I shall teach her such a story  
That she will love you much more  
Than any other man in the land."

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<sup>128</sup> The former in *Les Fables Pierre Aulfors*, and the latter in Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*.

Wilekin said: “And thus I (might) have God’s protection,  
For you have well said, Lady Sirith,  
And may good health be yours!  
Have here 20 shillings:  
This I give you for reward,  
That you might buy for yourself some sheep or swine. (264-72)<sup>129</sup>

Sirith also sells herself. Where Margery’s body is commodified so that Wilekin can have sex with her, Sirith’s body is commodified for her labor, including her unique skill of persuasion. That is, Wilekin must have asked Sirith to persuade Margery for him because Sirith is known to have excellent charisma, or else is exceptionally trustworthy, reliable, or persuasive. In an emerging market economy, where craft, skill, and labor are commodified for compensation, Sirith herself exists as a transitory worker. She is still some level of nobility, but she participates in the economy of trade. Her body is also an object through which her patron’s wishes are delivered, as with any worker who agrees to receive money from an employer in exchange for their labor. Sirith’s motivations must be couched within her own economic gain, and merchandise holds sway over her just as it does over the poem’s setting and its inciting incident. Such a consistent emphasis on economics sets *Dame Sirith* up for a discussion on scamming and, therefore, paranoid alchemists.

The transitions within *Dame Sirith* extend beyond medieval England’s economy and character motivations, though, and encompass also the telling of the story itself, by one speaker moving among four voices. The transitory nature of the poem’s creation and performance indicate an inherent transformative quality, which allows the discussion of Sirith’s fraudulent

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<sup>129</sup> Smithers (p. 89 and in the Glossary, p. 496) is not sure whether *hau* is indicative or subjunctive, but it is certainly a combination of *hau* ‘to have’ and *i* ‘I.’

transformation (her lie about her dog) in likeness with alchemy. The unique manuscript contains no speaking verb, no “sayd,” quod,” or “spak” that might begin or end a section of dialogue.<sup>130</sup> Only twice the narrator introduces speech: once with “þus he bigon” (24), and once with “he hire grette” (160). Transitions between speakers are usually unnarrated. Instead, the text has marginal notes “T,” “C,” “V,” and “F” that correspond to lines spoken by the narrator, Wilekin, Margery, and Sirith respectively. What these letters stand for is not wholly settled; C for *Clericus* and F for *Femina* are most obvious. Smithers (he credits his wife) assigns *Vxor*, or in modern type *Uxor*, Latin for “wife,” to V.<sup>131</sup> Elaine Treharne’s annotation assigns *Testator*, or “witness,” to T.<sup>132</sup> These marginal notes are not narration, and reading them as part of the lines to which they appear adjacent breaks both rhythm and meter which is elsewhere consistent. On page 165v of the manuscript, for example, there is a small “C” even with line 109, “Dame dame torn þi mod” [Lady, lady, change your mind].<sup>133</sup> There is no mistaking this mark for being part of the line.

Therefore, as Smithers suggests, and as scholarly consensus has since agreed, it seems that *Dame Sirith* was performed aloud by a single performer; the marginal letters guide which character is speaking and, therefore, which voice the minstrel should adopt. Smithers concludes, “This [performance of *Dame Sirith*] would have been done not by three actors, but by a single minstrel who spoke all three parts, and by means of changes in the voice and dress and of appropriate gestures.”<sup>134</sup> Multiple characters’ liner notes probably would not survive copying

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<sup>130</sup> Preterite forms given because the Testator speaks in the past tense.

<sup>131</sup> Bennett and Smithers, 306.

<sup>132</sup> Elaine Treharne, *Old and Middle English c. 890 – c. 1450: An Anthology*, Third Edition, Wiley, 2009, p. 423.

<sup>133</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Digby 86, 165v: <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2d6dfc9f-2ab9-46bf-9b32-e52f0e6eabb3/> Accessed 12 October, 2023.

<sup>134</sup> Bennett and Smithers, 78. I will not speculate on what such costume changes may have looked like; I am satisfied only to argue that changes occurred during performance.

into a manuscript if they were relics of a single actor's annotations for his part in a full drama. We would instead expect to find only "C," for instance, marked when Wilekin speaks, written by the actor who played Wilekin. We would also expect a form of "Chorus" or perhaps another named character, rather than "T" for a generic narrator. Since all voices are marked, the performer had to, indeed, "torn [his] mod" from one to another during the performance. *Dame Sirith* is not just a poem about transition, nor does it only feature transitioning characters: it is also a transitioning story, fluid, repeatable, and always in flux.

*Dame Sirith* exists in a combination of genres in Middle English poetry. It is an oral poem, yet also aware of its status as a written work, including its marginal notes, as medieval poems often featured. It also prioritizes dialogue over description, with the only written mark between speakers being those liner notes; the dialogue itself flows easily and quickly, as one would read a play. *Dame Sirith's* composition need not be unique in its structure or form. The oral storytelling tradition of medieval England is not separate from the written tradition. For *Dame Sirith*, being written and then performed out loud to an audience that might not be able to read *is* its tradition. It is a text that transforms via literacy, speech, costume, and direction—let alone the changes in meter and rhyme scheme throughout the telling. The poem goes between the page and the ear, the scribe and the audience, just as it goes between the clerk and the wife, just as—Margery believes—it goes between the daughter and the dog. Transformation, the going between, and the transition of material matter are all intrinsic to the creation and telling of *Dame Sirith*. As it changes, so does the alchemist find change within it: the alchemist who finds in secret the relationship between matter and spirit also finds in texts the relationship between narration and narrative.

Transformation, then, is hard to ignore in the poem, and Sirith's lie concerning transformation offers the ability to find alchemy, especially given the way in which economic forces push *Dame Sirith's* plot. As I have briefly mentioned, the world of *Dame Sirith* is in flux, and the desires and pressures of capital are present within both Sirith (who accepts payment for a service, then offers such service to any man) and Margery (whose husband leaves on a business trip). As Ford argues, the conversations between Margery and Wilekin and then between Wilekin and Sirith represent class structures through negotiated courtly language that "obscures" the true classes of each character.<sup>135</sup> Margery promises to do anything for her guest, and Wilekin stylizes his proposition (that they have sex) as if it were a sales pitch. In an ideal telling, humor would come from the juxtaposition between fanciful sales rhetoric and sexual desire. At first, it seems that his advances may well work, but he makes a critical error in mentioning Margery's absent husband. This failure at flirtation receives visceral refusal, and Wilekin is "powerless before the imperatives of the system" of upper-class courtship, one of which including that a lady may not (openly) cheat on her husband.<sup>136</sup> Margery succeeds only in the short term, and only because Wilekin made a fatal error—but she does succeed. Though supposedly educated and wise, the clerk acts foolishly. According to Ford, the story thus sets up the dichotomy between social order and mercantile valuation. If piety wins out against persuasion and carnal desire, then Wilekin must rely on coercive and economic means to overcome Margery's fidelity. Coercion and desire are hallmarks of the fraudulent alchemist as well, despite the alchemist's foolishness in practicing an impossible craft in the first place.

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<sup>135</sup> Ford, 233.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

Such an economic reading is relatively new in the discussion of *Dame Sirith*. The dominant view of *Dame Sirith*'s satire immediately following its examination as a literary work—rather than simply linguistic or cultural, as it had been viewed in the early and middle twentieth century—is that Wilekin performs in the manner of *amour courtoise* while Margery responds with her devotion to conjugal love. Some scholars over the years have argued that *Dame Sirith* cares less about the market-church dichotomy and more about the distinction between courtly and religious love. Nicolai von Kreisler writes that Wilekin's "language is always courteous and formal, and its force, in the tradition of *amour courtoise*, is to sublimate the realistic aspects of the love match he seeks. Margery, on the other hand, represents a different moral persuasion and speaks a plainer language."<sup>137</sup> For von Kreisler, Wilekin's proposition is not economic in nature but romantic; he is playing the part in *Dame Sirith* of the suitor in a medieval satire showing how unrealistic Christian virtues are. He argues that the poem is educational, not necessarily entertaining, and he likens it to Caxton's translation of Aesop's fables in which a daughter is turned into a weeping cat.<sup>138</sup> I am not convinced that, since a similar tale appears in a collection of children's moral stories, *Dame Sirith* itself must have the same central moral lesson to learn. Rather, as Ford argues, the poet eschews any attempt at a clear moral: where other versions of the weeping bitch tale say explicitly to be wary of tricksters, the final stanza of *Dame Sirith* "confirms Dame Sirith's supremacy" and gives her the final argument that everyone has a price and she will do this service for any man.<sup>139</sup> And so, while Von Kreisler accurately depicts the struggle between Wilekin and Margery in the beginning as

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<sup>137</sup> Von Kreisler, "Satire in *Dame Sirith and the Weeping Bitch*," 382.

<sup>138</sup> Von Kreisler, "Satire," 380.

<sup>139</sup> Ford, 243.

one between carnal desire and virtue, we must consider *Dame Sirith* in its rightful place in a fabliau tradition. Even Von Kreisler says that the poem has “potential humor.”<sup>140</sup> What drives the humor, in part, is its dealings with economics. We might think of Jonson’s *The Alchemist* once again: a fool who seek an easy pathway to wealth gets taken advantage of, and the absurdity of his attempt becomes a natural object of derision. Margery is unique in her victim status and should avoid becoming such an object, but Wilekin’s foolish attempt to seduce Margery in the first scene may absolutely inspire laughter and mockery.

The presence of money forces the narrative and the moral issue forward. Later, when Wilekin discusses what to do with Sirith, he adopts a mercantile approach. Sirith performs as if she does not desire payment, but her accepting 20 shillings allows the audience and Wilekin to believe that she was merely pretending in order to carry the conversation through its natural bartering. If so, some scholars have concluded, then certainly Margery must also have been pretending, playing along, in order to hold up the pretense of Christian love.<sup>141</sup> *Dame Sirith* participates humorously in the contrast and conflict between, as Luke William Mills recently argued, “sacred ideals and profane reality.”<sup>142</sup> That reality is based in economic proposition. Mercantile trade and the act of putting to price everything and everyone overrule pious commitments. Since “pris” is so prevalent, the desires of each character are influenced by what they can offer to the marketplace, whether it be coins, service, or themselves. Speech might come into question, then, and each word might be no more than performance.

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<sup>140</sup> Von Kreisler, 380.

<sup>141</sup> Hines, Hamilton, and Ford all ascribe to this idea.

<sup>142</sup> Luke William Mills, “Oaths and Asseverations in *Dame Sirith*,” *Reinardus* 24 (2011–2012): 108–30; this on p. 128.

The fact that Wilekin, Sirith, and Margery all participate in an obligatory and mercantile performance should not cast doubt on Margery's words, though. The dialogue is best read—both for the medieval alchemist and for the humor in itself—if Margery is genuinely convinced through implicit threat, coerced by fraudulent mercantile means. She falls victim to a swindler, but scholars should not dismiss her as a mere gullible naïve plot device. Wilekin's salesmanship to Sirith succeeds where flirtation with Margery failed; Sirith's near-mythological tale to Margery succeeds as well. If economic forces defeating piety and innocence is where at least some of *Dame Sirith's* humor and lesson (or lack of lesson) emerges, then Margery can't be playing along from the start in a ritual of courtship and feminine passivity like so many scholars argue. Margery must be her own person, must have agency just as Sirith does when she agrees to accept Wilekin's payment. Margery performs for herself and for her safety, not for a courtship ritual. Alice Raw argues:

A close reading reveals that Margery attempts multiple strategies to convey non-consent less directly in a situation where she is under threat. These tactics have been overlooked by critics until now. First, the character maintains ignorance, a tactic of safety in a potentially viable situation... Next, as we have seen, she bargains... [She] attempts to ensure her manner remains courteous, while making it clear that there is a limit to what she might do for the man who has presented himself on her doorstep. Both methods reflect that from the outset Margery is constrained by the power difference between herself and the clerk.<sup>143</sup>

To dismiss Margery's language is also to dismiss her will. That Margery does *not* want to sleep with Wilekin all characters understand. The ensuing drama supposes that Wilekin knows that she will not say 'yes' to him alone, that she needs some persuasion from another. Sirith does not appeal to Margery's inner desires, as though she were secretly wishing to cheat on her husband but knew she couldn't say so out loud; instead, she appeals to Margery's fear. The fact that

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<sup>143</sup> Raw, "Coerced Consent," 311. I speak more specifically to the issue of Margery's consent below. For now, I only mention it to conclude that the economic factor is pervasive throughout *Dame Sirith*.

Margery is coerced into changing her mind—into speaking her willingness to act in a way she found deplorable only a hundred lines earlier—cannot be softened by claiming that she was performing in her earlier dialogue and genuine in her later. Margery’s will is conquered by the economic forces of Wilekin’s money and Sirith’s threat of commodification. To see *Dame Sirith*’s careful and thorough dealings with mercantile intentions is to hear Margery’s plea for what it is: that this lusty clerk leave her be. Margery chooses to survive with as little trauma as possible, and so the poem places economic desire in an overwhelming position, a position with such an imbalance of power over the story’s victim that occur rarely outside of texts about tricksters and alchemists.

Thus I argue from the context of its written and performed history, the transformational readings of alchemists, and the importance of economics that alchemical hermeneutics belong in the scholarly discussion of *Dame Sirith*. The themes of fictional (not informational) alchemical texts abound in *Dame Sirith*. Wilekin and Sirith split the role of the alchemist, and Margery is the tragic victim of their conspiracy to sell her a fraudulent product—for sex with Wilekin would certainly be as unsatisfying as a broken philosopher’s stone—and leave her desolate as a result.

Manipulation and coercion drive Margery’s function in *Dame Sirith*. She does not wish to sleep with Wilekin. Margery possesses an active will against Wilekin’s advances, rather than an absence of will for his pursuit (either of which would qualify as non-consent). I believe Margery is honest in her rejection, however formulaic, as her response has been called, it may appear. Little satisfaction or humor in Sirith’s trick exists if Margery is lying when she refuses Wilekin and telling the truth when he returns in the end. The persuasion could have come in any form, and Wilekin could have persuaded her himself through amicable persistence, as opposed to the degenerate manipulation that actually happens. Margery’s genuine negation and then reluctant,

but outwardly excited, acceptance of Wilekin's sexual proposition reflects to the same degree the issue of consent present in texts by critics of alchemy. Despite technically saying, "Yes," Margery is a victim in a complex relationship among self-preservation, her agreement with clear terms, and the breaking of trust that results in an engagement with sexual violence. In the anti-alchemy texts, an alchemist salesman lies to a victim and, through that lie, breaks consent so that they create a "Yes" where none would occur under truth. That scene is recreated in *Dame Sirith*, still economic but this time with sex.

While Margery proclaims her wish to "don aniþing / þat þe is lef" [do anything that is dear to you] (32-3). when Wilekin first arrives, this is quickly revealed as a standard greeting which she, the innkeeper, offers to her guests. After Wilekin makes his desires known, she fully and without hesitation rebukes him:

Nai, iwis, Wilekin!  
For noþing þat euer is min,  
Þau þou hit 3irne,  
Houncurteis ne will I be.  
Ne con I nout on vilte,  
Ne nout I nelle lerne.

No, certainly not, Wilekin!  
For nothing that has ever been mine will be yours,  
Though you yearn for it:  
Uncourteous I will not be.  
Neither can I enact such vileness,  
Nor will I ever learn it. (43-8)

Such a refusal leaves little to the imagination or to Wilekin's fleeting hope for a quick seduction. He continues to ask her to join him in bed, but his tone has shifted. He claims to have loved her for many years and that now, with her husband out of town, is the perfect time for them to fulfill their love. Wilekin participates in romantic language, not the base sexual language

of his original request.<sup>144</sup> His tactic changes, and so does her rebuttal; she refuses him again, this time relying on her faithfulness to her husband rather than her unwillingness.

Margery's change is formulaic, as other scholars have argued in support of her performative language. However, her formula is not representative of courtly love dialogue. Margery's formulaic responses and eventual agreement unto Wilekin's desire are produced by a desire to survive. Scholarly attention to *Dame Sirith*, not unlike much of medieval writing, has sadly lacked acknowledgement that the women whose wills are subsumed still must have wills. Though Margery changes her mind, she still has a mind that goes through changes, and that mind is her own. To view her as a simple, gullible, naïve woman created only to serve humor or misogyny is to remove her rightful agency—agency which she gains for herself in the first act of the drama by setting herself in clear and firm opposition to Wilekin and his lust. Further, the structural nature of poetry is at least as responsible for Margery's formulaic response as her participation in cultural norms. That her voice and Wilekin's fit into clean AABCCB verse with few exceptions during their first scene reflects the storyteller, the tradition, the ease of memorization, and the ease of listening. Margery's entertaining a conversation with Wilekin at all, also a relic of *Dame Sirith*'s pedigree, is structurally, not semantically, formulaic.<sup>145</sup> Stylized and performative dialogue—and it was performed, after all—should not cause scholars to conclude that the *meanings* behind the dialogue are merely performative.

I believe Margery when she refuses Wilekin. I follow the important declaration with which Alice Raw ends her recent article:

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<sup>144</sup> He does not say “love” at all in that first instance. Instead, he says, “will I to þe bede” [I want to bed you] (40), far more crass than the more elegant description of love.

<sup>145</sup> Hines and Hamilton rely on reading Margery's formulas not as part of a performative art but as performative in themselves. So too does Keith Busby in “*Dame Sirith and De clerico et puella*,” in *Companion to Early Middle English Literature*, ed. N. H. G. E. Veldhoen and Henk Aertsen, VU University Press, 1995, 67–78.

By reading consent carefully, the power dynamics underlying sex then and now are brought to the fore. The crux upon which the conceit hangs—that the woman is sexually entrapped—is legible only if we read coerced consent for what it is.<sup>146</sup>

I likewise believe Margery when she admits to Sirith that she will sleep with him only once *in order* to protect her own life and bodily identity:

Loured Crist, þat me is wo,  
þat þe clarc me hede fro  
Ar he me heuede biwonne!  
Me were leuere þen ani fe  
þat he heuede enes leien bi me,  
And efftsones bigunne.

Lord Christ, wo is me,  
For the clerk had left me  
Before he won me!  
If only I were a lover for some price  
So that he might have lain with me only one time,  
And afterward soon begun.

(379-84)<sup>147</sup>

Margery does not admit any supposed eagerness to sleep with Wilekin to Sirith when the “persuasion” occurs. She is reluctant, either unwittingly tricked into an agreement she previously refused or accepting her lot in her situation and lack of escape.<sup>148</sup> Any agreement to sex “once and only once” for defense, not for guilty pleasure, must be placed in the category of coerced consent. Margery’s will is clear for most of the poem. No one wants to be deceived, to be tricked; if she were reluctant but willing and eager, then surely such deception would not have been required.

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<sup>146</sup> Raw, 314.

<sup>147</sup> The “þen” of line 382 is difficult to parse; it resembles the dative article “þen” used also in lines 19 and 22, for example. I thank Alice Raw for her own argument in favor of the reading “once and only once” for “enes” (313).

<sup>148</sup> As Raw reminds us, women in fabliaux often see through the trick and act accordingly (313). Margery may be doing the same here, not believing that she might become a dog but instead that Wilekin is so persistent that she would suffer *as if she were* a weeping dog. The result of the threat is the same, just with less gullibility.

And yet, there is humor from Margery's position and dialogue, and that humor need not cast Margery disparagingly nor make light of coercion. Comedy's presence in the fabliau does not require Margery to be an object to mock; Margery can still be her own character with a will and agency, as much agency as a 450-line poem can allow. Humor is important also for our connection to alchemical stories, which tend to have a humorous element to make fun of both the conman and the victim. The immediate change from her initial promise to do anything her guest desires to her curt and serious promise to do nothing that he desires, especially when spoken in an exaggerated voice to distinguish her from the masculine Wilekin and the similarly feminine Sirith, almost certainly was performed for comedic effect. Such a complete reversal in speech is still a common vein for miners of comedy in the twenty-first century. Depending on the minstrel speaking the lines, Margery's response to Sirith's fable about her "daughter" could itself be played in two ways for the crowd to laugh. First, the performer could play Margery gullibly; that she buys the weeping bitch without question or second thought could be an affectation in her tone, the extreme absurdity of which lending itself to laughter. Second, the performer could follow Raw's and my reading that Margery understands she's being tricked and must find her way out. With a look to the crowd, perhaps a wink, and pseudo-grandiose over-posturing in her submission to Wilekin's desires, Margery could create laughter while also winning the crowd's favor. Because we have no liner notes, annotations, instructions, or rudimentary stage directions beyond the letters that indicate the speaker (and some dialogue changes are even missing those), we can only speculate *how* the minstrel elicited laughter from an audience; all we know is that they did. I offer these possibilities not to defend them as definite performance practices; I offer them to show that humor still rises from the story without punching down onto the victim Margery.

Even with her refusal, her confession that she will have sex with Wilekin only this once, and her potential for humor, Margery still submits to Wilekin completely in the end. She even, to Wilekin alone, says that she does in fact desire him: “Turnd Ich haue mi þout” [I have turned my thought/changed my mind] (430). Scholars have tended to view this as her true mind; others more recently have viewed this as her performance. For my alchemical approach to Middle English texts, I accept all of Margery’s announcements of will. That is, coerced consent is distinct from full consent. Margery was tricked and should not have been in this situation. But despite her reluctance, she still tells Wilekin, “Mi loue I þe bihete, / To don all þine wille!” [My love I give to you / To do all your will!] (428-9). Thankfully, Wilekin responds with reciprocity: “And Ich am redi...To don al þat þou saie” [And I am ready...to do all you say] (434-5). I accept her and Wilekin’s speeches here to be true for two reasons. First, for the storytelling of *Dame Sirith* to work (that is, to affect the audience with its conclusion of the present uncourtly courtship), the audience cannot assume Margery is lying in the end. If she were lying to Wilekin, then the story ends unresolved, and after the narration ends the courtship rituals either continue or don’t. Neither option here fits cohesively or tonally with the whole of the poem; if the story does not end where it ends, then Sirith’s trick has no relevance. The other characters always believe Margery when she speaks: Wilekin believes that she loves her husband enough not to cheat on him; Sirith believes that she will sleep with Wilekin once; and Wilekin again believes that she will do as he wishes, responding accordingly. The tale concludes with Sirith’s victory, not with Margery tricking Sirith back. Wilekin and Sirith believe her, and the audience should as well. Second, even though this is not a choice Margery would normally have made in a vacuum, or even enjoys making now, she still turns her will toward it. Margery does want to sleep with Wilekin—on the conditions that it only happen once, that she not be turned into a dog, and that

her husband not find out. So coerced consent is not full consent, but, as Raw argues, it is not the same as full non-consent.

That the choice of Margery exists in this nuanced space of will gives her agency in the narrative. The agency she displays is the same sort of agency ascribed to victims of alchemy's secret tricks in other stories. Despite her misfortune and the threat before her, she still chooses and makes such a strong choice that her ending admission is even stronger than Wilekin's. Just as the priest in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Epicure Mammon in *The Alchemist*, and Albergo da Siena in Griffolino's tale in *Inferno*, Margery is made a victim of deception and still participates in choice. There is a difference: Margery chooses to deal with her no-win situation in the best way possible, but the victims of alchemists choose the thing that they are deceived about. Margery does not choose and then is tricked; she is tricked and then chooses. She is more like John the carpenter in Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, another fabliau in which a learned trickster uses cunning to sleep with a married woman. But there is no perfect analogue for Margery, even in other versions of the "weeping bitch" tale. We must, from a modern perspective, condemn Sirith and Wilekin's actions, just as the narrator does. We can also praise Margery's resilience. She not a passive victim, but an active one despite the implicit threat: she understands that her current situation has no good path of escape, so she chooses the least bad option and willingly accepts her fate. For Margery specifically, then, I claim that *Dame Sirith* engages in the commodification of the will. Her mind is changed in the face of profane reality and Wilekin and Sirith's economic prospects.

Therefore, I turn now from Margery's will itself to the way her will is bought, how both she and her will are reduced to objects for the marketplace. Sirith sells herself, then she sells Margery to Wilekin. Despite Margery's attempts to gain agency for herself through her speeches,

Sirith sees her as a prize to win for Wilekin. In response to his offering her 20 shillings for her service, she says:

So Ich euere brouke hous oþer flet,  
Neren neuer pones beter biset  
þen þes shulen ben!  
For I shal don a iuperti  
And a ferli maistri,  
þat þou shalt ful wel sen.

So that I always possess a house or a floor,  
Never at all were pounds better used  
Than these shall be!  
For I shall commit to a venture  
And an excellent feat,  
Which you will see very soon. (273-8).

Once offered money for her services, Sirith drops her pretense of caring about Margery as a person. She previously asked Wilekin whether he truly loved her, seeming to weigh his request for her assistance on his own merits—and already distrusting and discounting the institution of marriage. However, Wilekin commodifies her labor, and she agrees willingly to act in a manner she would not normally enjoy without the influence of the shilling. When her services as a manipulative wingwoman are for sale, so too are her morals.

In the end, after Wilekin tells her to go away, Sirith gives her blessing over Wilekin and Margery's coupling in some graphic detail:

And loke þat þou hire tille  
And strek out hire þes.  
God ʒeue the muchel kare  
ʒeif þat þou hire spare,  
þe wile þou mid hire bes.

Make sure that you plow her  
And spread out her thighs.  
May God give you plenty of grief

If you spare her  
While you are with her.

(440-4)<sup>149</sup>

In Sirith's words are no loving praises or hopes for romance and love. She speaks to Wilekin and wishes that he have a good time, ignoring Margery and only speaking about her as an object of sexual use. While her first thought was to whether Wilekin truly loved Margery, Sirith now has simplified; in the face of economic gain, she has become a pimp, not the matchmaker she attempted to act like. Of course, the stanza is also funny and would almost certainly be accompanied in performance with crude gestures and sexual movements. Where *Interludium de clerico et puella* and *Disciplina clericalis* include warnings against being tricked away from pious chastity, *Dame Sirith* declares victory for the deceiver and engages in humorous sexual excess by describing what happens next. Sirith continues speaking into the poem's final stanza, switching from Wilekin to the audience. According to Ford, Sirith's final speech to the audience represents a "subordination of sexuality, both of the idealized courtly and the Christian marital sorts, to the rules of the marketplace."<sup>150</sup> With Margery fully objectified in the process of Sirith's trick, the tale ends and leaves the audience in the uncomfortable position of having just supported the commodification of all things. If everyone has a price, then everyone can also be made into a means for someone else's ends; our bodies, actions, and desires can be traded on the marketplace.

Reducing Margery to an object to be plowed, as if she were a field for men to use, relies on the metaphor of woman as fertile land. It also creates a malleable material out of Margery's will and body. The fraudulent alchemical claim in the changing of Sirith's daughter into a dog is

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<sup>149</sup> Corrie uses this stanza as evidence that the composer of MS Digby 86 was misogynistic, and her argument is persuasive (126). At the very least, any reader must acknowledge the fact that Sirith sees no solidarity in Margery. She turns the innkeeper into an object for her economic gain.

<sup>150</sup> Ford, 243.

met in reality with the substantial alchemical claim in the changing of Margery, a human woman but an object of desire, into the sort of woman who will give up her chastity under threat.

According to Sirith, all people have a price. Everything—and everyone—is negotiable. Despite Margery's attempts at agency, her choices still lead her into a capitalistic market where she loses that same agency.

Sirith, as the trickster, is apathetic for others as long as her profits are secure. She is the driving force against Margery the victim, and she fulfills in many ways an alchemist's role in the narrative. As a satirical poem, and insofar as it was transmitted orally, *Dame Sirith* takes on the alchemist's purpose as well, and its fruition is the fraudulent transformation at the crux of the story. *Dame Sirith* may not have an explicit alchemist, but its economic outlook and its transformation of Margery provide the alchemical transformation that allows us to find Margery's agency—always there, sadly overlooked.

CHAPTER IV: THE UNNAMED ALCHEMY OF *AMORYUS AND CLEOPES*

And with hys hand he bekynnyd the pepyl, bad them come nere.  
“Fere ye noght, and here qwat I schal sey;  
And put fro yowre [hertys] alle doutys away.”  
And so the pepyl dyd and he in opyn audyens

To the spyrytys thus seyde, that meuyd the spere:  
“O dysseyuabyl spyrytys! qwy make ye resystens  
Ayens yowre makere? qwy dysseyue ye that he hath bought dere?”

John Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, 2007-13<sup>151</sup>

I have so far presented ways to read alchemists as tricksters in two quite unsimilar Middle English texts: the first in Chaucer’s *Canon Yeoman’s Tale* and the second in the fabliau *Dame Sirith*. Both of those texts criticize the trickster’s behavior as a form of performative deception. It is the performance of those deceptions that links the secretary of Venus in John Metham’s *Amoryus and Cleopes* to a representation of the learned man misusing his knowledge in order to swindle or deceive the common people. In *Dame Sirith*, that conman was the “clerk” who, Sirith claims, turned her daughter into a dog—and in fact, Sirith herself takes on the role of the trickster because her claim is a lie. In Chaucer’s text, that conman was is represented in two alchemists, one who foolishly thought his experiments could work and one who knowingly defrauded his customer base.

In John Metham’s *Amoryus and Cleopes* (c. 1449), the learned deceiver is an unnamed “secretary” [a cleric or priest] of Venus (452, 634, 647, and more), and necromancer who imbues an amalgamation of physical objects, including metals and bones, with disembodied spirits in

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<sup>151</sup> All quotations from *Amoryus and Cleopes* come from its printing in *The Works of John Metham*, edited by Hardin Craig, Early English Text Society 132, 1916, pp. 1-81. Hardin has “bertys” on line 2009, but Stephen Page’s 1999 TEAMS edition and the MS have “hertys,” so I transcribe it as the MS has it here and translate it “hearts.” Princeton University Libraries MS Garrett 141, fols. 17r-56r. Line 2009 is on 53r. Stephen F. Page, ed. *Amoryus and Cleopes*, TEAMS, Middle English Texts Series, 1999.

order to construct a representation of the night sky. The “spyrytys” invoked in the epigraph above are the secretary’s means of deceiving the common people, for Metham writes that the spirits lead the people away from Christian truth. Metham’s romance contains no explicit reference to alchemy, but I argue that alchemical references are as present in *Amoryus and Cleopes* as they are in the other texts discussed in this dissertation. The secretary’s role as a trickster is a crucial connection to the combination of scientific inquiry and Christian community—for he represents, in his deception,<sup>152</sup> a barrier between scientific inquiry and Christianity—and an analysis of the alchemical process throughout the romance assists in viewing him as the trickster he is.

*Amoryus and Cleopes* has received less scholarly attention than other fifteenth-century works, like Lydgate’s *Troy Book* and William Caxton’s printed romances. Sadly, where Metham has received his due, it has usually come only in comparing Metham’s poesy to his predecessors, particularly Chaucer, and his contemporaries, diminishing Metham’s own talent through those comparisons.<sup>153</sup> Even Hardin Craig, who edited the first modern edition of *Amoryus and Cleopes* in 1916, could not help but insult Metham’s content, meter, and narrative construction.<sup>154</sup> More

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<sup>152</sup> Metham refers to both the secretary (agent) and the spirits (means) as deceptive, so I will as well, but the deception is the same: the secretary, using the spirits, leads his people away from God and toward pagan belief and ritual practice.

<sup>153</sup> Roger Dalrymple, in his 2002 chapter “*Amoryus and Cleopes*: John Metham’s Metamorphosis of Chaucer and Ovid,” calls Metham a “lesser Chaucerian” and claims that the “prosaic and metric merits of the piece appear minimal” (149-150).

<sup>154</sup> Craig, xiii, xv, and xlii; 159-63. Craig consistently assumes the worst of Metham’s intelligence and intentions, such as when he says that Metham could “hardly be using the epithet [lanifica] intelligently” (159), despite there being no reason in the text to think that “wool-maker” is somehow inappropriate as a reference to a Fate. Craig also interprets the poem in order to make the worst of Metham’s words, such as his note to line 44: “*Daryus*. Metham here seems to forget that he has just called the Persian monarch ‘*Camsyre*,’ or possibly he is at the end of his inventive powers, and copies quite openly from the Alexander story” (160). There is no reason in the text for Craig to assume that Metham meant the same man by two names: instead, it is rather fitting and much more likely that *Camsyre* is the ruler whom Nero overthrew, and Darius has been dead for five centuries: Darius is only mentioned as the common ancestor of the mothers of both *Amoryus* and *Cleopes* (lines 43-4). If Darius were the same as *Camsyre*, then our lovers would be second cousins at best (*Camsyre* was very recently killed in battle and was probably not old enough for great-granddaughters to wed shortly after his death).

recent scholars, such as Amy N. Vines, Kara Doyle, and Trena Evans, demonstrate that Metham's single fiction work is worthy of literary examination in its own right.<sup>155</sup> There is much to praise in Metham's complex plot structure and in the way he combines religious and secular themes into a cohesive argument for the importance of science's practical uses to a society. Metham's combination of science and practical morality is the basis for my argument in this chapter that alchemy appears in metaphorical references to its processes and that the alchemical process helps to characterize the deception of the secretary.

*Amoryus and Cleopes* and Metham's scientific treatises are preserved in Princeton University Libraries MS Garrett 141, which places the romance in between a treatise on palmistry (palm reading) and a treatise on physiognomy.<sup>156</sup> The proximity of the romance to nonfiction scientific documents and the presence of lectures on astronomy and dragon lore in the romance itself demonstrate how closely Metham held science to the telling of his story. Metham's patrons, Miles and Katherine Stapleton, for whom he wrote *Amoryus and Cleopes* and likely the manuscript as a whole, were interested in scientific inquiry themselves.<sup>157</sup> While writing under their patronage, Metham had access to their private manuscript collection and to

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<sup>155</sup> Amy N. Vines, *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011. Kara Doyle, "Fabulous Women, Fables of Patronage: Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes* and BL MS Additional 10304" in *Medieval Poetics and Social Practice*, ed. Seeta Chaganti (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2012) pp. 124-42. Trena Evans, *Late Medieval Meditations on Translating Subjects*, London, Ont.: University of Western Ontario, 2000.

<sup>156</sup> Metham understood both of these as legitimate physical sciences, with references throughout to astrology. The Garrett MS is the only extant copy of *Amoryus and Cleopes*. Metham's treatise on physiognomy, or chiromancy, is also preserved in All Souls College, Oxford, MS 81, ff. 202-12. That manuscript also contains alchemical writings, such as *Versus viginti duo alchymici, auctore Conrado de Hildenser, nonnullis subijunctis praescriptis ejusdem naturae* (ff. 98-99) and *Hermetis regis Graecorum Secreta secundum transmutationis naturam* (ff. 18-52). All Souls College subtitles the manuscript, "Alchemica, astrologica, medica, etc." (A. G. Watson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Medieval Manuscripts of All Souls College Oxford*, [1996], p. 164). The All Souls MS dates to the late fifteenth century, probably within a couple generations of Metham writing it, so other medieval writers interested in esoteric sciences very quickly associated his work with those of alchemists.

<sup>157</sup> We know, for example, that the Stapletons owned a copy of *Secreta Secretorum*, one of the leading medieval texts about alchemy (it also discusses physiognomy, astrology, statecraft, and medicine). See Evans, 257-8.

their connections in order to acquire more, if needed—all of this in addition to his own upbringing, family connections, book collection, and education.<sup>158</sup>

The greatest difficulty in discussing alchemy in Metham's work is that Metham, so surrounded by scientific writing, so fascinated by the rhetoric of esoteric knowledge-transmission, and so eager to seek information outside of formal university education, never explicitly discusses alchemy, the supposed prototypical example of extra-university and esoteric study in the fifteenth century.<sup>159</sup> He seems to ignore alchemy completely, despite the transmission tradition to which he belonged. Indeed, the vast majority of Metham's major scientific influences and sources (including writers of palmistry, physiognomy, and astronomy, whom he must have studied either for his own nonfiction works or for the astronomical lecture in *Amoryus and Cleopes*) were interested in alchemy.<sup>160</sup> The same holds true for scientific writers

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<sup>158</sup> Metham claimed to be a "sympyl scoler of philosophye" (1r) and "sk[c]olere off Cambryg" (75v) in the Garrett manuscript. His claim to Cambridge may be because it was his birthplace. Interestingly, the Cambridge University register of students, up to 1500 C.E., includes him, but its source is his own scholar "off Cambryg" claim (A. B. Emde, ed., *A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*, Cambridge University Press, 1963, p. 404). His family was certainly gentry, though probably not nobility (Craig x-xi). He must have received some level of formal education, but his rhetoric about education and his level of understanding in several fields suggest that most of his learning was done on his own. Metham's Latin quotations, Craig points out, are often quite different from their original sources, so his studying was probably done mostly in Norfolk, away from universities and without easy access to primary texts (xi). His best sources in Norfolk would have been the relatively limited collection owned by the Stapletons and their close connections, which included alchemical treatises. See Samuel Moore, "Patrons of Letters in Norfolk and Suffolk, c. 1450," *PMLA* 27, no. 2 (1912): 188-207.

<sup>159</sup> Alchemy was no longer taught in universities by the end of the fourteenth century (Evans 260-1). Chaucer's association of alchemy with learned clerks who choose to rip people off is not as salient for Metham, for whom alchemists would have operated largely in secret, even as their symbols and common metaphors became more widely known through increased transmission of their manuscripts and more frequent translations of scientific—including alchemy—material into vernacular languages.

<sup>160</sup> These sources include Avicenna, Roger Bacon, Michael Scot, Rodger of Mallorca, and Albertus Magnus. Other influences and fellow writers include Johannes Sacrobosco (John of Holy Wood), whose twelfth-century *Tractatus de Spera* [Treatise on the Sphere] received commentary by Robertus Anglicus and Michael Scot. Scot's commentary refers to Aristotle's *Meteororum*, on the section about the transmutation of elements: "Sciunt autem artifices alchimiste transmutari non posse <que specie different.>" In English, "Let the artificers [craftsmen] know, however, that <those which differ in appearance> cannot be transmuted for [the sake of] the alchemist" (my translation). That is, even with the alchemists' power, they cannot change the fundamentality of the elements. Scot followed Avicenna's belief that alchemists could only imitate gold, not create true gold. Alchemists like Avicenna and Scot were more interested in the elemental makeup of the universe than specifically turning lead into gold. See

who came after him and who belonged to the same tradition of sources and influences.<sup>161</sup>

Furthermore, Metham seems to know the process by which alchemical knowledge—indeed, any knowledge outside of medieval universities—was spread or transmitted among those who were interested in scientific writings but had no access to university libraries. This esoteric knowledge-transmission, or the method of copying and passing along manuscripts that discuss some claimed knowledge not highly regarded in more official settings like universities and the scriptoria of monasteries, is a key feature of the study of alchemy in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>162</sup> Metham explains in his treatise on palmistry that it was written originally by an Aurelius (whom scholars have not been able to identify), so he participated in the transmission tradition so familiar to alchemists.

The framing device for *Amoryus and Cleopes* is a fictional representation of actual esoteric knowledge-transmission: the “sempyl wryter” or narrator says that he had come to possess a Greek illuminated manuscript, but because he could not read it, he needed a translator. Thankfully, a Greek traveler in Norwich translated it into Latin for Metham (50-60).<sup>163</sup> Additionally, Metham includes direct references to other medieval sciences in his romance

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Lynn Thorndike’s *The Sphere of Sacrobosco and its Commentators*, University of Chicago Press, 1949, pp. 26 and 270.

<sup>161</sup> The alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541) and the compiler of medieval scientific treatises and poetry Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) are some of the most notable of these, but also worth mentioning is Richard (Ricardus) Dove of Buckfastleigh (c. 1407-1470), a Cistercian monk. His journal, found now in British Library MS Sloane 513, 100-8b, contains many astronomical, palmistry, and astrological ideas. In a letter to the abbot of Woburn, he claimed to have once successfully turned the moon into the sun while studying at Oxford (or some metal, perhaps silver, into gold; traditionally, ‘the moon’ should mean ‘silver,’ but scholars are unsure). See David Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England, Volume III: The Tutor Age*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p 32.

<sup>162</sup> As Linden argues in his Introduction to *The Alchemy Reader*, the authority and tradition of anthologies of ancient texts reigned supreme during the late Middle Ages. To position one’s thoughts as original to the ancients was to claim certainty not otherwise provided by experimentation (4).

<sup>163</sup> Metham is now doing us the favor of translating it into English from the Latin copy (stanzas 9 and 10). As Craig notes, John Leke of Norfolk’s *Wise Book of Philosophy* uses the same “out of Greek” conceit for prestige (160). Modern readers might be familiar with Tolkien’s own esoteric conceit for the Red Book, from which he “translated” his Middle-earth stories.

which would have been associated with alchemy by one audience or another: astronomy, for those who thought about alchemy alongside its theological and physical science partners, and necromancy and sorcery, for those who saw alchemy more sinisterly.

For a vernacular writer of scientific material whose sources and tradition were tightly connected with alchemy and alchemists, it is strange to me that Metham should avoid naming or discussing alchemy at all.<sup>164</sup> A text that discusses these sciences and itself represents extra-collegiate conversation on occult sciences, we might expect, should also discuss alchemy—and yet Metham never once mentions it, neither to praise nor to criticize it. Metham’s silence is especially odd given his proclivity for science’s practical use in Christian communities. Optimistically, alchemists sold alchemy as community support and economic benefit for all.<sup>165</sup> I argue, though, that alchemy is only absent in name: Metham *does* refer to alchemy throughout the romance in the imagery, in the symbolism of colors, metals, and astrological figures, and in the processes that transform physical objects from one state or element to another.<sup>166</sup> Alchemy scholars have so far passed him by, but an exploration of alchemy in *Amoryus and Cleopes* will present a rationale for Metham’s exclusion of alchemy. My alchemical lens sees the secretary of

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<sup>164</sup> Scholars attuned to Metham’s scientific interests have mentioned this gap in passing. Evans, for example, lists every science and craft named or mentioned in *Amoryus and Cleopes* on page 258: “statesmanship, heraldry, lapidary, medicine, charms, amulets, dyeing, dragon lore, military craft, jousting, necromancy, astronomy, and astrology.” She excludes alchemy for good reason, and when speaking about Palamedon she enumerates cunning, astrology, necromancy, and prophecy among his gifts, not alchemy (270-1). Evans still thinks of alchemy, though, and points out on 260-1 that it was no longer practiced in university settings at the time Metham was writing *Amoryus and Cleopes* in the middle of the fifteenth century. Considering the presence of astrology and necromancy, she was also curious about alchemy’s absence.

<sup>165</sup> Many popular voices in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as John Gower’s, repeatedly called on alchemy to help the poor and to deliver all of Christendom from poverty by creating as much gold as was needed, whenever it would be needed.

<sup>166</sup> Metham would have had access to the writings of alchemists, such as the *Secreta Secretorum* and those by Albertus Magnus and Michael Scot, and the writings of other scientists who included alchemy in their texts, such as Trevisa’s translation of Bartolomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum* [On the Properties of Things], either during his education or when he was a client of the Stapletons in the north, with access to their library and extra-university transmission. I have no doubt that Metham was aware of the central metaphors and even laboratory language of alchemists.

Venus as a trickster akin to the other central characters of this dissertation: Sirith's clerk, Chaucer's canons, Henryson's fox, and *Pentiment's* Prior Ferenc. Viewing the secretary as a deceptive transformer of spirits and metals (i.e., alchemist) leads me then to conclude that Metham's clear denunciation of the sphere's construction, due to the process (especially necromancy), is also a denunciation of the process of alchemy when applied to real practice. Metham reduces alchemy to useful storytelling metaphors, taking care never to endorse the practice itself: alchemy is useful not in making gold or in serving its community, but its symbolism can assist storytelling. Alchemy in Metham's text is literary *only*, useful in language, and so he strips it of any possible application to the real world. Alchemy, like the pagan gods, is a mere plot device in order for Metham to simultaneously use its useful metaphors and avoid endorsing its practice. Alchemy appears in the ways Metham represents process or change, especially in the characters Amoryus and Cleopes. Metham uses alchemical language to describe processes too often to be ignored. He presents the marriage of Cleopes and Amoryus as a conjunction of the alchemical principal metals (mercury and sulfur). He presents their deaths and resurrections as a putrefaction that acts as a catalyst (as a philosopher's stone) for Albynest's conversion (transmutation from pagan base metals to Christian gold).

In this chapter, I present evidence for his use of alchemical process to describe several processes in the romance, including calcination in the temple's destruction and Amoryus's dragon fight, conjunction in the marriage of Amoryus and Cleopes, sublimation in the construction of the sphere, and putrefaction in the deaths and resurrections of Amoryus and Cleopes.<sup>167</sup> In Palamedon's astrological reading (lines 262-324) is a brief representational

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<sup>167</sup> Calcination is the reduction of a substance into a powder or calx. Conjunction is the union of calcified mercury and sulfur. Sublimation is the distilling and purifying of a solution that contains both Body and Spirit (sometimes identified as mercury and sulfur, but sometimes as other metals as well). Putrefaction is the symbolic

relationship of his fortune-telling proclivities and the alchemical process of ceration.<sup>168</sup> Metham also employs other alchemical ideas, or tropes found in alchemical texts, throughout *A&C*, but for this chapter I focus on the four processes above.<sup>169</sup> Unlike the other texts of this dissertation, which base deception in the inability for the supposed power to work, pagan-wrought necromancy in *A&C* is successful. The secretary of Venus constructs a sphere that recreates and simulates the heavenly bodies, but this success is in fact a moral failure in Metham's romance, for it leads the people away from Christ and the construction requires an inherently sinful process (necromancy). It is still deceptive, despite really working: Metham describes the secretary as summoning those spirits in order to deceive the people (589), and as I quoted in the

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death and resurrection of metallic seeds in order to grow better; the process usually involved repeated drying and wetting or heating and cooling. See Stanton Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, "Introduction," Cambridge UP (2003), pp. 17-8.

<sup>168</sup> Ceration is the heating of a substance so that it softens into a wax. It was associated with Sagittarius, Palamedon's sign (Antoine Joseph Pernety, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique* [Paris, 1787]). One of Pernety's medieval sources is George Ripley, whose Wheel assigns each zodiac constellation to a certain element (earth, fire, water, and air) and therefore a certain combination of dry-wet/hot-cool. From those assignments come the zodiacs' associations with the alchemical process. For more, see Jennifer Rampling's "Depicting the Medieval Alchemical Cosmos: George Ripley's Wheel of Inferior Astronomy," *Early Science and Medicine* 18, no. 1-2 (2013): 45-86.

<sup>169</sup> For example, alchemical allegories also often included a hylozoistic world (the setting is alive and sentient—for example, objects normally inanimate have desires); allegorical visions; and aurification (the making of fake gold as alchemists themselves called it, as opposed to aurifaction, the making of true gold). The secretary has a dream vision about the risen Jesus Christ come to overthrow him and Albyn's paganism (661-7). Cleopes reaches for a book's illumination of a prophetic dream after she and Amoryus lock eyes (800-13). Amoryus has a vision while he suffers from lovesickness (1040-1). A hylozoistic world, a world with its own agency and sentience that acts miraculously, appears most clearly in the hailstorm/earthquake that both destroys the Temple of Venus and creates the chink in the garden wall (1059-62). This seems to be a sign, or some movement in the cosmos, that the force which calcifies pagan idolatry is the same which endorses and allows for the love of Amoryus and Cleopes. See Linden (15-19 for the hylozoistic setting and for other aspects), Jennifer Rampling (*The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300-1700*, University of Chicago Press, 2020), Eoin Bentick (*Literatures of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern England*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2022, chapters three and four, "British Library, MS Harley 2407" and "Alchemical Hermeneutics"), and José Rodríguez Guerrero, "El *Correctorium alchimiae* (ca.1352-1362) de Ricardus Anglicus y la versión de Bernardus Magnus de Tréveris," *Azogue* 8, no. 1 (2014-2018): 216-270. For primary sources before, around, or shortly after Metham's time, see Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390), the *Correctorium alchimiae* (c. 1352-1362) attributed to Ricardus Anglicus, the Psuedo-Aquinian *Aurora Consurgens* (best in the fifteenth-century Zurich Central Library MS Rh. 172), Thomas Norton's *The Ordinal of Alchemy* (c. 1477), George Ripley's *The Compound of Alchemy* (c. 1471), and British Library MS Harley 2407 (earliest works from the fifteenth century).

epigraph the hermit calls the spirits themselves “dysseyuabyl” (2012).<sup>170</sup> Metham contrasts the necromancy of the secretary with the necromancy of the hermit Ore, whose prayers resurrect Amoryus and Cleopes.<sup>171</sup> That necromancy is virtuous because its process, source, and intent are pure. Ore leads them to truth, not to falsehood. That truth is Metham’s central conceit: the purpose of any scientific inquiry and practice should point one’s community toward God. Alchemy as a literary device points Metham’s audience, primarily the Stapletons, to his ultimate lesson about Christian piety and science.

As interested as Metham was in scientific method and knowledge, he was just as interested in how a Christian community, when properly committed to loving their neighbors, should apply that knowledge and its artistic works.<sup>172</sup> As Vines argues, Metham sets forth in his treatises and his romance an argument for the social and practical use of all knowledge and thereby the fusion of scientific material and Christianity.<sup>173</sup> Evans argues that Metham combines Christian piety—especially in religious icons—with the virtuous scientific investigation that Cleopes conducts, that for Metham “image-based devotion is fundamental to Christian piety.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> The word Metham uses on line 589 is “ludyfye,” from Latin *ludificare*, “to delude/deceive,” or “to make a joke out of.” He elsewhere uses some variant of “dysseyue.”

<sup>171</sup> I use “necromancy” to describe both the secretary’s magic and the hermit’s prayer, but the negative connotation of the word is best used for the secretary. Metham’s ancient, medieval, and biblical sources for necromancy are not univocal in a denunciation of it as an evil practice, and his dual representation of it in the romance (one for the purpose of deception, and one for the purpose of salvation) reflects his sources well. I will tend to call Ore’s prayer a resurrection rather than an act of necromancy. For virtuous necromantic scenes which Metham may have known, c.f. Ezekiel 37, in which the prophet dreams that YHWH resurrects a whole army of bones by breathing new life into them; Christina Mirabilis (c.1150-1224), whose unsuccessful hagiography by Thomas of Cantimpré claims she returned to life during her funeral; John 11, in which Jesus raised Lazarus; and the resurrected saints Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and Magdalena Beutler (1407-1458) (Elizabeth Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1986; Thomas of Cantimpré, “The Life of Christina the Astonishing,” trans. Barbara Newman and Margot H. King, in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives: Abbot John of Cantimpré, Christina the Astonishing, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywières*, ed. Barbara Newman, Turnhout: Brepols, 2000, 125-157; and Alicia Spencer-Hall, “The Post-mortem Projections: Medieval Mystical Resurrection and the Return of Tupac Shakur,” *Opticon* 1826 13, no. 1 [2012]: 56-71).

<sup>172</sup> Evans, *Meditations*, 254, 283. Vines, *Women’s Power*, 54.

<sup>173</sup> Vines, 70, 82.

<sup>174</sup> Evans, 271.

In treating images with reverence but not idolatrous worship, Amoryus and Cleopes “prove themselves worthy of grace,” where the other characters are unable to distinguish idolatry and the devout proliferation of holy images.<sup>175</sup> That is, Metham creates a dichotomy between Christian and pagan approaches to science, suggesting that only those who come with a Christian worldview will be able to distinguish the ethical practices from the unethical ones. Pagans, however, are likely to “confuse the image with the imaged.”<sup>176</sup> According to Metham, Christians are able to subsume astronomical knowledge to the divine singular God, but pagans are tricked into worshiping the stars simply because they appear above and because they are represented in idols—this trick happens with the necromantic construction of the sphere in the rebuilt Temple of Venus. As with images of worship, Metham presents a pagan use of occult knowledge—alchemy and necromancy—that turns people from God, and he reinforces the positive nature of Christian use instead. Thus, for Metham, good science, as much as good art, must point toward God and must be used to help the community.

Metham’s frequent mention of process and his use of laboratory, furnace, or smithy terminology establishes the ease with which the alchemical process fits within the romance. His emphasis on continual actions and change, often buttressed by references to or similes about burning metals, reinforces that Metham is concerned with transformation, working with metals, and heating for the purpose of altering states of matter. Analysis of these references lays the groundwork that allows me to then apply the alchemical process to the romance, onto which I map the laboratory diction. The laboratory and the falling in love seem to benefit from the same terms. Metham mentions or grammatically implies process and chooses words that invoke the

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

laboratory or workshop in order to describe the lovers. For example, Metham takes care to represent the amount of time and labor it takes for Amoryus and Cleopes to fall in love. He also combines standard love language with a specific attention to the laboratory. Their eyes meet, and they fall in love instantaneously—but the falling in love has only just begun. Metham writes, “For with-in Amoryus the sparkyl off loue so rootyd gan be, / That he sekkynyd and pale gan wax in parte” (1033-4). Metham’s use of “pale gan wax” and “sekkynyd” suggests an attention to lovesickness that uses common tropes but uniquely invokes alchemy by way of hidden metal-working (hidden because it happens in the body). In only two lines, Metham has impressed on the reader that time is necessary for change, that love cannot only happen at first sight, and that love’s transformation is consequential in character growth. During the dedication of the new temple, Metham joins with classical passion-imagery in “louys fyre” (784). These usages are common across love stories, but Metham’s usages here stick out when paired with his less common furnace diction.

Metham is more explicit when the lovers leave each other after their first conversation through the wall: “Thus aftyr, as tellyth the proces off this story, / They ended thayre delytfful communing” (1156-7). The telling of the romance is a process, and Metham likens that process to the working of metals. Metham calls upon an “artyfycer” to help him tell his tale as well as possible.<sup>177</sup> This artificer is not a muse or his source: he invariably names his muse inspirations in the invocations and uses some variation of “mine author” to refer to his source, Fyrage. The artificer is something else, something wrapped up in craft—it is most often used in Middle English to describe a craftsman or worker with metals. While Metham uses the term to mean a

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<sup>177</sup> Alchemists referred to themselves as “artificers” and “craftsmen.”

craft of fiction, or a poet, his romance is the only example of such a use in the *Middle English Dictionary*.<sup>178</sup> Poets were craftsmen, of course, and Metham choosing this specific word in a call for someone to help him tell the tale creates an even closer connection between metalworkers and poets. Specifically, he asks the artificer to “puryfye” his unpolished poetry into something more befitting to his subject. Such a poetic, metaphorical use of “artyfycer” to transform poetry by purification suggests a resemblance to the alchemical process.

As with the language of artifice and purification in the romance, forges and furnaces appear often throughout *Amoryus and Cleopes*. In the scene where the seven hundred thousand spirits summoned by the secretary of Venus are constructing the new sphere out of the ruins of the original Temple of Venus, Metham employs the continuous active gerund in the same stanza as he recounts the sphere’s unending movement and the spirits’ circling:

In the este ende off this tempyl this spere apperyd alofft,  
Fyue cubytys fro the ground, alwey meuyng;  
Noudyr hangyng ner vndyr born, of herd ner off sofft,  
But alone in the eyar, to euery mannys eye apperyng.  
So meruulus a melody yt causyd to folkys heryng,  
...  
and so vysuually, to yche mannys syte,  
Abouyn this spere enchauntyd apperryd ouer, more and les,  
As liqwyde gold brennyng in a furnes (514-8, 525-7)

Metham’s description of the last stages of the sphere’s construction is reminiscent of how metals in an alchemy laboratory behave.<sup>179</sup> In a simile related to alchemical laboratory language, Metham likens this sphere’s mechanism to the burning of gold in a furnace. The sphere is a

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<sup>178</sup> MED, “artificer, -ier,” n. [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED2368/track?counter=1&search\\_id=705997](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED2368/track?counter=1&search_id=705997). Of course, that does not mean that he is the only one to associate artificers with poets, but it does demonstrate that the word was almost always used literally to describe metalworkers.

<sup>179</sup> For a similar literary use of alchemical metals in a laboratory, see Chaucer’s description of the canon and the canon’s yeoman in *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*.

spectacle so engrossing and beautiful that everyone watches it in awe. Gold burning in a “furnes” alone is clearly tied to alchemy, but it is important because Metham’s use of that simile here reinforces his love language about love’s fire and growing pale, as well as his references to artificers and purification in the act of poetry. Liquid gold boiling is Metham’s imagery because no other idea captures both the motion and experience of witnessing the sphere and also relating it to alchemy. The diction grabs the reader just as the suspended and spinning sphere grabbed its audience. Metham might have used some other turbulent force in the simile, perhaps a flowing stream, and keep in more common custom, as he did (apparently) with his description of Amoryus’s lovesickness.<sup>180</sup> However, he chose liquid gold in a furnace because the alchemical reference emphasizes the people’s attention. The sphere is the physical embodiment, of the secretary’s creation, for deceiving the people, so Metham marries alchemy with spectacle, associating alchemy with a trick that relies on a flashy demonstration.

Metham’s use of furnace imagery even assists his telling of Amoryus’s fight against a dragon and reliance on Cleopes, which thereby strengthens Cleopes’s association with the correct use of knowledge. After the two have fallen in love, Cleopes describes several different dragon species to Amoryus before his battle against one called the “serra cornuta.” In this short lecture, Cleopes tells Amoryus that the venom of the asp dissolves everything it touches: “For as wax ayens the fyre meltyth, on the same wyse / Steele and yryn be dyssoluyd at the touchyng of

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<sup>180</sup> Metham explicitly switches fire and water—again, perhaps to gain more association with the Sun, or gold, and with the alchemical process in describing the journey of Palamedon back home from the front lines as “fyry, and noght wattery” (294). This comes closely after naming Jupiter as “fyry” and Neptune as “wattery” (287), perhaps indicating that Jupiter (or tin) is a better start to the journey than water (and, of course, to indicate that the journey will happen over land, not by ship).

that corrupcion” (1281-2).<sup>181</sup> She also gives him a vial that contains a potion poisonous to the serra cornuta. During the dragon battle, Metham writes that Amoryus, as he lays heavy sword strikes onto the dragon, acts “as doth a smyth / Qwan he a brennyng hote yryn hath vp-on a styth [an anvil]” (1493-4). Amoryus’s sword is likened to the blacksmith’s hammer, and the dragon’s scales are the hot iron he strikes. The dragon’s venom comes “as flamyng fyre” (1504) while Amoryus bides his time and looks for an opening. The instruments of Amoryus’s victory are likened to the fires of experimentation and the configurations of metallic combinations. As I argued for in *Dame Sirith*, the combination of all these markers of material transformation point to alchemy’s broader goals, such as discovering the elemental makeup of nature and, more practically, experimenting with metals in their laboratories. Alchemy, then, is embedded in the language and the events of *Amoryus and Cleopes*, reduced to a plot device or effective metaphors.

Metham draws on four specific processes described by alchemists in order to propel his character’s actions, describe certain plot events, and establish the setting and plot sequence as a whole. For the rest of the chapter, I explain these four processes and demonstrate how they appear in *Amoryus and Cleopes*: in order, calcination, conjugation, sublimation, and putrefaction.<sup>182</sup> Calcination appears throughout the romance, sublimation is clearest in the sphere, conjugation appears in the sphere and the lovers, and putrefaction is most prominent in the resurrections of Amoryus and Cleopes. I end the chapter with a brief look at the implications of these processes on Palamedon’s astrological reading and then on the role Cleopes plays as the

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<sup>181</sup> The asp is of particular interest because Metham through Cleopes uses dog whistles for alchemists which we have seen in other texts in this dissertation: the asp is subtle (1270) and sleight (1271), or illusory, and full of tricks and enchantments (1271).

<sup>182</sup> Other processes, like ceration, also appear, though not to the degree that these four do.

source of victory and salvation, connecting back to my claim that Metham uses alchemical processes in order to strip them of power and reduce them to literary devices. Metham uses the processes of alchemy as positive metaphors for the importance of Christian communities to prioritize the practical and ethical uses of science.

The first step in most alchemical treatises is calcination, or the heating by fire of solid materials so that they either melt or dissolve, usually into a fine powder called “calx,” allowing the alchemist to then combine these powders in new ways.<sup>183</sup> Metham uses fire imagery, especially the verb “to burn,” frequently to describe the process of some change.<sup>184</sup> Amoryus burns with “louys fever” (1043) for Cleopes so much that he falls ill. Through his illness, his love is proved, and once recovered, his courtship begins in earnest. Calcination is represented best at three times in *Amoryus and Cleopes*: the thunder and hail which reduce the Temple of Venus to rubble, the dragon fight, and the destruction of the sphere during Albynest’s conversion to Christianity. In all these cases, something is broken or reduced to smaller pieces so that something better can be created.

The destruction of Venus’s temple results in a pile of debris. Metham narrates both its original construction and its eventual destruction:

The fadyr off Cleopes, as seyth this story,  
Was clepyd Dydas, hos wurchyp and fame  
Was spred ful wyde; so that the cyteceyns for a memory,  
Lete make a pyler of bras, ther-in wrytyn hys name  
And hys beneffetys, more-ouer, hys ymage heldyng a frame,

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<sup>183</sup> Linden, 17. George Ripley, an alchemist writing at the same time as Metham, called calcination “the purgation of our stone.”

<sup>184</sup> Consider this passage attributed to Jabir ibn Hayyan (scholars now refer to the author as Pseudo-Geber) in the *Book of Furnaces*, on the Calcinary Furnace: “Calcination is the Treasure of a Thing; be not you weary of Calcination...For imperfect bodies are cleansed by Calcination, and by reduction of the Calcinate into a solid body or mass. Then is our Medicine projected upon them, and cause give to you of Joy.” Linden, 94. Translated by Richard Russell (London, 1678).

In tokyn that be equite he reulyd the towne;  
And eke that the tempyl was off hys fundacion.

My boke tellyth the cause off this remembraunce,  
Seyng that qwyl Palemedon with the emperor was in batyle,  
Dydas had off the cyte the hole gouernauns;  
And, sodenly, ther come fro heuyn a thundyr and hayle,  
That it ouer-thrw the tempyl off Venus, top ouer tayle;  
And Venus, with alle ymagys off gold, syluer, and bras,  
Were smet to poudyr, bothe more and las. (ll. 106-19)

After the natural disaster, Dydas the ruler of Albynest funds a new temple's construction. In order for Amoryus and Cleopes to meet at the rebuilt temple and for them to talk across the broken wall, the temple and wall must be made ready for their fateful romance. It is not enough, that is, for Metham to recount a destruction. For it to be a moment of calcination, it should include some specific alchemical language and a hint at greater things to come because of the destruction. Metham provides both. The temple and its contents are "smet [smitten] to powdyr," in a line directly following mention of gold, silver, and brass. That powder is exactly the phrase used in alchemical treatises for the resulting matter of calcination; the powder in this passage comes explicitly from metallic images of Venus, not rubble or stone.<sup>185</sup> Metham also uses "brent in-to aschys" [burnt to ashes] (133) despite the temple not seeming to have undergone a burning process that would create ash. Metham foreshadows Venus's eventual fall with the collapse of the temple itself, but also notable is the rebuilding effort. Dydas promises to restore everyone's

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<sup>185</sup> The metals of the temple (gold, silver, and brass) are alchemically interesting. Gold is the goal of the alchemical process; silver is a nice second to gold, and it means the process is moving along well. Brass is an alloy of zinc and copper. Copper is associated with Venus (the Cyprian, of Cyprus, home of large copper mines and where we get the word), and zinc (according to Albertus Magnus) is interchangeable with lead (*Libellus de Alchimia*, chapter 3; Linden 102). Copper, Silver, and Gold are the three main metals showing the alchemical process of a single original metal (ibn Yazid, *Secrets of Alchemy*, chapter 24; Linden 75). Copper and Lead makes a Gold which harms and does not "stimulate the heart of man" (Albertus Magnus, chapter 10; Linden 105). The list of metals is also quite similar to Gower's presentation of the statue of Nebuchadnezzar in the fourth book of his *Confessio* and the fifth and seventh books of his *Vox Clamantis*.

wealth who kept their money in the temple (139), seemingly remaking the original structure, but then Metham skips over the rich adornments of this new temple. The descriptions we might expect of the new temple are replaced with two stanzas about the beauty of Cleopes; this replacement of the temple with her in Metham's narrative attention portends her part in the later overthrow of the new temple and, as I discuss at the end of the chapter, reinforces her central role in the marriage of science and Christianity. And Dydas does not only rebuild; he expands and, supposedly, improves by commissioning the sphere of pure gold to represent all the heavenly bodies in constant motion (446-51). The destruction of the Temple of Venus, therefore, is a representation of calcification.

Of course, it is not enough for Metham to depict a physical representation of calcination if his intent is to demonstrate alchemy's use as a literary device. Calcination appears in character journeys as well, not relying solely on physical materials. Calcination as a literary device is divorced from that physical requirement when Amoryus fights the dragon. In that scene, Metham crafts Amoryus's physical loss and mental despair as materials turned to powder, and he describes it in much the same way as he describes the destruction of the temple. In the third book of the romance, a dragon, which "serra men calle" (1184), terrorizes the land around Albynest. Palamedon allows his son, Amoryus, to fight the dragon. Now that the lovers have begun speaking through the wall, Cleopes is able to inform Amoryus about different dragon types, including this one—the serra cornuta—and gives instructions for armament. During the fight against the serra cornuta, Amoryus loses almost all of his equipment, and this is a more metaphorical use of calcination. Rather than metals being smitten into an ashy powder, Amoryus himself is beaten, and his spear (1439-41), steed (1445), and shield (1499) are all broken. It all seems lost until he patiently finds the right space to throw Cleopes's potion into the dragon's

mouth. Cleopes's advice and gifts save him only after he suffers from the dragon's breath and attacks. Just as that of the temple, this calcination of Amoryus features a breaking down of some original substance in order for something better to rise. The outcome is once again the standard medieval romance trope with some of Metham's twist—an eye for the transmission of knowledge, of legacy, and of the correct vector for worship. Metham leaves Amoryus victorious and at once describes “this pepyl” (1522), the fight's audience, who “lyff up her handys to the firmament, / Iheryng Mars and fortune” (1523-4) and who praise the “mercyful goddys omnipotent” (1525). After Metham reminds his audience that the cheering crowd have their religious dials wrong, he heaps that praise onto Amoryus himself: “and on ther knees fyl Amoryus beffore / With dyuyne wurchyppys” (1530-1). Amoryus's knightly deeds have increased both in their grandeur and in their effects on the community. Once home, he thinks about Cleopes and the help she offered, without which he would not have survived. Metham writes that his memories of her turn the “worldys felycyte” into “a derk nyght” (1547). To Amoryus, nothing could compare “To the prime oryent sparkyl off hys daunyng fyre, / Nwe radyffyd with the flame off ueneryan [Venerian/Venusian] desyre” (1548-9). The dragon fight and the lovers' story are quite connected, and here Metham connects them with fire. The dragon's fire on Amoryus increases his knightly honor just as Venus's fire increases his love—when, of course, his love and commitment to Cleopes were similar increased by her help in the dragon fight. That is, taking the dragon battle scene as an example of calcination applied as a literary device means that Amoryus's own growth as a knight and lover is dependent on his desperation and his being made low during the battle.

Metham's diction is remarkably similar in both the temple destruction and the dragon battle scenes. By using the same diction and describing the same sorts of events, Metham

cements the two scenes together. The sky during the hailstorm, the dragon in flight, and the dragon's final death-cry are "hydus [hideous]" (131, 1436, 1518). The temple, the dragon's eye, and Amoryus are "smet [smitten]" (119, 1448, 1498). Both temple and dragon have a "tayl/tayle" (117, 1497). Concepts remain similar as well, even with varying word choice. Both the temple and Amoryus face adversaries from the sky ("heuyne" [heaven, 116], wings/flying/"off the grounde" [passim 1430-1521]). Those threats from above announce themselves with great sound ("thundyr" [116], "meruulus cry" [1431]). Amoryus's spear "brast" (1441), and his shield "brak alle to pecys" (1499) in the same moment and breath as when Amoryus himself is "smet" by the dragon's "tayl." Compare to how the images of Venus, made of gold, silver, and brass, were "smet" into a powder. Additionally, Metham says that the hailstorm "ouer-thrw" the temple, using the verb in its more general metaphorical sense of "destroyed," though recalling its use in Middle English for unhorsing a knight during a duel, charge, or joust.<sup>186</sup> Metham does not use the word to describe Amoryus falling from his steed during the dragon battle, skipping Amoryus dismounting and narrating instead how the dragon "lepe on hys stede and kylde yt" (1445). Metham denies Amoryus the verb "over-throw" in his duel against the adventurous knight as well, first using "onhors [unhorse]" (933) and then threatening to have them fight on foot. In the end, they joust, during which Amoryus "smyght" the knight (997) and "schet [shot] hym ouer hys hors" (998). The ideas of over-throwing are present, but the verb is reserved for the temple's destruction, likening the hailstorm and crumbled temple to knights and therefore likening Amoryus's fights back to the temple's fall.

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<sup>186</sup> *MED*, "overthrouen," v. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED32021/track?counter=1>

Out of this trial of flaming venom, Amoryus comes out the clear victor, as if his self were burned and reduced in a laboratory to make something better. Amoryus is only able to become that better version because of the gauntlet of the dragon attack, delivered out of danger by the loving transmission of useful knowledge. Metham reminds us during the fight that we, like Amoryus, should be concerned with the transmission of knowledge: Cleopes is afraid that Amoryus may not have listened to her or heeded her warnings (1463). At the end, Amoryus is “hole and sound” (1523), suffering no serious injury. Though the dragon had “smet Amoryus to the grounde” (1498), the knight stood back up and “smet” the dragon back “vndyr the wyng” (1515). Amoryus had lost most of his equipment; traditional chivalric weapons had failed him, and his sword was only useful after the dragon had drunk Cleopes’s vial and had its mouth shut “as yt had be bound / With ilyn chenys” (1509-10). The gifted ruby and potion were his opportunity, and he had to suffer terrible attacks before the opportunity could come. In fact, he learns a great deal from the fight, most significantly that he is able to trust Cleopes, for it was because of Cleopes’s help via the lecture, ring, ruby, and vial that he survived. Amoryus has grown because of his reliance on Cleopes, his dependence on her knowledge and teaching. His brave actions, allowable only through the dragon’s breaking his spear and shield and through the use of Cleopes’s knowledge, have resulted in his becoming a much larger, greater man. Amoryus’s virtues were always praise-worthy, but now his actions were so great and admirable that he is given a golden garland as a sign of his victory (1534). The dragon battle is, therefore, a scene during which his inner true nature is brought out into the open for all to witness and revere, as a metal broken into ash will then be ready for combination, that its inner properties be revealed.

The destruction of the sphere and second temple, following Amoryus's and Cleopes's resurrection, is the calcination that directly results in Albynest's conversion. At the hermit's call, the sphere is "brokyn" (2023). In this case, most appropriately, the sphere is dissolved completely, the spirits within set free, so that Christianity can take precedence in the city. The passage is full of common critiques of alchemists, which I have shown in other chapters, most notably the claim that they contain nothing true and deceive via fraudulent presentation.

Beginning with the section I quoted in the epigraph, Metham writes:

[...] he in opyn audyens  
 To the spyrytys thus seyde, that meuyd the spere:  
 "O dysseyuabyll spyrytys! qwy make ye resystens  
 Ayens yowre makere? qwy dysseyue ye that he hath bought dere?  
 But enuye causyth yt, for that ye wold in fere  
 Them haue dampnyd with yow, in euerlastyng fyre;  
 I knowe that this ys yowre entent and yowre dysyre.

Qwerffore, that alle this pepyl may knowe opynly  
 That ye hem dysseyue, this fantasye and ye now dyspere,  
 In hys name that sofyrryd the Iuys hym crucyfye;  
 And schewe opynly that this fantastyk spere  
 Is no thing material, but as the smoke off a fere."  
 And nocht soner this word was spokyn,  
 But this spere was vanyschyd and brokyn.

And nocht apperyd noudyr gold, syluer, ner precyus stone.

(2010-24)<sup>187</sup>

The sphere, originally made of pure gold, contains no actual gold within it once the spirits are banished and the structure falls. The gold and silver that went into the construction do

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<sup>187</sup> ...he in open audience to the spirits who moved the sphere thus said: "O deceivable spirits! Why do you make resistance against your maker? Why do you deceive [the people] he has dearly bought? But envy causes it, for that you in fear would have damned them into everlasting fire with you; I know that this is your intent and desire. For that reason, so that all the people might know openly that you deceive them, make yourselves and your fantasy disappear in his name who allowed the Jews to crucify him; and show openly that this fantastical sphere is no material thing, but is like the smoke of a fire." And no sooner was this speech spoken, than the sphere vanished and was broken. And there appeared neither gold, nor silver, nor precious stone...

not appear at the end, for they have been completely transformed, or unformed. The building of it was, therefore, an act of aurification, the making of false gold, rather than aurifaction, the making of real gold. The hermit's condemnation of the spirits (and the secretary) is also notably not about the use of magic or enchantment, but specifically about the intent to "dysseyue" the people, to lead them away from truth. Fraud, then, is the accusation: the sphere is a trick born of "enuye," a trick which has "no thing material" and relies only on its presentation, its *apparent* reality. The sphere is ultimately an illusion which the hermit dismantles and disproves. Where Metham had demonstrated in the beginning the construction of the sphere in negative light, judging the secretary who created it and making clear its inappropriate application of science, Metham here at the end displays his denunciation of such practice in the real world. It is good to "schewe opynly," rather than to keep secret. It is good to condemn those who "dysseyue" with what is naught but "the smoke off a fere."

Christianity enters Albynest only after the sphere's destruction. Once it is vanished, the hermit begins to baptize everyone in the city, who have now seen the proof that the sphere (and therefore pagan idols) was an illusion, a representation without reality. The significance of the departing of the spirits and the disappearance of the sphere is, therefore, two-fold for Metham: this scene both uses alchemical calcination to finalize the ultimate conversion of Albynest to Christianity, and it denounces alchemy as a deceiving and ineffectual pseudo-science without going out of its way to name it. Metham, therefore, exposes alchemy for what it is: a fraud. He adapts alchemical language for describing the downfall of the pagan, idolatrous, and deceivable temple in order to gain some power back from alchemy in poetry, to cement its use as a literary device in the same breath as he casts his aspersion on the practice.

Alchemy's presence in the spirits and the sphere is best examined in the alchemical process of conjunction.<sup>188</sup> Conjunction, sometimes also called "combination" or "chemical wedding," is the process by which mercury and sulfur are merged in a laboratory in an attempt to create the philosopher's stone. As Linden explains, "Conjunction is the union of the two opposing, sexually differentiated *principles*, Sulphur and Mercury...variously referred to as male and female...[or] the red man and the white wife."<sup>189</sup> Roger Bacon, quoting a supposed Merlin, says, "If you Marry the White Woman to the Red Man, they will be Conjoyned and Imbrace one another, and become impregnated...whereby the two are made but one Body."<sup>190</sup> The masculine and red metal is sulfur; the feminine and white metal is mercury/quicksilver. Metham uses some of the color associations in the materials which the secretary uses for the sphere's construction, such as the "cedyr" (a red wood; 485) and the "mennys bonys [bones]" (white or pale; 490). The sphere, with those materials, the precious metals and stones, slowly takes on the appearance of "the firmament" as "in frosty nyghtys" (513), indicating a stark blackness with white dots adorning to represent the cosmos. A black material is expected from the initial conjunction. Bacon later explains that "this blackness [the result of Conjunction] is that which conjoyneth the body with the spirit."<sup>191</sup> The "Body" and "Spirit" are also common substitutes for sulfur and mercury. Another way to talk about that blackness or darkness is to call it "coal," which Metham uses for one of the component materials in the sphere ("qwyk colys," 485). Because calcination is required for the metals to be combined afterward, Khalid ibn Yazid speaks of the two

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<sup>188</sup> Because of alchemy's close relationship to astrology, "conjunction" also refers to the proximity of two heavenly bodies. For example, if an alchemical treatise refers to a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, it means to mix the metals copper and tin. I have not found this specific metaphor in *Amoryus and Cleopes*, despite Metham's interest in astrology.

<sup>189</sup> Linden, 17. Italics his.

<sup>190</sup> Francis Bacon, *Radix Mundi*, trans. William Salmon (London, 1692), chapter 40. Qtd in Linden, 115.

<sup>191</sup> Bacon, chapter 44. Linden, 117.

processes as in fact “one Operation, for the Spirits are not congealed [conjoined], except the Bodies be dissolved [calcinated]...And when the Soul and Body are joined together, each of them works its Companion into its own likeness and property.”<sup>192</sup> Of course, the result of the calcination and conjunction of the sphere in *Amoryus and Cleopes* is that, metaphorically, it appears as “liqwyde gold” (527).

Because sublimation is closely related to conjunction in the alchemical process, Metham represents both in the sphere’s construction. along with the hermit’s denunciation of that construction and its relation to other frauds or tricksters, warning the reader of those who promise to create such wonders in this way. Sublimation is the “elevation” or distilling of raw materials, sometimes several times, in order to purify them and bring Body and Spirit together. Sublimation, that is, is sometimes required for conjunction, but not always.<sup>193</sup> Since the sphere is the secretary’s attempt to rebuild after the original temple’s calcination, it fits into the alchemical schema as the conjunction step. And Metham infuses that “Body” and “Spirit” language into the secretary’s summoning of seven hundred thousand spirits. They enter the “Gold, syluer, and precyus stonys” that make up the physical material, or body, of the sphere (488). The secretary of Venus conjoins Spirit and Body in a literal sense, shutting the spirits into the solid ball (505). Metham extends this section with references to other “clerkys,” to “carectyrs and fygyrys,” and to “liqwyde gold brennyng” (492, 497, 527). The passage is concerned with learned men experimenting and crafting in secret, a not-so-subtle allusion to occult scientists—but unlike those who practice palmistry and physiognomy, the alchemist receives no support in the rest of Metham’s work. Metham’s silence on alchemy is loudest here, where the secretary

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<sup>192</sup> Khalid ibn Yazid, *Secrets of Alchemy*, trans. William Salmon (London, 1692), chapter 23. Linden, 73.

<sup>193</sup> Linden, 18.

and his actions are described with the same rhetoric associated specifically with tricksters and alchemists. The depiction of the clerks, learned religious authority figures, whose writings can hardly be deciphered and who deceive the common people with images of gold, sounds a lot like a condemnation of alchemists.

Of course, the condemnation of alchemists in general does not come, and Metham focuses instead on the specific injustice of this secretary, allowing his audience to make the connections for themselves. Metham does not allow the reader to sympathize with the secretary of Venus: the secretary uses organic materials and human remains to introduce the spirits to the sphere and trap them within—that is, he literally brings spirit into body. Metham describes a collection of cedar wood, coals, incense, and men’s bones, which the secretary uses, “introducynge the spyrytys in-to hys cyrcumfferens” (486). In fact, these “spyrytys haue delectacyon / Amonge tresur and ded mennys bonys to make ther mancion” (492-3). The “Body” symbol is much more literal here, considering the corpse-stealing which had to have occurred. The secretary and the spirits he summons are unequivocally evil. Once the sphere is built, Metham offers his opinion on the “sotel falsnes off the fend [fiend/devil]” which he believes has guided the building process (592). The issue at hand is deception, that, in Metham’s view, the secretary is leading people away from the true God and toward false idols. Sublimation and conjunction serve Metham as the means by which he can use alchemy while criticizing the fraud so closely tied to it.

The most significant way that literary alchemy appears in the romance is through the love story of Amoryus and Cleopes—the Red Man and White Woman, brought together because of the temple’s calcination and the sphere’s conjunction and sublimation. Where the moments of material transformation and combinations of Spirit and Body result in a clear denunciation, the

more metaphorical use of conjunction, as a literary device assisting the development of the central romance, reduces alchemy's power to that use as a literary device alone. Amoryus and Cleopes lock eyes and begin to fall in love during the dedication ceremony for the new temple of Venus and the necromantic sphere. Metham sets the scene when he “declare[s] the substau[n]s off the story / Off Amoryus and Cleopes, beyng at thise mysteryis alle / In that tempyl” [declares the substance of the story of Amoryus and Cleopes, who were participating in all the rituals at that temple] (725-7).<sup>194</sup> The rebuilt temple is the site of their meeting, so calcination, conjunction, and sublimation have all led in the text to the lovers. Later, their courtship begins in earnest when they meet through the crack in the garden wall, after the temple's original destruction and bouts of lovesickness. Calcination allowed for the romance because of the dedication ceremony and the chink in the wall. Metham describes their meeting through the wall's crack after a reminder of the original thunder, hailstorm, and (now added in) earthquake that tore the temple down:

Off this walle I spake in the first boke,  
 That qwan the tempyl off Venus dyd falle  
 With the erthqwaue, in the myddys asundyr yt schoke,  
 That yn at a crany a man might loke

(1059-  
62)

It is while remembering the destruction of the temple and the breaking of metallic idols that we are introduced to the lovers and their means of learning about each other. Their story so far—the temple falls, which causes a new to be built, so Amoryus marches in a procession, and there their eyes meet—fits within the alchemical process (calcination leading to conjunction).

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<sup>194</sup> Metham likes the word “mystery” for pagan ritual practice. He says just before this that the secretary “began the holy obseruans and mystery / Afftyr paynymmys [pagans'] gyse” (719). The mysteries are, evidently, singing, praying, and sacrificing rams, goats, and bulls (720-2).

Furthermore, the poesy of this section is structured in such a way that the audience must read about the temple's fall once again before Amoryus and Cleopes may meet. Usually, when Metham pauses the narrative, it is for a brief lecture—constellations, zodiac, planets and gods, dragonology—but this time, he takes a few lines to freeze the current plot and collapse it against one of the earliest events. The “cranny” in the wall allows for Cleopes to hear Amoryus in the next yard over, and so the earthquake both destroys the temple of Venus and provides the means for Amoryus and Cleopes to become lovers. This version of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is all the more poetic because what seems to be a tear or rip is in fact a means for bringing the two together. While every version of this story includes the gap in the wall, Metham makes effective use of this brief flashback in order to bring out their love from the ruins of the temple.<sup>195</sup> Before the reader can enjoy the conjunction of Amoryus and Cleopes, they must remember the calcination of the temple. The two events are intricately linked, and more than just in a plot device (the cranny does not *need* to be made by the earthquake that had rent the temple; it could have been there before, for the wall could be old)

Following Amoryus and Cleopes as the Red Man and White Woman of conjunction brings us to their ultimate moment of combination, their deaths and resurrections, which I cover in full below when discussing putrefaction. For now it is important to note the colors of the lovers when they leave the city to meet, for the red blood and the pale skin of fear and death combine in order to convert the city. In their gruesome conjunction, Cleopes first “wysch[es] both [her] handys and face” in a spring (1617). She begins the scene with purification and

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<sup>195</sup> Other than the version by Ovid well-read during the Middle Ages, some medieval versions of the Pyramus and Thisbe myth include those by Boccaccio (*Decameron* and *De Mulieribus Claris*), Gower (*Confessio Amantis*), and Chaucer (*Legend of Good Women*). The lovers speaking through a crack in a shared garden wall is fundamental to the story, but their resurrections and the cause of that crack by a temple-destroying natural disaster are unique to Metham's adaptation.

wetting—as important symbols in Christianity as they are in alchemy. She sees a lion approach, so she hides and drops her handkerchief. The handkerchief is “[m]ade alle bloody” when the lion wipes his mouth on it after having killed “an hyinde” (1632; 1621). Cleopes stays hidden when Amoryus arrives, and he is shocked at the bloody “kerchyf” (1649): his “hert gan cold and heuy wax as ony led” [heart began to grow cold and heavy as lead] (1650). Red has overrun the cloth, and Metham places Amoryus in the right beginning state for an alchemical transformation. The knight decides to commit suicide in order to “conioyne [his] spyryt on to [his] lady syde” (1700). His body turns red with blood, and as he dies he turns “the qwyght / Off hys eyn” [whites of his eyes] (1739-40). Cleopes asks Saturn to “deyfy” him in the sphere and to “[c]onioyne owre spyrytys” (1752; 1755). I find it no coincidence that, immediately following such emphasis on conjoining, red, white, and even lead, Metham asks the Sun to save them in conflation with Jesus: “O sunne of grace...Namyd be right *oryens sol iustycye*” [O sun/son of grace...named by right the East, the Sun of Justice] (1778; 1782).<sup>196</sup> That is to say, Metham looks to gold for a solution and salvation for the lovers.

Color similitude with alchemy—red with rubification and sulfur, white with albification and mercury—maps onto the characters.<sup>197</sup> But more than that: their conjunction and marriage is the impetus for their deaths in the first place. The colors mean little on their own, but in context

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<sup>196</sup> The Latin name is probably a reference to “O Oriens,” an Advent chant dating at least to the seventh century: *O oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol iustitiae* [O East, splendor of everlasting light, and Sun of justice]. Metham may also have had in mind Malachi 4:2 (sun of righteousness). The thirteenth-century breviary Engelberg, Stiftsbibliothek Codex 103, f. 79r uses the spelling *iusticie* rather than *iustitiae*. Metham pulls on this tradition of speaking about Jesus and the Sun together, which pairs well with alchemical gold.

<sup>197</sup> Rubification and albification, literally making something red or white, respectively, refer to lesser-written-about alchemical processes. Chaucer mentions “albificacioun” in *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*. According to Khalid ibn Yazid, for but one example, sublimating a substance (purifying it, essentially) will turn it white, into an apparent silver or white lead. Once it is white, then the alchemist should add enough “Spirit” to turn it red. Once it is red, then it is complete: “Whiteness is that which tinges Copper, and makes it *Yarit*: And it is redness which tinges *Yarit*, i.e. Silver, and makes it *Temeynch*, or Gold.” Chapter 24 of *Secrets of Alchemy*; Linden 75.

of their role in the city's conversion and their marriage, they signal through their alchemical interpretations the very transformative power which Metham assigns to them. Metham ends the third book of his romance with an admission that there is not enough time "them to combyne" (1776). Before their tragic suicides, because of the intrusion of a lion and a misuse of logic, the lovers ran out of time before they could combine, before they could wed. The hermit Ore, however, is able to give them a second chance.<sup>198</sup> With more time added to their lives, with Metham having broken from the fate restricting them, they convert to Christianity and then preach their resurrection to the city. Once the conversion is complete and Venus is "excludyd" from love (2044), Amoryus and Cleopes turn to themselves, and they are wed: Ore "joyne[s] Amoryus and Cleopes be lawe matrimonyal" (2050). The wedding of the lovers cements their conjunction and, by transforming their city, brings the story to its conclusion. Like mercury and sulfur in a philosopher's stone, the man and woman combine to create something purer from their union.

To be more specific on the resurrections of Amoryus and Cleopes: Metham situates his central concern—the practical use of science—in the literary alchemy that delivers a physical and cultural transformation in the putrefaction of the lovers conjoined in death. Putrefaction is the death and resurrection of principle materials so that the metals or conjoined alloys being worked may be reborn more perfect and numerous—that is, complete, pure, and multiplied.<sup>199</sup> This step relies on the foundational belief in alchemical literature that the metals and stones used

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<sup>198</sup> Evans links Ore's name to Latin *orare*, "to pray" (270). It is also reminiscent of English "ore," as in unrefined mined metal. *MED*, "or(e)," n.3, [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED30850/track?counter=2&search\\_id=684390](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED30850/track?counter=2&search_id=684390)

<sup>199</sup> Linden, 17.

in alchemy laboratories are alive.<sup>200</sup> For example, Roger Bacon, when discussing mercury, explains, “This is a Stone, and no Stone... Wherefore our [philosopher’s] Stone is called Natural, or Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal, for it is generated in the mines, and is the mother or womb of all metals...it springs or grows like a vegetable: and abounds with life like an animal.”<sup>201</sup>

Ancient and Arabic sources emphasize the similitude between their elements and stones and the natural world they observe. The Roman Era Greek *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* (not the last Egyptian pharaoh, but the woman alchemist of the second or third centuries) claims that all of nature grows, dies, and is reborn—animals, plants, and the inanimate alike:

[W]hen you take plants, elements, and stones from their places, they appear to you to be mature. But they are not mature until the fire has tested them...being transformed to the divine state of fusion. For they are nourished in the fire and the embryo grows little by little nourished in the mother’s womb...When the tomb is opened they issue from Hades as the babe from the womb.<sup>202</sup>

In the Latin West, in the thirteenth century especially, alchemists applied the words of Jesus, prophesying his own resurrection, to their metals and minerals: “[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Again, they represented in their allegories a sentient and vibrant cosmos with its own agency, called a hylozoistic world. I have not found any sources arguing that such a sentiment is related to or based on animistic beliefs, but it is similar.

<sup>201</sup> Bacon, chapter 38. Linden, 113. Mercury is also called quicksilver, from Latin *argentum vivium*—living silver.

<sup>202</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, trans., *The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry* (London: William Heinemann), 1951, p. 59. The original writer is anonymous, and the several manuscripts are grouped into the M-text and the A-text. Taylor translates from the Greek text in Marcellin Berthelot, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs, texte grec*, (Paris: George Steinheil), pp. 289-99, using Berthelot’s French translation as a guide. The manuscript from which Berthelot takes his Greek text is unnamed, but he says it is in Zurich and is closely related to the M-text, though he relies on A as well. Berthelot’s Greek rendering is no longer considered as relevant to medieval readers and writers or to modern scholars. For more on the manuscript transmission and the flaws of Berthelot’s critical text, see A. J. Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne), 1967, pp. 216-8. I am indebted to the second chapter of Fabiana Lopes da Silveira’s dissertation, on the manuscripts of this text, for helping to elucidate what Berthelot, Taylor, and Linden left unsaid (*The Searched-for Thing: A Literary Approach to Four Early Alchemical Texts*, Oxford: St. Anne’s College, University of Oxford, 2020, pp. 91-3).

<sup>203</sup> New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. The association stuck around into early modern alchemy writings. Paracelsus, in the first book of his *Of the Nature of Things*, quotes it: “Unless a grain of Wheat be cast into the Earth, and be putrefied, it cannot bring forth fruit in a hundred fold.” Linden, 152. Neither King

Putrefaction was built on this principle: the metal must die in order to increase and be purified. As a process, it was very much intertwined with both calcination (which one might think of as a death) and conjunction. For Metham, putrefaction can both transform his romance into a conversion narrative and serve as the ultimate purpose for his lovers, doomed to die in their narrative tradition linked back to Pyramus and Thisbe.

Amoryus and Cleopes commit suicide and are resurrected because of the hermit Ore's virtuous and true prayer on their behalf. The scene again depicts Metham's interest in deception, associated with alchemy, and the truth of Christianity: where the pagan gods do not answer prayers said to them, the Christian God responds to Ore with miraculous resurrection. It is also a scene of putrefaction, for Amoryus and Cleopes are made greater and purer by death and return. Amoryus and Cleopes upon awakening admit, "for nowe we dowght [doubt] nowght / That God ys none but one that regnyth in hevyn bryght" (1892-3). They believe that pagan priests and spirits "haue vs begylyd be vanyte and foly" (1896). Forsaking the pantheon, they ask for Ore to baptize them. In this new ending to the *Pyramus and Thisbe* story, one which has no obvious parallel in Metham's sources, the lovers must die and rise again in order to come to everlasting life. And more than that, the lovers must die and rise again in order for Ore to spread the truth of Christianity to Albynest. By their deaths and resurrections, Amoryus and Cleopes are certainly able to "bear much fruit" and assist in the conversion, which is Metham's ultimate victory. The "myrakyl" of their returning to life is the proof which Ore needed to convince the city to convert (1937). Had Amoryus and Cleopes been converted by discussion, by divine vision, or even by witnessing some other miracle—all otherwise represented in romances and vitae—then their

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James, Geneva, Douay-Rheims, nor Wycliffe use the word "putrefied" in this verse. Paracelsus's version adds "putrefied," demonstrating that alchemists felt comfortable translating scripture in a specific way for a greater resonance with their craft.

effect on the city may not have been powerful enough. They had to experience that death and resurrection directly, and it is only from their deaths and resurrections that the city can be saved. Putrefaction, then, is the final catalyzing alchemical process from which Metham draws.

All of these alchemical processes I find in *Amoryus and Cleopes* fulfilling some literary function in service of Metham's concerns for the transmission of knowledge, the ethical and practical use of scientific knowledge, and ultimately the combination of scientific inquiry and Christian community. The temple of Venus is calcified by flames of lightning so that the temple's remains may be conjoined with spirit for the construction of a vicious deception, the sphere, and so that Amoryus and Cleopes may talk through the chink in the wall. Amoryus's equipment is calcified by the dragon's flames, and he waits to use the potion Cleopes gave him until he had no recourse—calcification brought him to the point where he can admit just how badly he needs Cleopes's help, proving her own wisdom and preparation. Amoryus and Cleopes are putrefied—die and return—so that, in their new union (conjunction), they can save themselves and their people from the lies of the secretary and the spirits.

The alchemical process appears in *Amoryus and Cleopes*, but it is still left to argue how that literary alchemy affects the reader and brings about Metham's central conceit that scientific knowledge should be used for its practical applications in community. Additionally, literary alchemy provides Metham with the ability to use alchemy for its metaphors while omitting any direct alchemical reference and condemning its real-world practice in its association with scam artists and deceivers. The crux of why Metham uses alchemy in his romance, the implication from this application of the alchemical process onto his narrative, is Cleopes's role as the combination of science and Christianity.

Cleopes is the catalyst for Metham's great marriage of science and Christianity, and allowing the reader to see her through the alchemical process demonstrates the veracity and centrality she plays.<sup>204</sup> Her teaching of Amoryus is the focus of a large middle section in the romance, without an obvious source or parallel in Chaucer, Lydgate, or Ovid. As Vines argues, Cleopes takes on the chivalric education for Amoryus, being the "catalyst" for his character growth, his defeating the dragon, and his earning knighthood.<sup>205</sup> Doyle claims that Cleopes, throughout the entire poem, displays incredible agency, subjectivity, and self-certainty, all in such degrees that contemporary readers rarely saw elsewhere, especially in Metham's sources.<sup>206</sup> Evans, Dalrymple, and Vines all agree that one of Cleopes's functions is to create through her teaching the requirement that Christian piety and practical science be brought together through social responsibility.<sup>207</sup> Amoryus's great potential at the beginning of the poem comes to naught without Cleopes; he would fall to the dragon without her gifts, and the city would remain pagan. Cleopes is, therefore, more than just a character: her center-stage actions and speeches are the impetus for wise and practical learning and for spreading the news of Jesus Christ. She combines with Amoryus and combines science and love in her speech on dragon lore. At every step, Cleopes's journey along the alchemical processes prepares her for the virtuous use of her knowledge and for her eventual fate to convert Albynest.

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<sup>204</sup> Metham mentions the Sun (the ultimate goal) often, and the mentions of Cleopes seem only to highlight her destiny. That the sun means gold and stands as the purest and best goal only reinforces the power Cleopes has when Metham refers to the two of them together. Metham compares her beauty to the sun directly early on (148-9). She sees the lion before dawn (1605), and after they die Metham invokes the "sunne of grace," combining the Sun and the Son (1778-98; see above).

<sup>205</sup> Vines, *Women's Power*, 64.

<sup>206</sup> Doyle, "Fabulous Women," 131. Cleopes has action and choice in her romance that Chaucer's Criseyde does not.

<sup>207</sup> Vines, 76, 82; Dalrymple, 153-5 (Cleopes calms Amoryus as he paces before the dragon fight); Evans, 271 (Cleopes is an expert at both religious devotion and sciences like lapidary).

Metham's use of alchemical references also provides him with the ability to engage in the same sort of literary alchemy which I described in Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*: he relates alchemy to us through its metaphors, turning alchemy itself into a literary device and taking away some of its real-world potential. Metham already does this with the pagan gods: as Dalrymple argues, "Like many a Christian poet (like Metham himself), Amoryus has articulated experience in terms of the influence of a pagan deity, but in doing so reduces that deity to a literary device rather than an autonomous god."<sup>208</sup> True reduction is not only the narrative's presentation of Christian truth in Ore; it is the narrational use of former genuine beliefs as mere devices to support something else in the story. Metham does not only speak his belief that Christianity has triumphed over the pagan gods of ancient Europe and western Asia. He displays it in poetics as well.

The same reduction happens to alchemy in the romance; I argue that reduction is why Metham never names it. He allows its absence to speak not against but alongside the references. When Metham writes about gold and silver, about combination, even about magic, he allows those references to carry alchemical information only insofar as they are literary devices. When transformation is practiced in the story, he condemns it as falsehood, fraud, deception, and illusion. But he freely uses alchemy's language to further the plot, to tell more about the characters, and to signal widely his concern for the combination of science and Christian community. Those references to the alchemical process do not tell us how to conduct alchemical experiments or follow their processes, as alchemical allegory poetry is meant to do. Instead, they tell us alchemy only works in the world of text.

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<sup>208</sup> Dalrymple, "Metamorphosis," 157.

## CHAPTER V: THE MORALIZATION OF ALCHEMICAL REFERENCE IN ROBERT

### HENRYSON'S *MORAL FABLES*

Seis thow not, lord, this warld overturnit is  
As quha wald change gude gold in leid or tyn.

[Do you not see, Lord, that this world is overturned,  
As though one had changed good gold into lead or tin.]  
Henryson, "The Sheep and the Dog," *Moral Fables* 1307-8.<sup>209</sup>

#### **Introduction**

So far in this dissertation, I have discussed various themes which relate to alchemy in some direct or indirect manner across Middle English verse: trickery; deceit; religious bans; references to certain metals (especially gold); processes of whitening, yellowing, and distillation; and transformation. In the first chapter, I examined Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the ways in which alchemical and religious language collided; his poem is quite overt with its condemnation of fraudulent alchemists. I argued for the presence of literary alchemy and established the association of alchemists with tricksters, both of which appear in each subsequent chapter. In the second chapter, I went back in time to the orally-performed *Dame Sirith*, a fabliau about trickery and commodification, in which a learned clerk is rewarded for his supposed transformational abilities—ideas which inspire skepticism for fraudulent traveling self-described scholars, though the text does not mention alchemy itself. Building on the co-association of alchemy and trickery, I argued that criticism of alchemy is still a useful framework for discussing rhetorical manipulation (that is, the process by which a trickster character deceives a victim through clever use of their words and direct lies) when it appears in conjunction with physical

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<sup>209</sup> All quotes from Henryson come from David J. Parkinson's edition, *The Complete Works*, TEAMS, Middle English Texts Series, 2010.

transformation, which is also at work now in this present chapter. In the previous chapter, I examined Metham's ability to weave alchemical processes and references into his romance *Amoryus and Cleopes* despite never explicitly mentioning the science.

In Robert Henryson's *Moral Fables*, I have found evidence for all these literary devices through the mention of alchemy. Henryson comes last of the medieval texts in this dissertation because his corpus is the final establishing moment of literary alchemy.<sup>210</sup> The trickery in *Dame Sirith* set the stage in the Anglosphere for a criticism of travelling clerks claiming power over nature. Chaucer made the connection explicit and used religious language of the late fourteenth century to cast alchemy in doubt—and yet he used alchemical references and ideas throughout *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, such as describing the canon and his yeoman as metals in a laboratory. Metham continued the depiction of physical manipulation and transformation as a method of fraudulent deception, and his use of the alchemical process as a literary device assists his telling of Amoryus and Cleopes' love and Albynest's conversion. Robert Henryson, writing about twenty years after Metham and almost eighty after Chaucer, uses literary alchemy and alchemy's deceptive and manipulative legacy without any clear denunciation. Henryson's use of alchemical references in his *Moral Fables* and leprosy in *The Testament of Cresseid* continues the attempts by Chaucer and Metham to reduce alchemy to a literary device. He uses alchemy not to deem it deceptive as Chaucer did, nor to argue that alchemy leads good people away from

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<sup>210</sup> Literary alchemy is the use of alchemical references as a literary device, usually in order to invoke mysticism or untrustworthiness in one character or another. In the Middle Ages, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the invocation is often practical and physical: the alchemist character (or, the character who tricks others and claims to have some power over a transformation of the natural world) deceives and cannot be trusted. The association becomes more mystical—but still fundamentally based in fraud—in Metham. By “mystical,” I do not mean tied to medieval mysticism or the mystics, but rather the belief that alchemical practice contained some spiritual meaning not apparent to senses, rational thought, or scientific processes of discovery. Such a belief, presented as an opposition to scientific and physical discovery, gains traction in the early modern period and is overwhelmingly present in today's depictions of alchemy.

God as Metham did. Alchemy in Henryson's works assumes a relationship with deception and trickery, and from that relationship Henryson presents literary alchemy as we find it in full strength in later works: separated entirely from commenting on its real-world practice.<sup>211</sup>

In this chapter, I will primarily analyze the tricksters of *The Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian*.<sup>212</sup> I argue that Henryson's literary alchemy permeates every trickster character and invokes untrustworthiness by association alone, representing those alchemical references as rhetorical manifestation and manipulation.<sup>213</sup> Rhetorical manifestation is the process by which a character attempts to summon some object by speaking their will. Rhetorical manipulation likewise concerns a character using a presumed power by voice alone, but this time in altering an object rather than summoning it. Neither of these are necessarily based in magic spells or fraud, but they may be. A priest absolving a parishioner is rhetorical manifestation, resting in his religious authority to deem a certain act contrite, believe the repenting person genuine, and mete out divine forgiveness. Similarly, a trickster employs rhetorical manipulation when they lie about the true nature of some object—in their words, they create a false idea of that object, willing a change in its essence—and in that lie itself, since they manipulate their victim. Henryson's *Moral Fables* fulfills the trajectory I saw in Chaucer and then in Metham: alchemical reference

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<sup>211</sup> Later works famous for literary alchemy include *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. The latter of these still makes that comment about alchemy's fraudulent reputation.

<sup>212</sup> The title *Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian* comes from late sixteenth century printings. Only half of the tales come from Aesop; the other half come from the French tradition of Reynard the Fox. I will tend to refer to the full collection as *Moral Fables* or *Fables*. Cresseid's curse of leprosy in *The Testament of Cresseid* deserves an analysis in terms of alchemy—especially insofar as alchemy was related to astrology, divination and the divine, and skin diseases. Such an analysis is outside my current scope.

<sup>213</sup> Very many scholars use a phrase like "call into being" to describe rhetorical moves by several characters or the narrator; it is that "calling into being" which I'm calling "rhetorical manifestation" (it must be spoken aloud, and it must change someone's understanding of reality, if not implying an actual change to reality). One such analysis is John McNamara, "Language as Action in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," in *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. A. J. Aitken, M. P. Diarmid, and D. S. Thompson, Glasgow University Press, 1977, 41-50.

points are useful in literature.<sup>214</sup> Literary alchemy in Henryson works the same as it does in the other texts I've examined so far: it relies on deception and is housed within trickster characters who hold a supposed intellectual superiority over their victims. The lie relies on the victim's belief in the learned trickster's powers over nature and includes some illusion to seal the deception. The literary alchemy in Henryson rests in rhetorical manifestation and manipulation—characters speak certain ideas or object transmutations into being, and they act as though their speech acts were in fact the same as changing the interior natures of those objects.

Though some of the alchemical mentions are quite clear, scholars have left Henryson's relationship with alchemy almost entirely untouched.<sup>215</sup> I argue not only that the alchemy in the *Fables* deserves examination in its own right—even if only for the sake of identifying and unpacking the references, as Alison Hanham and J. C. Eade did for the astrological references.<sup>216</sup> I argue also that alchemy, as I argued in my chapters on *Dame Sirith* and *Amoryus and Cleopes*, reveals a certain instruction and type of poetic craft in Henryson's poetry, which we might not find without it. In this case, alchemy in the *Fables* acts as a catalyst for mixing the *utile* [practicality] and the *dulce* [pleasing].<sup>217</sup> The distinction between *utile* and *dulce* to describe the

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<sup>214</sup> Reading Henryson as a continuation of Chaucer is nothing new. Every scholar of *The Testament of Cresseid* reckons with the fact that it itself is an extension of the ending scenes of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chad D. Schrock, "The Sacramental Language of Robert Henryson's Fox," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 116, no. 3 (2017): 330-50, identifies Henryson's version of "The Cock and the Fox" as a direct retelling of Chaucer's adaptation of that same Reynardian tale in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (336-7).

<sup>215</sup> Only one scholar so far, Sarah Elliott Novacich, has included Henryson and alchemy in the same conversation, but she does not bring the two together in the same argument. In fact, while she mentions both briefly, the focus of her article is neither Henryson nor alchemy. Sarah Elliott Novacich, "Alchemical Fictions," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 7 (2016): 214-24.

<sup>216</sup> See Alison Hanham and J. C. Eade, "Foxy Astrology in Henryson," *Parergon* 24 (1979): 25-9. No scholar has yet written an equivalent piece cataloguing Henryson's alchemical references and arguing for their importance.

<sup>217</sup> I am indebted to Schrock for pointing out the relationship between *utile* and *dulce*, which he argues is the same dichotomy in Chaucer's "game" and "earnest," and in Henryson's "play" and "ernist" (333). Schrock describes the binary in the *Fables* as a "serious distinction between serious instruction and serious pleasure" (333).

craft of poetry comes from Horace's *Ars Poetica*: "Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, lectorem delectando pariterque monendo." [Those who have mixed pleasures with what is practical, teaching and entertaining the reader at the same time, win every vote.]<sup>218</sup> Together, the practical learning [*utile*] and the entertainment [*dulce*] of Henryson's literary alchemy decontextualize alchemy from its original sources and apply it to moral lessons.<sup>219</sup> That decontextualization empowers Henryson to include symbols for audiences to find for the benefit of their pleasure in reading and of their moral instruction.

Most central in my analysis is the advice from Horace above, which argues for a poet's need to balance both *utile* and *dulce*: practicality and pleasure. My chapters so far have followed this mixing of instruction and entertainment: *Dame Sirith* attempts to be humorous, even when Sirith tricks Margery into a sex act she did not originally desire; *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is widely considered a satire, creating a scathing indictment out of humorous and exaggerated depictions; Metham combines religious import and scientific knowledge through the romance genre, allowing instruction and entertainment to coexist with little force. Now, in Henryson, I follow the same thread: these Fables tell us about ourselves through the human actions of various animals, an aspect common across fabular traditions and writers. Henryson writes his "fenzeit" [feigning/false] fables with serious morals, lengthy *moralitas* sections the purpose of which is to

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<sup>218</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, ll. 343-4. My translation. Latin text from *The Latin Library*: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/horace/arspoet.shtml>

<sup>219</sup> Horace's *utile* I translate as "practicality," "that which is practical," or something similar. Others have translated it "seriousness" or even "serious instruction," relating it to the Chaucerian and Henrysonian "earnest" (Schrock, 333), which they use to signal a serious lesson for readers to gain from their poetry. I have chosen "practical" here because of *utile*'s connotative relationship with the everyday, the mundane, and the requirements for here-and-now; this also invites a strong bond with the science-practicality dichotomy Metham cares about so deeply. Horace's use of *dulci* (*dulce* in neuter, nominative, singular) is even more difficult to translate, so I will alternate my words according to the best English connotation. Chaucer's use of "game" and Henryson's of "play" certainly invites a certain playfulness or even "fun." For Henryson, I like "entertainment," "silly," "comic/comedic," and more, depending on the need.

“[extend] beyond moralizing and [include] lampooning.”<sup>220</sup> The falsehood of the tales in their impossibilities and abstractions supports the moral truth delivered through those same abstractions.<sup>221</sup> As Sheila Delany argues in *Medieval Literary Politics*, “Renart literature [tales about trickster Reynard the Fox] is above all a literature of parody.”<sup>222</sup> Like *Dame Sirith* and *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, the *Fables* should be read as serious satire concerning, in part, clerical corruption.<sup>223</sup> There is hardly a genre more suited to the discussion of the marriage of the serious and the silly, the allegorical and the real—both of which are dichotomies which a reading through alchemy readily catalyzes into a single coherent and consonant lesson. After all, alchemy emphasizes a marriage of opposites in order to find truth. Henryson uses alchemical references in his works for moral instruction and entertainment both, bringing *utile* and *dulce* together in his new adaptations of older works (notably, the Aesop and Renart traditions in the *Fables*, and *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Testament of Cresseid*).

Scholars have long acknowledged such a combination of the instructing and the pleasing within Henryson. As Michael G. Cornelius argues, Henryson is “a conservative moralist” whose poems, “while moralistic, do not lack compassion.”<sup>224</sup> Henryson keeps his tone from ever becoming too grave, even at his most serious, and even when the fables depict truly terrible acts. The fables always retain some value of entertainment, possible to enjoy with or without the *Moralitas*. The two are separated, and the lack of direct judgment or condemnation in the tales

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<sup>220</sup> Michael G. Cornelius, “Robert Henryson’s Pastoral Burlesque ‘Robene and Makyne’ (c.1470),” in *Fifteenth-Century Studies, Volume 28*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick, Boydell and Brewer, 2003, 80-96. This from 82.

<sup>221</sup> For the fabular traditions from which Henryson pulls, instruction through abstract or allegorical tales was expected: it is common to Aesop, Renart literature, folktales, warnings for children, and even the gospels’ parables.

<sup>222</sup> Sheila Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics*, Manchester University Press, 1990, 147.

<sup>223</sup> This phrasing from Delany, 147.

<sup>224</sup> Cornelius, 80-1.

themselves demonstrate a willingness to let the tales be read freely, applying a strict and single interpretation of them onto the end. Schrock argues that Henryson's fables show the balance between speech and reason, usually depicting scenarios in which words cannot be trusted and characters must be skeptical of each other: "language is nothing but a tool that vicious intention uses for camouflage and violence."<sup>225</sup> The tales are full of intrigue, and the deceptions at play are sometimes quite complex; character motivations are not always obvious. That is, the tales are not as simplistic as children's moral lessons are perhaps meant to be. The tales are themselves engaging and enjoyable to read; they please their audience. Henryson expends great effort to teach a moral at the end (sometimes more than one), explicitly and without inviting much disagreement: the story means what it means, according to Henryson's own interpretations.<sup>226</sup>

The structure for the *Fables* as a collection is a process along that very *utile-dulce* dichotomy. George D. Gopen sets out a convincing overall structure for the *Fables* that blends the "bright" into the "bleak," or the pleasing with the serious.<sup>227</sup> The tales become more serious in their content as they go along, but the *Moralitates* are serious the whole way through. The early tales are relatively calm and take place within a moral universe. The first fable, "The Cock and the Jasp," is lighthearted in content and form alike. None are harmed in the first fable; it hardly contains a conflict at all. The tale is that a rooster comes upon a jasper stone, which had been recklessly and hastily swept aside, and decides to leave it alone and search for food instead, saying to the jasper: "Thow hes na corne and thairof I had neid" [You have no corn, and thereof I

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<sup>225</sup> Schrock, 331-2.

<sup>226</sup> Other genres of moral instruction in the Middle Ages, such as dream visions, and other fabular writings often leave their true allegorical interpretations up to the reader, so Henryson's extensive *Moralitas* sections demonstrate his considerable care for the lessons.

<sup>227</sup> George D. Gopen, "The Essential Seriousness of Robert Henryson's 'Moral Fables': A Study in Structure," *Studies in Philology* 82, no. 1 (1985): 42-59. The "bleak" and "bright" duality from p. 44.

have need] (99). The *utile-dulce* dyad is present even from the *Fables*' opening: the jewel is both worthless (for it offers no help for the Cock's hunger) and priceless (for it is pleasing to gaze upon), covering both practical and pleasing in one object. The moral equates the jasper to "science" [knowledge] (148, 159) and calls the rooster "ane fule" [a fool] (142) for not taking that knowledge when he had the chance. However, Gopen argues that Henryson provides an option for viewing the rooster in a more positive light.<sup>228</sup> The Cock eschews the temptation of wealth and focuses only on his needs, satisfying no want and taking nothing that does not belong to him. We might see virtue in his decision to seek simple food.<sup>229</sup> The argument requires understanding Henryson's audience and the sorts of Christian moral they would have expected to find. As Denton Fox argues for *The Testament of Cresseid*, "Henryson took for granted an audience who would see, because they were looking for it, the evidence that this poem was serious, moral, and Christian."<sup>230</sup> The same should be true of the *Fables*. Henryson's morals are certainly serious, therefore, even from the very beginning, and he opens the tales up for many meanings to be made, many lessons to be learned.

The marriage of the useful and the pleasing in the jasper points to the following fables, too.<sup>231</sup> As the reader moves tale-to-tale, circumstances become more serious and more dreadful, plots become more violent, and "sympathetic characters suffer increasingly harsher consequences."<sup>232</sup> In the third fable, "The Cock and the Fox," the victim Chantecleir is able to

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<sup>228</sup> Gopen, 46-7.

<sup>229</sup> George Clark, in his "Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transfigured," *ELH* 43, no. 1 (1976): 1-18, argues that Henryson's expansion from the original Aesop fable makes the Cock seem rather more praiseworthy than foolish.

<sup>230</sup> Denton Fox, ed., *The Testament of Cresseid*, London: Nelson, 1968. This is from the "Introduction," qtd. in Gopen, 46.

<sup>231</sup> As Gopen argues, the "thair" in the final line of "The Cock and the Jasp," where the reader is instructed to look for knowledge, refers to the rest of the fables (Gopen, 46).

<sup>232</sup> Gopen, 50.

outwit his hunter Lowrence, who goes hungry. In the fourth, “The Fox and the Wolf,” Lowrence dies as a natural consequence of his own fraud; he had attempted to turn a goat into a salmon, fit for eating after Lowrence agreed to abstain from meat, but the goatherd shot him to defend his herd. The universe is naturally just, without needing any explicit rules or punishments. In the fifth, “The Trial of the Fox,” Lowrence’s bastard son is hanged, a punishment for his decision to commit treason. In the sixth, “The Sheep and the Dog,” an innocent sheep is made nude and humiliated by a corrupt court ruling. The world progresses in the first half of the fables from the inconsequential to the tragic and the dire. For each step, the *dulce* might remain, depending on a reader’s reception, but the *utile*, or the serious lesson, becomes more difficult to ignore.<sup>233</sup> They slowly meld together, demonstrating that they were never truly apart.

After the crucial center tale, “The Lion and the Mouse” (a utopian dream vision), each fable becomes darker, more gruesome, and even more tragic. However, the scope of this chapter focuses on the first half of the fables, especially Fables Four through Six. I split the rest of this chapter into sections based on the fable I discuss. I begin with Fable Six, “The Sheep and the Dog,” and Fable Five, “The Trial of the Fox,” because they have the most explicit references to alchemy. I then discuss the very clear *utile-dulce* distinction and rhetorical manifestation and manipulation in Fable Four, “The Fox and the Wolf,” insofar as it uses literary alchemy in an astrological reading to characterize Lowrence the false fox.

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<sup>233</sup> For Henryson’s fables as a particularly entertaining and pleasing work, see foundational scholarship such as: Gopen, “The Essential Seriousness;” Clark, “Henryson and Aesop;” Daniel M. Murtaugh, “Henryson’s Animals,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 14, no. 3 (1972): 405-21; Matthew P. McDiarmid, “Robert Henryson in His Poems,” in *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. A. J. Aitken, M. P. Diarmid, and D. S. Thompson, Glasgow University Press, 1977, 27-40; Nicolai von Kreisler, “Henryson’s Visionary Fable: Tradition and Craftsmanship in ‘The Lion and the Mouse,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15, no. 3 (1973): 391-403; and Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1972.

## A Moral of Making Gold

Henryson only mentions alchemy explicitly in the *Moralitas* of both Fable Five, “The Trial of the Fox,” and Fable Six, “The Sheep and the Dog,” which feature two court cases. In the *Moralitas* of “The Sheep and the Dog,” the sheep refers to alchemy in a final lamentation to God about the backwardness of the world he inhabits, one in which the guilty profit and the innocent suffer. The mention is a device, invoking the purpose of alchemy in the reader’s mind in order to get the sheep’s point across. Fable Six’s literary alchemy is simple as a device, but it also presents alchemy as an impossibility in the real world (for which the world of the fable stands, according to Henryson’s moral). Alchemy is a fantasy, potentially useful if it could work. The brief mention of alchemy in the *Moralitas* of Fable Five makes no comment on alchemy’s possibility, but rather Henryson situates it with other difficult arts that feature the combination of *utile* and *dulce*. I spend most of this time on Fable Six because its context is quite important for understanding alchemy’s appearance; Fable Five’s mention is much more isolated.

In “The Sheep and the Dog,” dog sues a sheep in the court of a judge Maister Wolff, a raven summoner, and the clerk, Lowrence the fox (a central character throughout the *Fables* and whose trickery is closely linked to alchemy, as I’ll demonstrate in these sections).<sup>234</sup> The dog claims that the sheep owes him “Ane certane breid worth five schilling or mair” [one loaf of bread worth at least five shillings] (1183), and he asks his fellow dogs to join the court case against the defending sheep. The sheep claims that the trial must be thrown out as obviously corrupt and unjust:

Heir I declyne the juge, the tyme, the place.

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<sup>234</sup> The clerk, or notary public, is the position Robert Henryson would have had in a real court case. Putting the fox in his shoes may be a sly admission of the nature of the office’s power (that is, seemingly predatory, even when he is largely unable to affect any ruling).

This is my cause in motive and effect:  
The law sayis it is richt perrillous  
Till enter pley before ane juge suspect  
And ye, schir wolff, hes bene richt odious  
To me for with your tuskis ravenous  
Hes slane full mony kinnismen of myne,  
Thairfoir as juge suspect I yow declyne.

[Here I deny the judge, the time, and the place.  
This is my cause in motive and effect:  
The law says that it's very dangerous  
To enter a plea before a corrupt judge,  
And you, Sir Wolf, have been quite odious  
To me, for with your ravenous tusks  
You have slain very many of my kinsmen,  
Therefore I deny you as a corrupt judge.]

(1187-94)

The sheep does not deny that he might owe a loaf of bread to the dog, but (despite having no lawyer himself) asks that the case be thrown out. He knows that, with a wolf as a judge and a fox as the clerk, he cannot win the trial, no matter whether the original claim is true. The wolf, raven, and fox are the sheep's mortal enemies (1197); the bias is unavoidable. Henryson's narrator of the tale plays a backseat supporter of the sheep, first extolling, "I schrew thame ay that leis" [I curse them always that lie] (1222), meaning the wolf, fox, and dogs, who have conspired to harm the sheep through a fraudulent lawsuit. The sheep is forced to go before the judge once again, and the narrator wonders, "On clerkis I do it gif this sentence was leill" [I leave it up to the clerks whether this was legal] (1229). Back in court, the dog argues, "Ane soume I payit" [A sum I paid] for a loaf of bread (1233), for which payment he was not compensated with that loaf of bread. He falsified witness testimony that the sheep never provided the bread, and the court—which the narrator condemns as "corruptit for all meid!" (1241)—rules in the dog's favor. The wolf orders the sheep "The soume of silver or the breid to pay" (1247), which the sheep can only afford by selling the wool off his back (1254).

The *Moralitas* of this tale begins with a clear defense of the sheep, sympathizing and promising that those corrupt officials will meet their true punishment in the afterlife (1264). However, the bulk of the moral is a long lamentation of the sheep, speaking to a silent God. He begins: “Quaikand for cauld, sair murnand ay amang, / Kest up his ee unto the hevinnis hicht / And said, ‘O lord, quhy sleipis thow sa lang?’” [Quaking for the cold, in mourning he / Cast up his eyes to the high heavens / And said, “O Lord, why do you sleep so long?”] (1293-5). He, having suffered at the hands of his natural predators, rebukes God for not intervening with true justice. The world in Fable Six is run by corrupt political vultures, who condemn the righteous as they lift up the greedy and false. The sheep recounts his selling of his wool: “Se how I am be fraud, maistrise, and slicht / Peillit full bair” [See how I am, by fraud, oppression, and trickery, stripped completely bare] (1297-8). He describes himself destitute, naked, and sued out of any wealth—but he also feels spiritually stripped, literally “peeled,” by the impossibly unjust payments and stress his oppressors have placed on his soul.

Coming to the end of his *Moralitas* on a tale about the greedy and powerful winning out over the innocent and “pure commounis that daylie ar opprest” (1251), Henryson demonstrates via literary alchemy just how backwards the world has become. The sheep invokes a most common alchemical metaphor—that of gold as the expected end or hope—as he continues to describe the upside-down nature of the world around him:

Sesi thow not, lord, this warld overturnit is  
 As quha wald change gude gold in leid or tyn.  
 The pure is peillit, the lord may do na mis,  
 And simonie is haldin for na sin.  
 Now is he blyith with okker maist may win.  
 Gentrice is slane and pietie is ago.  
 Allace gude lord, quhy tholis thow it so?

[Do you not see, Lord, that this world is overturned,  
 As though one had changed good gold into lead or tin.]

The pure is fleeced, the Lord can do no wrong,  
And simony is no considered a sin.  
Now happy is he who can win the most from usury.  
Gentility is slain and piety has left.  
Alas, good Lord, why do you suffer this thus?] (1307-13)

These words admit a proclivity toward alchemy, which Henryson is confident his audience would understand. The metaphor relies on readers' ready understanding of the alchemist's aim to turn lead or tin into gold. Furthermore, Henryson's placing it in the mouth of his sympathetic sheep demonstrates a willingness to use the metaphor for its implications for teaching his readers about the real world. A character so harmed and innocent deserves our ears, according to Henryson's own recording of such a lengthy lament, so his metaphors carry weight. In this case, that weight is an admission that tin or lead should be turned into gold, if only the world would work as it is supposed to.

Henryson is not admitting to being an actual alchemist, though, or supporting its practice. The appearance of the alchemical goal in the text is not an endorsement but a useful example of literary alchemy. If anything, Henryson believes that alchemy is impossible on earth as it exists. According to the structure of the sheep's metaphor and complaint, alchemy would work as alchemists claim if simony were considered a sin, if gentility and piety held more sway, if usury brought no profit, and if the pure were not stripped bare. Of course, we know from the fable that none of those are true. The sheep cleverly flips the standard alchemical process, also avoiding any evaluative language: in this world, where an innocent sheep unjustly walks uncovered, none are turning base metals into gold. They're turning gold into those base metals. The metals degrade, devolve. The metaphor is simple enough on its own, further reinforcing the sheep's despair at the "overturnit" world. However, the metaphor also carries the fact that this sheep otherwise believes it is possible to turn base metals into gold, if only the world could work as it

is supposed to. Elsewise, he believes that alchemy is a useful analogy as he prays. In either case, his use of alchemy in analogy with the proper working of society's systems demonstrates that the alchemical reference is to be taken as a literary device. The alchemical reference in the *Moralitas*, then, demonstrates a clear literary alchemy in the *Fables*, divorced from evaluating or judging an actual alchemical process or principle. Henryson asks us to leave our preconceptions and opinions about alchemy outside the text and deal with this reference as a device; we are not discussing alchemy in the real world, but as an ideal metaphor.

The sixth fable contains within it no example of rhetorical manifestation, but it is rife with rhetorical manipulation, and the reference to alchemy shows the extent to which the sheep is honest in his lamentation, casting further doubt on his accusers. The fable with the clearest example of literary alchemy is also the tale whose moral extolls the greedy and powerful falsifiers. Combining them so, Henryson pits the injustice of the dog's manipulative and corrupt lawsuit against the supposed justice of a world, led by a present and caring God, in which lead and tin might be turned into good gold. That is, taken in context of the fable, the sheep's brief reference to alchemy is an admission of his knowledge and his hopes: it would be great if alchemy could work, but we do not live in that world, and so it is but a fantasy—as equally fantastical as believing that our judges were just and protected the common people. “If only it were so!” he might as well have said. The literary alchemy is, therefore, not *only* a useful metaphor—it also demonstrates a sincerity in the sheep's lamentation and argues that alchemy's promise is a fantasy, best left to use as a literary device.

Henryson skips the character-go-between in the *Moralitas* of the previous fable, “The Trial of the Fox.” His narrator refers to it directly, positioning the writer of morals to fables as a great artist, whose craft seems impossibly difficult to others, but is nonetheless important for

society's moral instruction. After Lowrie the fox, bastard son of Lowrence, is put to death for treason (i.e., not keeping the peace, eating a lamb while on official court business), Henryson moralizes the tale thus:

Richt as the mynour in his minorall  
Fair gold with fyre may fra the leid weill wyn,  
Richt so under ane fabill figurall  
Sad sentence men may seik and efter fyne  
As daylie dois the doctouris of devyne  
Apertly beoure leving can apply  
And preve thare preching be a poesye.

[Just as the miner in his metallurgy  
May with fire create fair gold out of lead,  
So too within a figurative fable  
Men may seek and refine a serious lesson  
Just like doctors of divinity who every day  
Explicitly apply a moral by our lives' examples  
And prove their sermons by poetic composition.] (1097-1103)

Once again, alchemy is a reference, and a confusing one at that. Normally, the miner is not synonymous with the alchemist, and the metallurgic forge [*minorall*] would not be the place for alchemical practice.<sup>235</sup> The process is right, though, and simply put: according to the ideals of alchemical theory, the alchemist might get gold from lead if worked properly. The simile is also clear and requires no previous belief in alchemy's possibility in the actual, physical world. Creating a moral meaning, an application to our lives, from a fable is like the process of turning lead into gold; it is also like how a preacher will use both examples from daily life and references in poetry and scripture in order to make arguments during their sermons. Henryson's point here is not that these are simple processes which anyone can do, and which are reliably feasible to see

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<sup>235</sup> *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, "minour," n. may also mean "metallurgist" or "metalworker," but even in that sense Henryson is the only use of the word in context of the alchemical process. "minerall," is only recorded in the *DOST* as an adjective, mineral. [https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/minour\\_n](https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/minour_n) and <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/minerall>

occur. Rather, the processes are incredibly difficult: for men to “seik” a “sad sentence” in a fable about wild animals, they would have to come to the story with an intention to find that “sentence” (1100). The author would have had to write the fable in such a way to allow that meaning to appear, as well.

Indeed, making meaning in a silly tale is the combination of *utile* and *dulce*. Both of Henryson’s explicit references to alchemy in metaphor make use of combination of opposites. Alchemy is not the point of the alchemical mentions—rather, they guide the reader to consider the second parts of their metaphors. In Fable Six, alchemy’s presence speaks to the overturning of the world and the injustice the sheep has faced, pairing with how irreversibly corrupt our power structures have become. The Fable Five, alchemy’s presence speaks to the adept skill of an author to weave lessons in with his pleasing tales. In a sense, Henryson is calling himself an alchemist of poetry. As the alchemist extracts gold from lead (out of the combination of mercury and sulfur to create the philosopher’s stone), so too does Henryson extract moral instruction from anthropomorphic archetypes (out of the combination of *utile* and *dulce*). That is, Henryson’s alchemy is literary by design and by nature, itself a symbol for the lessons he is trying to teach through the fables.

### **A Wolf in Priest’s Clothing**

The fourth fable, “The Fox and the Wolf,” coming to Henryson via the Renart tradition rather than Aesop, is the clearest example of rhetorical manifestation in the collection.<sup>236</sup> In line with trickster tales and fables in general, the intentions of the central characters cannot be assumed to line up with their words—quite a reversal from the first and more lighthearted “The

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<sup>236</sup> Another version of this tale is “Of þe vox and of þe wolf,” Bodleian MS Digby 86, ff. 138r-140r, the same manuscript as *Dame Sirith*, which I examine in the second chapter.

Cock and the Jasp” and the more obviously black-and-white “The Sheep and the Dog.” Each character makes good use of distrust in order to navigate every conversation; as Schrock argues, speech and reason fail in these sorts of fables.<sup>237</sup> Deception is expected in a tale about a Fox, and doubly so because of Henryson’s repeated calling his own fables by the same word he uses to describe the Fox: “fenzzeit” [false] (589, 600). The audience is primed to notice a trick and, ostensibly, to learn something practical from the fable. Henryson’s depicts the fox late in his journeys, evidently before the events of Fable Six; Lowrence is back to his old ways, ever the trickster. In fact, despite any of his words or promises, which might appear genuine at the beginning of Fable Four, Lowrence is unable to change who he is, a fact which the literary alchemy in the stars and in the characters bolsters. I examine alchemy in the astrological reading and then in the Wolf’s dress and physical appearance.

Lowrence the Fox continues his “fatal aventure” (616) from the previous fable, “The Cock and the Fox,” in which Lowrence tricks Chanteclair the rooster, through extensive flattery, to sing a song on tip-toes and with his eyes closed, allowing Lowrence to take him “be the throte” (480). However, Chanteclair survives, and he tricks Lowrence back, leaving the fox hungry.<sup>238</sup> At the beginning of “The Fox and the Wolf,” Lowrence the fox sits on a hill and gazes up to the stars for guidance, interpreting astrological signs for his future. Apparently feeling guilty from his attempted trick on Chanteclair, and having learned his lesson, Lowrence seeks some foreknowledge of his fate and how he might live without relying on such trickery. He is able to read the zodiac and the planets so well that Henryson’s narrator claims that Lowrence

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<sup>237</sup> Schrock, 330-1.

<sup>238</sup> Fable Three is a retelling of Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, which comes from the Renart tradition. Henryson weaves it, this fourth fable, and the following fifth into a single narrative. The sixth fable may be considered a prequel but has no obvious temporal reference to the main Lowrence trilogy. It is probably best to consider it outside of the three-fable narrative altogether.

even taught him how to do so (634). The order of the zodiac in the narration matches the order in which Lowrence finds them, centering his perception as the key action of the scene. As Hanham and Eade argued, some of the positions are impossible, so we take them symbolically only.<sup>239</sup> Indeed, their symbolic meanings, as Lowrence is able to witness and interpret them, create his motivation for the rest of the fable. Lowrence interprets that he will meet a tragic end soon, paraphrasing Paul's letter to Romans that "Deid is reward of sin" [Death is the reward for sin] (653).<sup>240</sup> His previous pride and deception have earned him an imminent death, or so he believes.

Trying to outthink destiny, he decides to confess his sins for salvation, and the priest he chooses is "Frier Wolff Waitskaith" [Friar Wolf Woundmaker] (667).<sup>241</sup> After the seemingly successful confession, Lowrence receives his penance: he must not eat the meat of land animals until Easter, a proper *contrapasso* for attempting to eat Cantecleir in the previous fable.

Lowrence's astrological observations place the sun in Leo, which dates the events of the fable in mid or late July, and thus very far from the next Easter.<sup>242</sup> Lowrence goes to the water to catch some fish, at first appearing to abide by the rules of his long Lent (which was already lenient, for Friar Wolf allows him to eat flesh twice per week [731]). Noticing his lack of tools (even as an

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<sup>239</sup> Hanham and Eade, 25. In the text's configuration, it shouldn't be possible for Venus to be set within Cancer, nor the Moon in Aquarius, despite line 639 saying that they are.

<sup>240</sup> Romans 6:23. Vulgate as Henryson would have known it: "Stipendis enim peccati, mors" / "For the wages/income of sin is death."

<sup>241</sup> Confession, of course, saves one's soul in the afterlife, not on earth, demonstrating the fox's misunderstanding of Catholic doctrine. Lowrence's purpose may be to save his soul, knowing his death is imminent, but regardless he does not take the penitence seriously. For this translation of the friar's name, "wait" is *DOST*'s second verb: to treat, to do to something ([https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/wait\\_v\\_2](https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/wait_v_2)), and "scaith" as "scathe" ([https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/scathe\\_v](https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/scathe_v)), cf. *Beowulf* 2514, "*mansceaða*," man-scathe, ripper of humans, ravager. The wolf treats others with damage, either physical, moral, or financial. Parkinson glosses it "Do-harm" (p. 45).

<sup>242</sup> The sun is in front of Leo today from late July to late August. In the late fifteenth century, the Julian calendar was about nine days off from its starting point (and our current dates). Going by literal position rather than the tropical astrology dates, "Phebus in the Lyoun furth can carie" must refer to the middle or end of July. Hanham and Eade argue that the sun is in the middle of Leo, and so favor later in the month rather than earlier (25), and I shall follow suit. In either case, Lowrence's penance lasting until Easter is quite the undertaking.

animal, he does not consider his own teeth, nor does he wish for claws), he nearly gives up. As if sent by God at the last minute, a herd of goats appear, and one of the kids comes close to the fox. Lowrence takes the kid, submerges it thrice in the water, renames it “Salmon,” and then eats it, believing his “baptism” to have recategorized the goat meat as fish. The fox believes that the renaming enacts a manipulation of physical reality: “Ga doun schir kid,” Lowrence commands, “cum up schir salmond agane” (751). This act of Lowrence is rhetorical manifestation—he tries to change the interior nature of a kid by word alone so that, having changed it, he will be able to eat that “new-maid salmond” (753)—and the consequences are dear. Almost immediately, Lowrence is shot through his full stomach by an arrow; a goatherd, protecting his flock, has killed the fox and taken his “skyn” as “recompence” (774).

Henryson’s *Moralitas* for this fable focuses on the fox’s unwillingness to genuinely repent, a stark flip to the *Moralitas* of the sixth fable. Lowrence, that is, confessed his sins to Friar Wolf—but these were empty words, for Lowrence did not follow them with a real change in his actions. He kept his trickery, kept his attempts at controlling the world and literally feeding on its inhabitants. When he had to deny himself for recompense, he tried to play a trick on the categorization and system of different types of meats, which is essentially a trick on God and his designs for creation. There is no possibility that Lowrence’s words truly had the ability to transform reality: the kid is still a kid, despite Lowrence’s attempt at rhetorical manifestation and physical manipulation through his speech. Henryson minces no words in what may as well be a eulogy for Lowrence: he was “without contritioun” (776), and he is just like all of those who “gois now to confessioun / [and] Cannot repent nor for thair sinnis greit / Because thay think thair lustie lyfe sa sweit” (779-81). Henryson then warns his readers to be sincere in their confessions and to do the hard work of penance while they still can. “Do wilfull penance here,”

Henryson says, “and ye sall wend / Efter your deith to blis withoutin end” (794-5). Lowrence chose not to make his life any more difficult, not to meaningfully give anything up, even though his only hope was to let go of his predatory and exploitative lifestyle. His ultimate fate in the afterlife is unknown, but his legacy on earth is the subject of the following tale, “The Trial of the Fox,” in which Lowrence’s bastard son is put to death for treason.

An alchemical interpretation of the stars demonstrates Lowrence’s ultimate inability to change, despite his best intentions. His fate is sealed, and the alchemical meanings of Lowrence’s astrological reading are clear: he will die tragically, and his death will be due to a fraudulent attempt at manifestation. The particular interpretations of each planet and zodiac Lowrence identifies also portend his coming doom, best demonstrated in alchemy. Indeed, the literary alchemy present in the astrological reading upends the sheep’s alchemical reference, reinforcing the hope for tin and lead to be made into gold. The distinction between the base and the precious metals also establishes that *utile-dulce* distinction: lead and tin are practical, useful metals in everyday life, while gold is ideal and pleasing to the eye. Lowrence’s failure in his interpretation is assuming that gold is all he needs; he forgets the *utile* and is led down a tragic path.

The indirect reference to alchemy is in the astrology itself, since the two were so intertwined.<sup>243</sup> Alchemists named planets when meaning certain metals: Mars for iron, copper for Venus, etc. Most important were Moon for silver and Sun for gold. Additionally, alchemists took classical and medieval interpretations of certain zodiac signs and conjunctions of celestial

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<sup>243</sup> See my Introduction for more specifics, and Paola Zambelli, “Teorie su astrologia, magia, e alchimia (1348-1586) nelle interpretazioni recenti,” *Rinascimento* 27 (1987): 95-119. Very few alchemists were not astrologers, and vice versa. The Arabic-to-Latin translation schools of the twelfth brought both alchemy and astrology to the Latin West.

bodies to have practical laboratory effects and guidance.<sup>244</sup> Lowrence's stargazing takes up a whole stanza:

Than Saturne auld wes enterit in Capricorne  
And Juppiter movit in Sagittarie  
And Mars up in the Rammis heid wes borne  
And Phebus in the Lyoun furth can carie,  
Venus the Crab, the Mone wes in Aquarie,  
Mercurius the god of eloquence  
Into the Virgyn maid his residence.

[Then old Saturn had entered into Capricorn  
And Jupiter moved into Sagittarius  
And Mars ascended into Aries' head  
And the Sun went forward with Leo's head,  
Venus was in Cancer, the Moon in Aquarius,  
and Mercury the god of good speech  
Made his residence inside Virgo.]<sup>245</sup>

(635-41)

Mars is in ascendance, indicating to Lowrence a swift and violent death. The position of the Moon, which represented archery by way of Artemis, in Aquarius foreshadows Lowrence's death by an arrow to the belly.<sup>246</sup> Pisces is absent, perhaps advising Lowrence not to worry about fish and foreshadowing his failure at creating one by means of his attempted rhetorical manifestation. Saturn and Jupiter foreshadow his death as well, though more circuitously. Saturn represented change and was usually viewed negatively, and Capricorn (lit. Goat-horned) stood in for the cold and isolation. Saturn's position in the Goat, then, portends Lowrence attempting to

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<sup>244</sup> For more on the interconnectedness of alchemy and astrology, see: Pearl Kibre, *Studies in Medieval Science: Alchemy, Astrology, Mathematics, and Medicine*, London: Hambledon Press, 1984; Jonathan Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England: Plantagenet Kings and the Search for the Philosopher's Stone*, London: Continuum, 2012; Jennifer Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300-1700*, University Chicago Press, 2020; Eoin Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy*, D.S. Brewer, 2022. For alchemy's and astrology's relationships with medicine, see Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection*, New York: Zone Books, 2006. For alchemy and astrology in the early modern period, see Peter H. Marshall, *The Magic Circle of Rudolf II: Alchemy and Astrology in Renaissance Prague*, New York: Walker & Co., 2006.

<sup>245</sup> I have opted for the Latinate names of the zodiac, and I translate them as appropriate.

<sup>246</sup> See also Hanham and Eade, 26-8 for more details.

change a goat and receiving some punishment for it. Jupiter represented power, and in the eighth house (Sagittarius, which he is currently in) he represented death. Sagittarius is the Archer, and Jupiter's power and justice ought to tell Lowrence that, if he chooses to change a goat, he will meet justice by means of an arrow. In short, astrologically, Lowrence should expect a swift, lonely, and violent death via arrow to the stomach.

Lowrence does not seem to understand the specifics, though; his fear is quite vague, and he believes that repentance will save him, at least in the afterlife. Alchemically speaking, Lowrence's reading of the stars is superficial at best and dishonest at worst. The stars convey their predictions for the future (which all come true), but through alchemy they belie Lowrence's own hope in salvation. Fable Four becomes, if the stars contain a use of literary alchemy, a fable about the fox's self-delusion and, by symbolizing again the combination of *utile* and *dulce*, tragic misinterpretation. Jupiter stood for the metal tin. Tin on its own is a practical metal, rather than the beautiful goals of gold and silver. Tin is quite useful when focused on the mundane, whether it aims for gold or not, and we should not forget how it is used make bronze when combined with copper, Venus' metal. Saturn is lead, the chief of base metals which the alchemist wishes to turn to gold.

The zodiac are much more difficult to analyze alchemically, but we can take the Wheel of George Ripley, published in his *Compound of Alchemy* in 1471, as a guide.<sup>247</sup> Capricorn and Sagittarius are the focus here. The Wheel comprises the alchemical process—which Ripley describes as twelve “gates”—alongside the metal-planet associations and the hot/cold and

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<sup>247</sup> See also Chapter Three, in which I discuss the more esoteric reading of each zodiac as a part of the alchemical process. The best source for it comes from the eighteenth century, and even though it relies on older material, the evidence is scant for any medieval text having access to the same sort of association. Scholars have used such zodiac-process equivalences when discussing medieval alchemy, but that lens is not needed here.

dry/wet dichotomies, which concern the four humors and fundamental elements, the essential alchemical metals, and the zodiac constellations.<sup>248</sup> In the Wheel, Ripley places Sagittarius with the South signs: warm, dry, summer, and attractive. Capricorn is with the West: cool, dry, autumn, and retentive.<sup>249</sup> Ripley says that the alchemical process begins in the West, which is cool and dry, and therefore associated with the element earth.<sup>250</sup> Saturn is the governor of Capricorn, Lead guiding the Goat, and Henryson places the two together. Saturn governs earth as well [*Saturnus tenet terram*], and being in Capricorn represents lead beginning the alchemical process. Jupiter's placement in Sagittarius is similar in its dual reinforcement of symbol. Sagittarius is Jupiter's rightful domain, and Henryson places tin at the end of the seasonal process with the southern, warm, and dry zodiac Sagittarius. Jupiter in Sagittarius is not the complete creation of the philosopher's stone, though; to do that, according to the wheel, the alchemist would have to enter autumn again, this time with such a great fire as to give the metal in question its quintessence.<sup>251</sup> The alchemic metal being worked needed a final step to turn it into something super-natural, greater than perfect, reaching up above the world and our four elements. The fifth element, or quintessence, was *aether*, believed to be the element that made up the stars both wandering and fixed.<sup>252</sup> The final step along the *scala philosophorum* (ladder of

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<sup>248</sup> For more on Ripley specifically, see Jennifer Rampling, "Depicting the Medieval Alchemical Cosmos: George Ripley's Wheel of Inferior Astronomy," *Early Science and Medicine*, 18, no. 1-2 (2013): 45-86.

<sup>249</sup> Rampling, "Alchemical Cosmos," 54, 59. Elias Ashmole printed a recreation of Ripley's *Compound of Alchemy*, including the Wheel, in 1652 as part of his *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, p. 117. Accessed through the Science History Institute Museum and Library: <https://digital.sciencehistory.org/works/hq37vp21f>

<sup>250</sup> Ripley resolves his twelve Gates into four sections along the Wheel, based on the seasons. The first is autumn: cool and dry. Then, the alchemist should add water to create the blackness of winter, which is a purgatory (standing for putrefaction, or death and resurrection of the chemical principle). Third is to add heat and, therefore, spring. Summer is the south, warm and dry, where "the Sun holds the fire" [*Sol tenet ignam*] (Rampling "Alchemical cosmos" 65-6; Ashmole 117).

<sup>251</sup> Rampling, "Alchemical Cosmos," 67.

<sup>252</sup> The nature of the fifth essence was debated, and by the seventeenth century alchemists began insisting it was not ether but a primordial element out of which all other elements came: alkahest. Ripley does not seem to refer to anything like an "alkahest," and its first attestation is far later.

the philosophers), which Ripley used in the making of his Wheel, was a “resplendent, fiery, autumnal” final alchemical process.<sup>253</sup> The final alchemical process was projection, or taking the finished material (a powder of a new philosopher’s stone) and casting it upon base metals in order to transmute them into gold. Just so, the final turn of the Wheel is altitude, or casting the stone-to-be in order for it to become a super-perfect substance, able to then be cast upon metals and transmute them.

All of this alchemical association leads to three main conclusions in Lowrence’s astrological reading: first, that the stars tell an incomplete process; second, that the utility in Lowrence’s actions following his interpretation is uncertain; and third, from the first two, that Lowrence misunderstood just what the stars were really saying and should have known better than to try transforming the goat into a salmon. Henryson, therefore, crafts a deeper tragedy and a secondary lesson through literary alchemy in the stars. The two astrological placements of Jupiter in Sagittarius and Saturn in Capricorn represent a majority of the pathway around the wheel of the alchemist, from harvest to harvest, from lead to tin, but not a complete circuit. Gold is not in the future for Lowrence. He will not complete his journey of contrition; though he might begin well, and though he might win a goat, an archer will stop him too soon and prevent his ascension to the fifth element. The incomplete process and the alchemical association with Jupiter and Saturn—ruling their proper mansions and, when joined, representing a change in power structures—should have meant for Lowrence to be careful and humble in his confession. He missed Pisces’ absence (i.e., there will be no fish), Sagittarius and Capricorn’s associations with dryness (i.e., stay out of the water), the season cycle’s imperfection (i.e., he is doomed), and

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<sup>253</sup> Rampling’s translation (67).

the lack of any auspicious gold, substituted for the reigning of base metals (i.e., he should focus on useful and practical steps in his contrition and penance because of their hope, not only the flashy or beautiful possibilities without taking careful steps toward them). Having missed so many interpretations in his stargazing, and therefore being ignorant of their lessons, Lowrence is even more tragic than an unchanging trickster as he is otherwise depicted. When he negotiates with Friar Wolf for an easier penance and confesses that he is unable to change because of his nature, Lowrence is also ignorant of what being unwilling to change will cost him.

Lowrence's attempt at rhetorical manifestation was always doomed to fail. Of course, for Henryson, the only transformation possible by dunking someone in water is a conversion to Christianity. Moreover, while magic does appear in the *Fables*, it is never executed via magic spell which alters the physical world. Lowrence is not engaging in a real ritual or in magic, even within the bounds of the *Fables*. He relies on his old tricks: speaking his will into being, trying to convince with his honeyed tongue that the world is different than it really is. That is, Lowrence's rhetorical manifestation is fundamentally based in fraud, as his entire characterization is. He did not learn his lesson from the previous tale; getting tricked back was not enough to deter him from bargaining and from playing people, making them victims to his sleight. The stars warned him, but evidently not well enough; too many of their warnings went unheard, and so Lowrence could not have known what specific fate awaited him. The fable, therefore, because of an alchemical understanding of Henryson's short astrological aside, is indeed about Lowrence's relapse into his old ways—but it is also about his ignorance and his inability to combine *utile* and *dulce*. Lowrence cannot give up the pleasing gold for the useful tin and lead because he missed the fact, in Capricorn and Sagittarius, that he was never going to arrive at gold (absolution) in the first place.

Friar Wolf, as a satire of a Franciscan friar, also fails to combine *utile* and *dulce*, and alchemy's appearance in Henryson's depiction of the wolf reinforces Lowrence's doom.<sup>254</sup> Where Lowrence is too focused on the potential outcome (salvation; gold; *dulce*) to worry about the process or his starting point (humble and contrite works; lead; *utile*), Friar Wolf Woundmaker is neither intent on nor capable of shriving Lowrence as his imminent doom so requires. Henryson describes his first appearance with performative actions toward the clergy:

Accusand thus his cankerit conscience,  
 Into ane craig he kest about his ee,  
 So saw he command ane lyttill than frome thence  
 Ane worthie doctor of divinitie,  
 Freir Wolff Waitskaith, in science wonder sle,  
 To preiche and pray wes new cum fra the closter  
 With beidis in hand, sayand his Pater Noster.

[Accusing thus his cankered conscience,  
 Lowrence cast his eyes into a crag,  
 Seeing there coming a little ways off  
 A worthy doctor of theology,  
 Friar Wolf Woundmaker, very cunning in knowledge,  
 Newly arrived from the cloister to preach and pray,  
 Now reciting the Lord's Prayer with beads in hand.] (663-9).

The application of "worthie" is based on looks alone: the wolf is wearing the right garments, presenting himself in the right way to be recognized as a member of the priesthood. He has his rosary, and he is speaking the most identifiable sentences in Christendom. Little else could present him as a religious figure any more quickly. Henryson gives two reasons to doubt that the presentation is accurate for the wolf's character, though. His name, "Waitskaith," is a negative appellation, referring to the harm he causes to those he meets—he treats them with damage, both physically and morally. The second is the adjective "sle," cognate with "sly,"

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<sup>254</sup> For more on Friar Wolf's imperfect clerical aptitude, see Parkinson's notes to lines 666-9 and 710, *The Complete Works*, p. 173, and Derek Pearsall, ed., *Chaucer to Spenser: An Anthology of Writings in English, 1375-1575*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 492. Henryson's portrayal matches Langland's and Hoccleve's inadequate friars.

which I translate as “cunning,” and Parkinson glosses “expert.” *DOST* lists an incredible depth to the word’s connotations: some praiseworthy, such as expert or skilled; others neutral, such as cunning or crafty; others strictly negative, such as sly or deceitful.<sup>255</sup> Again common in fables and in satires, the friar, though he dresses as a clergyman, is not to be trusted.

In his attempt to “schryve” Lowrence (683), the wolf barter and compromises the penalty, revealing just what makes him harmful—his sentence dooms Lowrence, and in an indirect reference to alchemists connects back with fraud and rhetorical manifestation. Friar Wolf seeks a confession and attempt to change from Lowrence, but the fox is unwilling to repent, saying that trickery and exploiting others are parts of his nature. Unable to convince Lowrence to have remorse, the friar calls him a “schrew” (704) and demands that he submit to a prescribed penance. The first instruction is for Lowrence to “forbeir flesch hyne to Pasche” [forgo meat until Easter, but Lowrence negotiates so that he may eat meat “Twyse in the oulk” [twice per week] (723, 731). Lowrence, in the hands of this priest, still retains his power in cunning and capitalizes on the wolf’s ineptitude. The wolf is a pretender, a young clerk (“new cum fra the closter” [668]) who, though technically educated, is in over his head in the real world. He inhabits a role with real rhetorical power, too, for his blessings and penances are supposed to have real effects on the world. His closeness to the divine, in medieval Catholicism, gives him the ability to use rhetoric for the remission of sin and the salvation of his parishioners’ souls. Through his pronouncements, the friar should manifest the will of God—but in this fable, he inadvertently lets Lowrence off easy and leads him directly into the fate Lowrence wished to avoid. His words do nothing for Lowrence’s actual redemption, for he is never redeemed, nor

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<sup>255</sup> *DOST*, “sle,” adj. <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/sle>

even regretful. The power he claims to have is empty in practice, when put up against the wily and shrewd manipulator.

The indirect literary alchemy is in Friar Wolf Woundmaker's lack of real ability which he claims and its portent for the end of the fable. Just like the clerk in *Dame Sirith*, the tragic fault in Fable Four lies in an educated man being assumed to have power over the natural world which he does not actually have. The wolf's rhetoric falls short, also representing that incomplete cycle which Lowrence missed in his astrological reading. That is, the stars which Lowrence read could not be wrong; the fable follows each step just as the stars said they would. Alchemy reveals in those stars just how hopeless Lowrence's attempts at atonement would be and just how incapable Friar Wolf would prove to be. In fact, both failures are due to a misuse of rhetoric: the friar in his negotiation of penance and in his lack of power to truly save Lowrence, and the fox in his lack of power to transform the goat into a salmon.

The alchemy in the stars and the characters coupled together, yet again the *utile* and *dulce* unite: the practical tin and its serious process meets with the beautiful gold and satisfaction of completion. In Fable Four, that combination leads to tragedy, for neither character wields in truth the rhetorical manifestation and manipulation to which they laid claims. Henryson, therefore, associates alchemy with a pretension to rhetorical power that is unable to show the fruits of its labor. The tricksters, when presented as educated or as manipulative, play each other in a sense. Neither wolf nor fox are trustworthy, and their lack of faith in each other leads to Lowrence's demise and sufficient proof that Woundmaker is not truly prepared for the job, despite his education. Henryson's poetry once more combines the *utile* with the *dulce*, creating his *Moralitas* out of the simultaneously absurd and tragic ending to Lowrence's trickery. His fable, for the purpose of instruction, has shown the natural and horrific consequence for

attempting to skirt by just rulings, for trickery. Alchemy's brief indirect presence in the stars and in the characterization of Lowrence and Woundmaker reinforces the immutability of the fox and the great extent to which Henryson took the *utile-dulce* distinction in his *Fables*, for their use as entertainment and as education at the same time.

### **Conclusion**

Henryson's references to alchemy support and widen his fable's combination of *utile* and *dulce*. The structure of the *Fables*, the explicit references to making gold from base metals, the insincerely-contrite trickster, the astrological reading, and the failure of rhetorical manifestation to enact real, substantial change all demonstrate the presence of literary alchemy. Henryson uses each of these concepts to marry the *utile* and the *dulce*, bringing about moral instruction within entertaining fables with alchemical reference as his catalyst.

## CHAPTER VI: ALCHEMY AND DISTRUST IN *PENTIMENT* (2022)

The Picatrix, Key of Solomon, the Heptameron... Prior Ferenc keeps giving me all of these books to read.

Andreas, *Pentiment*<sup>256</sup>

### Glossary of Videogame Terms

**Adventure games** – (typically) narrative videogames that prioritize exploration, plot, and puzzle-solving. The genre is named after 1976's *Colossal Cave Adventure*. Gameplay consists of movement and dialogue, sometimes allowing the player to alter the conversation or the story, and narrative is often revealed through solving puzzles and speaking to non-player-characters (NPCs).<sup>257</sup> Traditional adventure games are also called “point-and-click” games, though that term connotes the appearance of silly, unintuitive object manipulation puzzles (which not all adventure games have). These include the *Monkey Island* series<sup>258</sup> and *Kentucky Route Zero*.<sup>259</sup>

**Conceptual games** – videogames that present history primarily through their core mechanics and rules. They most often include strategy and resource management games. In medievalism studies, the most often cited are the *Civilization* series<sup>260</sup> and the *Crusader Kings* series.<sup>261</sup>

**Game elements** – a tripartite model of essential videogame mechanics. Espen Aarseth set the foundation in 2004: “Gameplay (the players’ actions, strategies and motives) / Game-structure (the rules of the game, including the simulation rules / Game-world (fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc.).”<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> *Pentiment* (Obsidian, 2022) is a role-playing adventure game set in early sixteenth-century Bavaria, in the foothills of the Alps, in a German-speaking fictional town of Tassing and its neighboring, aging Benedictine abbey Kiersau. Andreas thinks this to himself after waking up on the first day, if the player clicks on his pile of books on the desk in his rented room. The *Picatrix* and the *Key of Solomon* are hermetic texts from the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, respectively. This moment is the first hint of Ferenc’s occult interests.

<sup>257</sup> In his 2019 video “Who Shot Guybrush Threepwood? | Genre and the Adventure Game,” adventure game commentator Ian Danskin (whose channel is *Innuendo Studios*) argues that adventure games have no core, shared mechanics like other game genres. Instead, they have mechanics unique to their stories and stories uniquely tied to the navigation of their puzzles and settings. In short, he sums it up: “Puzzles as plots.” The name “Guybrush Threepwood” in the title is the protagonist of the *Monkey Island* series of adventure games.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMV15U3SIS0>

<sup>258</sup> *Monkey Island* (LucasArts, Telltale Games, Terrible Toybox, 1990-2022).

<sup>259</sup> *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer, 2013-2020).

<sup>260</sup> *Civilization* (MicroProse, Activision, Firaxis Games, 1991-).

<sup>261</sup> *Crusader Kings* (Paradox Development Studio, 2004-).

<sup>262</sup> Espen J. Aarseth, “Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis,” *Game Approaches/SPil-Veje. Papers from Spilforskning.Dk Conference*, 2004, p. 2. Under the MDA approach pioneered by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek that same year, the “Gameplay” would be split between

**Game-world** – the setting of the videogame, both in the depiction of the background visuals and worldbuilding and in the allowances for player-character movements and manipulation.<sup>263</sup> The game-world of *Pentiment* is, in the first sense, sixteenth-century rural southern Bavaria, featuring a village and an abbey with both monks and nuns; in the second sense, it is a 2D plane, designed like an early modern woodcut print, in which Andreas can walk along prescribed roads, speak to NPCs, and manipulate a few certain objects.

**Ludonarrative** – a story revealed in a videogame by player interaction that allows or requires player input in order for the plot to move forward.<sup>264</sup> This can be as simple as clicking the mouse or pressing a controller button to see the next dialogue box or narration.

**Player-character (PC)** – the character which the player controls at that time. The character may change over the course of a game, or the player may control several at once (called “party mechanics”). Andreas is the player-character for the section of *Pentiment* I discuss in this chapter.

**Resource, construction, and management games** – videogames that give players control over some economic production, usually on a small scale, such as a farm, a tavern, or a fishing boat. These games, also called simulation games, typically require players to amass enough resources to purchase upgrades, which allow them to harvest their resources faster or more efficiently. They can include firm narratives for players to complete at their own pace (*Spiritfarer*),<sup>265</sup> player-driven narratives through character interaction (*Stardew Valley*),<sup>266</sup> or no narrative at all (*Tavern Master*).<sup>267</sup>

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mechanics and dynamics (M and D, respectively). For them, a “mechanic” is purely within the game itself: code, structures, world, etc. The dynamics are the player’s physical responses to that code: motivations, button presses, etc. Aesthetics (the A of MDA) are the player’s emotional responses: fear in a horror game, excitement in an exploration game, etc. The difference is in categorization, not whether the elements are there. Regardless of the framework, the tripartite elements are still valid. In this chapter, I primarily look at the game-world of *Pentiment*, specifically the character Prior Ferenc and the audio-visual representation of his alchemical practice.

<sup>263</sup> Joleen Blom, in her 2023 book *Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling* (Amsterdam University Press), gives special importance to the game-world of a franchise (one of her examples is the *Pokemon* franchise), as opposed to the setting of its film, novel, or comic book counterparts because the game-world is necessarily interactive and built for player input. While her focus is on the ways characters are adapted across media so that players can assume control of them, she also speaks to the same phenomenon with “world-building” in games (15-7, 20-1). See also Bo Ruberg’s work on queer game-worlds, such as their 2020 book *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Durham: Duke University Press).

<sup>264</sup> The term comes from Clint Hocking’s 2007 blog post “Ludonarrative Dissonance in *Bioshock*.”  
[https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html)

<sup>265</sup> *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020).

<sup>266</sup> *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016).

<sup>267</sup> *Tavern Master* (Untitled Studio, 2021).

**Realist games** – videogames that present history primarily through their visual representations, characterizations, and narratives. They most often include adventure and action-adventure games.

**Role-playing games (RPGs)** – videogames that give players options for how their player-character(s) would solve a certain problem, respond to a certain piece of dialogue, or view the world. These include *The Elder Scrolls* series,<sup>268</sup> *Pillars of Eternity*,<sup>269</sup> and *Baldur's Gate 3*.<sup>270</sup> *Pentiment* has some RPG elements, for the player chooses Andreas' backstory, choices which affect how Andreas can go about his investigation.

**Strategy games** – videogames that encourage players to interact with the game through careful thought and planning, usually concerning military, logistics, puzzles, role-play, and often the fate of more than a single person. Includes the “4X” subgenre (abbreviation of explore, expand, exploit, exterminate), in which the player controls a people group or empire over the course of years or millennia. These include the *Civilization* series.

**Technology tree** – an abstract representation of technological invention over time, usually featured in 4X strategy games, which tends to deemphasize the scientific achievements of the Middle Ages and overemphasize the improvements of the modern world. It treats history as the march of constant and predictable progress away from superstition and toward scientific enlightenment.

**Visual novels** – a genre of interactive fiction that prioritizes fiction over interactivity, and so are not always considered “videogames.” They are almost always 2D and present the world from the point-of-view of the protagonist, and gameplay consists of pressing “next” and (often) choosing dialogue. There is often strong overlap with adventure games due to their shared level of interactivity (low: usually gameplay requires nothing more than clicking a mouse or pressing a controller button with no sophisticated patterns or urgency). Visual novels with no player options are called “kinetic novels.”

### ***Pentiment* and Alchemy: An Introduction**

Throughout this dissertation, I have analyzed several medieval texts that include references to alchemy (*The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*; *The Moral Fables*), to alchemical symbols and metaphors (*Amoryus and Cleopes*; *The Moral Fables*), or to traits and associations common to alchemists (*The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*; *Dame Sirith*; *Amoryus and Cleopes*). I have argued

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<sup>268</sup> *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks, Bethesda Game Studios, 1994-).

<sup>269</sup> *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2015).

<sup>270</sup> *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023).

that they present a “literary alchemy,” or that they use alchemy as a literary device, in which the text itself represents alchemy’s practice. Despite its absence from most mainstream or popular media and exclusion from modern science, alchemical literature is not dead, and today it is alive and well in gaming.<sup>271</sup> Videogames about or that include alchemy have become extremely popular over the last several years; modern players<sup>272</sup> seem interested in being able to transform materials in games. Alchemy makes for fun interaction, and it is not surprising to see such a burgeoning landscape of games that invoke or feature alchemy.

In this final chapter, I examine the presentation of alchemy in the videogame *Pentiment* in terms of medieval alchemical presentation, in concordance with the other texts I’ve examined in this dissertation. I do so in *Pentiment* specifically, rather than other videogames set during the medieval and early modern periods, because it is so far the best and most comprehensive representation of alchemy in the Middle Ages by a videogame that I have found. Even so, my goal is not to judge authenticity or accuracy of the alchemy in *Pentiment*, but rather to analyze the game’s representation of alchemy in itself. *Pentiment* was written and directed by Josh Sawyer, whose undergraduate degree is in history with a focus on early modern Holy Roman Empire. He published a short reading list of scholarly or well-researched popular books that help understand the sorts of historical tales on which the game is based.<sup>273</sup> *Pentiment*’s merits as a respectful medievalist text are clear, and its representation of sixteenth-century Bavaria (and how

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<sup>271</sup> While discussing alchemy’s reach beyond the medieval period, Stanton Linden in the Introduction to *The Alchemy Reader* states, “alchemy survives primarily on the strength of its own remarkable literary tradition, one that extends from the time before Christ to the eighteenth century” (p. 19). However, I argue that alchemy’s literary tradition has not yet ended. The discrepancy between Linden’s and my concept of what constitutes alchemy’s “remarkable literary tradition” is that I include, where he excludes, modern texts that refer only vaguely to alchemy, and he does not consider the modern practitioners of alchemy, for they are few.

<sup>272</sup> I will tend to use “player” for the person interacting with and being affected by a videogame.

<sup>273</sup> <https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2022/11/10/recommended-reading-of-medieval-history-from-josh-sawyer/>

different people in that culture viewed alchemy) has enough scholarly backing that I am able to focus specifically on what the representation of alchemy is *doing* in the game for its twenty-first century audience.

In this chapter, therefore, I ask: How does *Pentiment* present alchemy? What does *Pentiment*'s presentation of alchemy demonstrate to its players/audience? I find that *Pentiment* is the most recent attempt to use and depict alchemy in just the same way as the texts I discussed in the previous four chapters. Alchemy, in *Pentiment* as in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, is named and discussed in association with deception and secrecy. As in *Amoryus and Cleopes*, it is a pathway away from truth and open knowledge. As in Henryson's *Moral Fables*, its association with suspicious characters is assumed. Alchemy is not magical in *Pentiment*—as opposed to the vast majority of medievalist games that feature it—but merely a signal to the player that something is not quite normal and aboveboard with the man who practices it. Alchemy, that is, invokes suspicion and doubt; it demonstrates a worthy avenue of investigation. Thus, the literary alchemy of Middle English (and Scots) poets is still alive today. *Pentiment*'s alchemy continues the trend of literary alchemy, from its first primordial hints in *Dame Sirith*, through Chaucer and his fifteenth century successors, and into the games of modern world.

The focus of this chapter will be on the representation of alchemy in *Pentiment*, but it is important to note that the vast majority of alchemy's appearance in videogames is in management simulation games or mechanics. The player is invited to become an alchemist, usually in the form of crafting magical potions. Alchemy as a medievalism exists still as a practice, represented now not in a lab but in a screen. In order to present *Pentiment*'s alchemy as starkly *non-interactive*, as only a literary representation, I will first touch on how games create a phenomenological experience that teaches their players to think about alchemy as a practice. I

will discuss a few games that are entirely based on creating alchemical potions, and then three games that use alchemy as a mechanic: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*,<sup>274</sup> *A Plague Tale: Innocence*,<sup>275</sup> and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.<sup>276</sup> I will end the brief look at other games that represent alchemy with *Misericorde*,<sup>277</sup> which, like *Pentiment*, features an alchemist character and no option for interaction with alchemy.<sup>278</sup> I've chosen these games because the way in which players interact with alchemy in them show the diversity of the current state of alchemy in medievalist games. They also portray different versions of a medieval-like game-world, where *The Elder Scrolls* is high fantasy, *A Plague Tale* more historical in fourteenth-century France (though still with some fantasy elements), and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* the most grounded in fifteenth-century Bohemia. By contrast, *Pentiment* contains no alchemy gameplay; alchemy appears as an interesting concept for players to discover during a murder investigation and is otherwise a piece of the setting.<sup>279</sup>

Videogames are particularly apt in discussing how modern media portrays alchemy because players must participate in (or play) the activities which would otherwise only be

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<sup>274</sup> *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) is an action role-playing game (ARPG) set in a fantasy setting heavily inspired by iron age and medieval northern Europe. The player-character is created and named by the player at the beginning of the game.

<sup>275</sup> *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo Studio, 2019) is an action-adventure game with some role-playing elements set in France during the Black Death. The player follows the story of sister-brother pair Amicia and Hugo de Rune as they discover the alchemical cure for Hugo's illness.

<sup>276</sup> *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018) is an ARPG set in Bohemia during the reign of King Wenceslaus IV, beginning during the king's imprisonment and Sigismund of Hungary's invasion in 1403. The player follows Henry, survivor of a Hungarian raid.

<sup>277</sup> *Misericorde: Volume One* (Xeecee, 2023) is a kinetic novel game: a visual novel with no player input for dialogue or protagonist decisions. It is set in an abbey in 1482 England. The player follows Hedwig, an anchoress who is brought out of her seclusion to investigate the murder of a nun.

<sup>278</sup> The alchemy in all of these games deserve fuller examinations, but for now I briefly explain the usefulness of videogames as a medium and summarize their uses of alchemy.

<sup>279</sup> Drawing this distinction is important because *Pentiment* chooses to depict alchemy and allow players to choose an "Occultist" background for Andreas—but Andreas never becomes an alchemist. That option is never presented to the player, never even entertained. In a game development landscape where players expect alchemy to be a gameplay mechanic, shutting it off and only referring to it as a literary device in an adventure game is incredibly clear: alchemy in *Pentiment* is not a game.

observed in other media. The term “videogame” is itself difficult to define based on including certain aspects which all games have and excluding certain other aspects which no games have. This is true for even the most obvious aspects that make a videogame a videogame, like graphics and player agency.<sup>280</sup> For my purposes, a videogame is a text that requires player input into a computer in order to occur and, therefore, exist.<sup>281</sup> As Espen Aarseth argued in his introduction to the first edition of *Game Studies* in 2001, “Games are both object and process; they can’t be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental like the appreciative reader or listener. The creative involvement is a necessary ingredient in the uses of games.”<sup>282</sup> It must be *experienced* over time, i.e., “played,” and its reality is based on its revelation over that time.<sup>283</sup> In interactive fiction, and adventure games especially, the narrative

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<sup>280</sup> Some videogames have no images (*Colossal Cave Adventure* [Will Crowther, 1976]); others have no text (*Dropsy* [Tendershoot and A Jolly Corpse, 2015]). Some have plots or character development that are determined by player input (*Heavy Rain* [Quantic Dream, 2010] or *The Wolf Among Us* [Telltale Games, 2013]); others have no options for narrative, dialogue, or character change and allow only a small freedom of movement for combat (*Uncharted* [Naughty Dog, 2007] or *New Super Mario Bros* [Nintendo EAD, 2006]). Even just within the adventure and platformer genres, the scope is difficult to define.

<sup>281</sup> I invoke the use of a computer here because *videogame* must be distinct from physical games, like sports, boardgames, and table-top role-playing games (*Dungeons & Dragons*). The videogame must also be distinct from film and from prose. The presence of a computer (a necessarily interactive technology that receives input and can display certain images) is the greatest separation here. Shane Denson speaks to the separation between computer and cinema screen when he discusses the 2014 film *Unfriended*, dir. Leo Gabriadze. The film is “desktop horror:” the entire movie takes place in a Skype call on a computer screen. The cameras are perfectly still, adding to the audience’s unease and creating an uncanny relationship between the interactive computer and the passive screen. Denson argues, “[W]here the desktop framing jarringly contrasts with the scale and noninteractivity of the big screen and therefore detracts from the spectator’s involvement, the movie begs to be viewed on the small screen of a computer for full effect” (*Discorrelated Images* 155). Computers are the means by which we interact with media, even if the computer looks like a smartphone or a gaming console. Game studies scholars tend to believe that the difference between turning a page and pressing a button is large enough to warrant even text-based no-choice games to be considered games.

<sup>282</sup> Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies* 1, no 1 (2001). <https://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>. Many game studies scholars, like Aarseth here and Blom (*Transmedia*, p. 27) in her appraisal of *Bandersnatch* (2018), undervalue the activity and agency which consumers exercise when they engage with other media, like books and television. We still choose what to watch, and watching with interest is not passive. It is true, however, that games offer players more choice and more freedom than their written or filmed counterparts.

<sup>283</sup> To borrow a term from Alfred North Whitehead, a videogame is a text-over-time that must be prehended by its player and interacted with by means of some computing device. A game is always in a state of becoming. It is never static and cannot be timestamped, for each playthrough of even the most basic and cinematic game will take a different amount of time. To “prehend” is to encounter or experience over time, gathering together

is revealed as players continue their inputs.<sup>284</sup> Truth emerges from practice, effort, and/or attention. The changing nature of a game and its insistence on human input for continuation creates a unique perspective on alchemy, for the player must become complicit in the medieval science.

### Alchemy games as medievalism

Alchemy games are quite diverse in how the player interacts with alchemy. There is currently no comprehensive scholarship on the trends and effectiveness—either from medievalists or from game studies scholars—of alchemy games.<sup>285</sup> Most alchemy games are simulations, or else they represent alchemy through a simulated environment: they ask the player to use ingredients and create certain items or carry out certain recipes. Ian Bogost argues that simulations in general tend to show the experience of “the day-to-day activity of a mundane profession.”<sup>286</sup> Of course, it is not “mundane” to create potions that break the laws of physics—such is the appeal of these titles over resource management games or farming simulations like *Stardew Valley*, despite the similar mechanics themselves. However, that appeal is in the aesthetics; the mechanics of these games are fairly simple. In *Potion Craft: Alchemist*

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previous experiences and new data into new forms of interpretation. So that I can speak to the nature of alchemical realization in gaming, I will pull some from Mark B. N. Hansen’s *Feed-Forward*, in which he applies Whitehead’s process philosophy to the twenty-first century media landscape. Joleen Blom dislikes the term “video game” [sic] and uses “cybertext,” which I avoid due to its association with webpages and websites. I also do not use the term “computer game,” despite its accuracy and its popularity in early games studies literature, because it has fallen out of favor in recent scholarship and because many modern gamers do not necessarily consider consoles to be “computers,” believing a “computer game” must refer to older PC games.

<sup>284</sup> The verb “reveal,” and noun form “revelation,” I take from Andrew Plotkin’s foundational blog post “Characterizing Interactive Fiction” (2002), but the term appears across scholarship. <https://eblong.com/zarf/essays/ifdef.html>

<sup>285</sup> Robert Houghton’s *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2024) is so far the best examination of medievalism in videogames broadly speaking. However, alchemy mechanics and representations take up only a few mentions: when he touches on *The Elder Scrolls*, *A Plague Tale*, and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, as I do below. There is still a large gap for new scholarship on individual alchemical representations and on the nature of alchemy games as a whole. I offer such a work on an individual alchemical representation in this chapter.

<sup>286</sup> Ian Bogost, *How to Talk About Videogames*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 113.

*Simulator*,<sup>287</sup> for example, the player combines two items in a shop together in order to create a potion, and then they sell that potion to the customer who requested it. Like how *Stardew Valley* allows the player to engage with idealized farming in a more direct and participatory manner than a classical georgic, alchemy simulation games allow players to engage with alchemy in a way they could not through medieval poetry. Alchemy, even when in a grounded setting of a management game, is a medievalism associated more with fantasy and mysticism than with history or science. Alchemy is unquestionably reliable and evident. Its effects are apparent. A magical product emerging out of a physical process is a bridge between reality and fantasy, inviting the player in and heightening their experience of the game-world.

The alchemy in most games has little in common with the practice of medieval alchemy, mostly because it is a successful magical power.<sup>288</sup> *Morrowind*,<sup>289</sup> *Skyrim*,<sup>290</sup> *Alchemist Adventure*,<sup>291</sup> *Alchemy Garden*,<sup>292</sup> and *Potion Craft* all feature potions. They are interested in alchemy as a healing practice through drinking potions or poisons made from any number of different ingredients—almost always excluding metals. They view alchemy primarily in its attempt to create the elixir of life, and in doing so they often combine the term “alchemy” with

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<sup>287</sup> *Potion Craft: Alchemist Simulator* (niceplay games, 2022).

<sup>288</sup> I am not going to criticize alchemy games that misrepresent the practice. To take another page from Bogost’s book, it is best to “form credible theories about why [the game] is the way it is, rather than [criticize the fact that] it is not something else” (119). Simply put, while I do appreciate a game that represents Europe’s medieval period authentically, in this brief section I want to know what alchemy games depict and what they do to the players.

<sup>289</sup> *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda, 2002).

<sup>290</sup> *Skyrim* has been released in many formats. This date is its original release. When speaking on the base game, I exclude the Creation Club content. My screenshots on PlayStation 4 are from the *Special Edition*, taken in October 2021, before the *Anniversary Edition* launched on November 11, 2021, and added Creation Club content like Survival Mode. My screenshots on PC are from *Special Edition* but taken in 2024, so they include some CC content but not the full *AE* upgrade. Both pre-2021 and post-2021 versions of the game are valid, but there were enough changes to landscape, materials, and gameplay that the two versions deserve individual treatment; for my current treatment of alchemy, I speak to the traits which all versions of the game have in common. While *Skyrim* is famous for its modding community, I discuss no modifications to the game here—only official releases by Bethesda.

<sup>291</sup> *Alchemist Adventure* (Bad Minions, 2021).

<sup>292</sup> *Alchemy Garden* (MadSushi Games, 2022).

the practices of gardening and herbal medicine. Other games may contain some reference to alchemy but use the term to refer to some magical spell of elemental transformation—that is, it is still not a science or related to physical metalworking.<sup>293</sup> The alchemy in a game like *Little Alchemy 2*,<sup>294</sup> which cannot rightly be called “alchemy” in any medieval context, is somewhat closer. *Little Alchemy* invites the player to combine any two objects together in order to make something new, beginning with the primordial four elements (water and fire make steam, for example).

*The Elder Scrolls*, across all releases including *Skryim*, uses “Alchemy” as the name for their potion-crafting system.<sup>295</sup> The turning of base metals into gold can occur by means of the spell Transmute, which allows the character to turn iron ore into silver and then silver into gold; the process is entirely magical and does not consist in the combination of any materials.<sup>296</sup> Alchemy, however, is a form of herbalism or home remedies, and the Ingredients include far more than gathered herbs: parts of plants, like Blue or Purple Mountain Flowers and Black Anther, can be collected, and so can parts of native fauna, like Butterflies, Human Hearts, and Saber Cat Teeth. It is more similar to cooking than to casting spells.<sup>297</sup> *Skryim*’s status as an open world RPG allows for player co-creation in its story and its setting alike, and alchemy is presented an optional way to inhabit the player-character and the game-world. The Alchemy skill is, like all other skills in the game, open at the novice level to any possible player-character.

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<sup>293</sup> *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) has a spell called “Prima Materia.” The *Golden Sun* series (Camelot Software Planning, 2001-2010) concerns a magic system called “Alchemy.”

<sup>294</sup> *Little Alchemy* (Reclouk, 2017).

<sup>295</sup> Alchemy as a specific skill in *Skryim*, which the character can “level up,” and which the player can place points into (to improve the potions’ effectiveness), is capitalized.

<sup>296</sup> Transmute is part of the Alteration school of magic, rather than Illusion, implying that its transformation is true in essence, not just appearance.

<sup>297</sup> Cooking is another in-game crafting system, but one without applicable skills or levelling up; all characters can cook all recipes with their full effects if they have the required foodstuffs.

Anyone can begin to gather ingredients and mix them at an Alchemy Lab at any time, whenever they are available. The mechanic is optional, one of three crafting mechanics that improve over time as players practice it.<sup>298</sup> Engaging with the mechanic is both powerful and profitable: high-levelled potions are incredibly useful, and they are worth far more than their ingredients. The Alchemy skill is practical, useful, and accessible: perfect for a high fantasy setting.

Alchemy is directly tied to both the story and the gameplay of the action-adventure *A Plague Tale: Innocence*. The player-character, Amicia, has a petty lord for a father, Robert, and an alchemist for a mother, Beatrice, whose goal is to create a cure for Hugo—Beatrice’s son and Amicia’s younger brother. Hugo’s sickness is mysterious: as the player guides Amicia through the first few hours of the game, the characters and player slowly learn that his illness is connected somehow to the Black Plague.<sup>299</sup> At the start, a group of Inquisition soldiers arrive at the de Rune estate; they demand Hugo, believing him to be the cause of the Plague and believing Beatrice’s alchemy to violate Church law. They kill several servants and Robert himself, but the siblings escape. The game sets Amicia on a quest to find help—usually in the form of alchemists and forbidden occult codices—and cure her brother. The gameplay of *A Plague Tale: Innocence* is based on two major interactive segments that occur between its narrative-centered cutscenes: rat puzzles, in which the player must guide Amicia around groups of infected rats; and stealth with possible combat, in which the player must guide Amicia around human enemies. Both sections of the game make use of Amicia’s slingshot and several kinds of alchemically-crafted

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<sup>298</sup> The others are Smithing (crafting out of metals: purely physical) and Enchanting (imbuing weapons and armor with inherent magical abilities: purely magical). Alchemy combines the physical and the magical, bridging that gap as we tend to think alchemy does. Because the Alchemy skill is so tied to discovery across the *Elder Scrolls* games, Houghton argues that it transposes “the notion of a march of progress...from technology to magic” (128).

<sup>299</sup> The Plague is highly fantasticalized: they call it “The Bite,” and it is spread through the bites of massive hordes of ravenous, hivemind rats. Hugo’s illness is called the “Prima Macula,” an evil of the blood dormant in noble families that caused the plague of Justinian and is now causing the Black Death.

ammunition and supplies. Amicia must gather supplies, like sulphur [sic], fabric, saltpeter, and alcohol, and combine them to create different projectiles or tonics. Alchemy, that is to say, is required.<sup>300</sup> Without the player's embrace of alchemy and willingness to learn these alchemical reactions from alchemist characters, the game could not progress; the world would lie incomplete, untouched. The use and the learning in-game of alchemy, then, is the process by which players create and discover the game-world of *A Plague Tale*.

The alchemy of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is more similar to *Skyrim*'s, despite the more realistic and grounded historical setting. *KC:D*'s alchemy skill is the player-character's ability to create potions from gathered ingredients. The minigame is similar to the management sim games above—it is possible to mix the ingredients incorrectly or incompletely and so create a worse potion (unlike in *Skyrim*, where any combinable ingredients will always combine). The crafting mechanic is completely separated from the actual medieval alchemy which the game would be assumed to portray, considering its otherwise deep and thoughtful rendering of medieval central Europe. The codex entry for alchemy in the game describes the role of the court alchemist (to fashion wealth and elixirs for the lord) and how alchemists were imprisoned or executed for failing to deliver on their promises. However, the alchemy in the game is completely divorced from those implications—it is not possible for Henry the protagonist to be arrested for his alchemical experiments, and he never transmutes metals with the skill. Houghton divorces the alchemy of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* from medieval science as well, calling it a “fantastic element.”<sup>301</sup> As with *Skyrim* and those simulation games, here alchemy is an herbalist potion-making minigame.

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<sup>300</sup> The central antagonist, Vitalis, the leader of the Inquisition army hunting Amicia and Hugo, is a malevolent alchemist. He is able to control rat hordes and has broken from Church doctrine to practice.

<sup>301</sup> Houghton, *The Middle Ages in Computer Games*, 64.

*Misericorde* is similarly historical, but its alchemy is more authentic and remains out of reach for the player—mostly because the player has no narrative options in the game. It is not fair to say that the player “controls” Hedwig, the protagonist: it is truer to say that the player reveals her story, as is the nature of kinetic novel games. As the player clicks, more text unfolds, and the story progresses. What is revealed is that one of the nuns of Linbarrow Abbey, the Welshwoman Darcy, is “something of an alchemist,” according to the Mother Superior. Darcy calls herself as “alchevisionist.” Hedwig is investigating the murder of one of the nuns, and each of the sisters is a potential suspect. However, Darcy is undeniably sweet and soft-spoken.<sup>302</sup> She has ecstatic visions and keeps the herb garden; she is much more a Hildegard von Bingen than she is a Cleopatra the Alchemist.<sup>303</sup> Hedwig is given the opportunity early in the story to share her initial suspicions with the Mother Superior, and Darcy does not come up. The fact that she is an alchemist invites no particular suspicion, surprise, or worry in Hedwig. While the setting is historical, the alchemy seems almost entirely unimportant: mystical, and an interesting character detail, but not much more.<sup>304</sup>

Alchemy even occurs positively in the strategy games *Crusader Kings III* and *Humankind*.<sup>305</sup> In the former, which doubles as a role-playing game, the player-character may be approached by an alchemist who seeks funding in order to develop wealth through metallic

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<sup>302</sup> Despite consistent use of standard punctuation and capitalization in all narration and dialogue, Darcy’s dialogue is always minuscule and contains very little punctuation. It is as if she calmly whispers everything she says. Darcy is in charge of the abbey’s livestock but never slaughters any of them, leaving that task to her friend Eustace; Darcy is simply too emotionally attached to the ducks (she names them all). During Hedwig’s first night with the rest of the sisters, Darcy pulls a prank by knocking on Hedwig’s door and dashing away. Darcy is quite proud of herself.

<sup>303</sup> Hildegard von Bingen (c.1098-1179) was a German Benedictine philosopher, mystic, and medica. Eustace compares Darcy to Hildegard. Cleopatra the Alchemist was one of the more famous women alchemists of late antiquity and would have made for an apt comparison in the game.

<sup>304</sup> The series of games is not yet over, so there may be more in store for Darcy’s alchemy.

<sup>305</sup> *Humankind* (Amplitude Studios, 2021).

mixing, an elixir of immortality, or a panacea.<sup>306</sup> The alchemists in *Crusader Kings III* each have an aptitude rating in alchemy, just as court physicians have aptitude ratings in medicine. In an otherwise grounded and historical game, alchemists do in fact produce artifacts for their patrons that improve the patron's lot. The elixirs do not actually provide immortality, but they do give a health boost (so that the character is less likely to fall ill or catch a plague). That is, the alchemists do have some skill: they are not only tricksters.

*Humankind*, in which the player guides a people group across all of human history, includes alchemy as a required scientific development. 4X Strategy games like *Humankind* feature a Technology Tree that displays which scientific breakthroughs the player can unlock, in what order, and what options they provide for future play. One of the technologies in the Medieval era is Alchemy—a trait not shared with *Civilization VI*. The Alchemy technology becomes available after Theology and must be researched before continuing on to Movable Typeface (which unlocks the printing press). *Humankind* teaches its players that alchemy was not all wrong or misleading; its physical discoveries gave way to the chemistry of later ages in a method not shared with other hermetic or mystical “sciences” like astrology, divination, or augury (none of which are technologies in the game).

The landscape of videogames in 2022 is one in which a mention of alchemy is assumed to come with an option for play. When games break away from that expectation, as *Misericorde* does, it is due to the game's nature as a kinetic novel. Alchemy is an odd part of Darcy's character, but it is relegated only to that oddity. Strategy games that include alchemy in the

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<sup>306</sup> The role-playing in the *Crusader Kings* series means that, as opposed to other strategy games, the player is always controlling only one person at a time. The player-character must navigate family turmoil, intrigue, political instability, etc. as they try to obtain or keep their political power. It is a dynasty simulator: when the player-character dies, the player then controls their heir and so plays as a family's lineage over several generations.

Middle Ages do so either as a brief historical reference (as in *Crusader Kings III*) or in order to simulate the contributions that alchemical theories and laboratories provided to the birth of modern sciences like chemistry (as in *Humankind*). All of these instances—in which the player does not control alchemy—in fact separate alchemy from the player. *Pentiment* is able to keep the intrigue, mystery, and deception of alchemy without creating the same separation. Andreas can come very close to alchemy during his investigation, and the player has the option to give Andreas an academic interest in the occult, including alchemy. *Pentiment*'s alchemy, then, is not the same mystical and unknowable reference or uneasy invocation as it appears in *Misericorde* or in popular medievalist media broadly,<sup>307</sup> and it is not a useful and practical means for power, health, and wealth as it appears in otherwise realistic games, like *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. I spend the rest of this chapter examining what the alchemy does in the game, concluding that it primarily is tied to deception and suspicion, for it offers players an opportunity for investigation and for distrust.

### **The Secrecy of Prior Ferenc**

*Pentiment* branches its narrative according to player choice, and alchemy takes on a narrative role insofar as choosing to deal with alchemy changes the story.<sup>308</sup> In Act I, it is quickly revealed that Prior Ferenc, second in command at the Benedictine Kiersau Abbey (under Abbot Gernot), practices alchemy and uses alchemical symbols to hide his interest in other occult rituals.<sup>309</sup> Because of his suspicious behavior—and a clear motive for committing the

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<sup>307</sup> As it is in Eggers's *Nosferatu* (2024).

<sup>308</sup> As opposed to dealing with alchemy *in order to* further the story, as one must in *A Plague Tale*.

<sup>309</sup> The "Acts" refer unofficially to each investigation, though that is not the numbering system of story-beat-categorization which the game itself uses. There are three Acts as fans have categorized it; the game is split unevenly into nine sections: from "I. The Baron" to "IX. Incipit." I will use the Act convention in this chapter. All alchemy appearances occur in Act I.

murder of Baron Lorenz Rothvogel—Andreas identifies him as one of five suspects. Deciding to pursue the alchemist during the investigation is as valid a way to play as deciding not to.

Alchemy is fully removed from the study of astronomy, medicine, theology, and philosophy in *Pentiment*; it retains only its esotericism, its secrets and hidden grasps at power over the physical world. *Pentiment* presents a game-world in flux, in the midst of transformation, apt for showing alchemy. That alchemy pulls on the same strings as the medieval texts discussed in the first four chapters, shedding a particularly distrustful light on alchemical practice and on Prior Ferenc.

Andreas, the player-character for most of the game, is an educated young artist working temporarily at the scriptorium in Kiersau Abbey, just up the hill from Tassing, in April 1518. The game begins shortly after Easter—on April 21, specifically. The player spends the first couple hours of gameplay talking to the Tassing townsfolk, the peasants with whom Andreas is lodging, and the monks at Kiersau. During this time, the player picks out the area Andreas had most recently lived in: Tuscany, Basel, or The Netherlands. The player will also choose from a variety of basic personalities, including Bookworm or Rapsallion. These choices will expand Andreas' dialogue options throughout the game, tailoring each playthrough and investigation to a specific version of Andreas. Andreas, like the town, is in flux. As Andreas makes his way to the abbey for a day of work on his masterpiece,<sup>310</sup> a visiting nobleman, Baron Lorenz Rothvogel, comes through town on his way to the abbey. He was well educated privately and decides to talk to Andreas about his studies, theology, and the abbey as they make their way up the hill.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> The game authentically represents the origin of “masterpiece:” Andreas has a Master’s degree but cannot become Master Maler (technically) until he completes his masterpiece and marries, upon his return to his hometown Nuremberg. Most in town call him Master Maler, though.

<sup>311</sup> *Pentiment*, because it is text-based without voice acting, represents dialectical, class, and register differences in voices through five different fonts, or scripts. Andreas’ is the neutral Humanist script. Rothvogel begins the game with the Scribe script, for upper-class folks without formal education. When Andreas learns that he is quite well-read, the font changes to the Humanist script.

During their conversation, the player picks Andreas' intellectual interests. One of these choices is Occultist, which gives Andreas a basic academic familiarity with alchemy, astrology, and other esoteric and occult ideas. Later that evening at supper, Abbot Gernot and Baron Rothvogel have a heated conversation about Martin Luther (Rothvogel is already quite interested in Luther's ideas for reforming the Church). Sometime during the night, probably around Matins, the baron is murdered.<sup>312</sup> Brother Piero, Andreas's friend and mentor, is accused of the crime only because he discovered the body and Gernot needs someone to blame, and Andreas must find the real killer to save Piero. However, there is not enough time in the game to investigate every lead before the trial; Andreas must choose which suspects to focus on, and there is no clear answer (the murder had no witnesses, and several of the townsfolk have motive, means, and no alibi). The investigation covers Act I. Act II is seven years later and focuses on Tassing's participation in the Peasant Revolts of 1525. Act III takes place in 1543 and switches (at first) the player-character to young Magdalene Druckeryn, daughter of the printer Claus Drucker.

*Pentiment* is about the modernization of the fictional town Tassing, Bavaria, and as the name suggests it is about revealing underlying layers of reality, of history. Tassing is a town in flux, and its history is a cycle of rebuilding and recontextualization: Tassing is itself a pentiment, and the actions of Andreas reflect and reify those pentiments as he discovers each layer and adds his own influence onto the town.<sup>313</sup> Rothvogel is a noble who spouts radical Lutheran talking points and egging the clergy on, seemingly out of entertainment. Tassing itself is home to both the last illuminated scriptorium in the surrounding area and a print shop. In fact, Andreas the illuminator and Claus Drucker, who runs the print shop with his wife Marie, are on amiable

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<sup>312</sup> Matins is the divine office of the early morning well before dawn, probably about 2 a.m.

<sup>313</sup> In Act III, Andreas quite literally paints over saints in a "Dance of Death" mural with the faces of character who died in the first two acts.

terms throughout the game. Though they might appear to represent colliding and exclusive modes of book-making, their differences in medium and employment are only jokes. They are otherwise united in their shared craft, allowing the technologies to coexist for different purposes. Andreas gets a chance early on to offer advice to Claus on one of his newest woodblock prints, not fearing that he would be replaced. There is a tension held in flux, then, between two worlds—a tension that can unite as much as it can divide, if the people involved respect and trust each other. In Act II, the townspeople embrace an inn that hosts travelers and pilgrims, but they believe their economy worked better in previous generations. Peasants are not allowed to forage in common areas like the woods south of town, but they own their homes and land. *Pentiment* shows a world, as both Rothvogel and Brother Piero say, “out of time.”

Tassing’s flux—and therefore its argument for a story that might concern alchemy, the changing of materials—is clear in its bookending scenes: the game begins in a dream vision and ends with a young woman printer moving to the big city for her career opportunities. After the player uses a stone to scrape off the top layer of an illuminated manuscript, which features a Latin translation of the opening to *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, the pages turn, and the frame zooms in on an image labeled, “An Artist Sleeps.” Andreas speaks to Prester John, Beatrice, Socrates, and Saint Grobian for a short while, then Saint Grobian accompanies his ship-voyage back to the waking world.<sup>314</sup> Dream visions are a ubiquitously medieval genre. They appear consistently throughout ancient literature, including several episodes or entire books of the Bible which the Latin West took for great influence.<sup>315</sup> After intense popularity leading up to

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<sup>314</sup> In order, these four are symbols for courtly prestige, faithful duty, logic and education, and irreverent disregard of all the previous three. The dream contains, in Andreas’s mind, the make-up of medieval societal stability.

<sup>315</sup> Biblical dream visions—and uses of dream visions within other works—include Joseph in *Genesis*, several sections of *Ezekiel*, and John of Patmos’ *Revelation*. Other ancient dream visions include Cicero’s first-

and in the century following the Black Death, the dream vision fell out of fashion slowly over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The game begins squarely with a medieval setting (the outdoor court of Prester John) and medieval archetypes (Prester John, Beatrice, Socrates, and Grobian), and it is told via a medieval genre (the dream vision).<sup>316</sup> But the medieval world must come to a close. As Prester John says in the opening dream vision sequence, “The wheel of time stops for no man, Andreas,” dismissing Andreas from the court and allowing him to return to the waking world. After Andreas wakes from that dream and begins to go about his day, the timepiece by which the game presents urgency is a cyclical clock of Monastic hours: Lauds at dawn, then Prime, Sext, and Nones through the day, Vespers in the evening for supper, and Compline and Matins at night. Daily time still retains its medieval foundation.

Change comes quickly for Tassing. At the end of Act I and Act II, Andreas accuses someone of murder (first of the baron, second of the labor organizer Otto Zimmerman). In Act I, that person is executed in the town square by order of Jacob Estler, acting on behalf of the Prince-Bishop.<sup>317</sup> In Act II, the peasants and townspeople are so enraged that they attack the abbey and burn down its library.<sup>318</sup> No matter the other choices throughout the game, Andreas jumps into the flames to save as many manuscripts as he can. The abbey closes, Andreas is

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century BCE *Somnium Scipionis* [The Dream of Scipio] about Scipio Aemilianus’ dream-journey through the stars and Lucian of Sarosata’s second-century CE *True History*. Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the greater influences of medieval dream visions.

<sup>316</sup> *Pentiment* includes an anchoress, Sister Amalie, in Tassing’s local church (not the abbey). Amalie has a vision the night of Baron Rothvogel’s murder, yelling out as Andreas passes her window: “Pale horse! Pale horse! Still on the floor! / Matins! Matins! The pale horse...death!” (I use the “/” to denote when the player must click to see the next sentence; the videogame equivalent of a line break.) Anchorites are similarly medieval, and the truth of her vision implies a truth about ecstatic visions that fits well with *Pentiment*’s ambiguous setting.

<sup>317</sup> After all, a nobleman had been slain. The first estate would not allow such flagrant disregard of the medieval world order, the Great Chain of Being even, though disregard would continue to bubble.

<sup>318</sup> This act also features firearms. The musket is a new arrival and causes unease in most of Tassing.

missing and presumed dead, and the town loses several lives when the Duke's army arrives to put down the rebellion. Eighteen years later, Andreas returns and, with Magdalene, as a fellow player-character, uncovers the thread-puller, the one who enticed those murders and had killed on his own as well, as the local priest Father Thomas. Thomas wanted to keep the layers of Tassing's history a secret, and so he killed or conspired to kill everyone who threatened to bring the truth to light.<sup>319</sup> The flexible and progressively complex changes of Tassing over the course of 30 years also strips away at the town, layer by layer—as the title implies—for Andreas and Magdalene discover the late-Roman origins of most of the town's founding myths, including the two legendary patron saints of the town and the abbey.<sup>320</sup> As the player controls Magdalene, the timepiece changes from the Monastic hours to a standard 24-hour clock and calendar, mechanical and based on even hours, not based on the Sun or on hours of prayer. The modern world has come. Magdalene ends the game by moving to Prague regardless of other player choices. The future is bright, and while Andreas stays in Tassing, Magdalene is hopeful and excited to open a print shop in the big city and enjoy a new modern adult life not possible for others from Tassing even one generation earlier.

Andreas himself forms the boundary between medieval and modern (or, more accurately, the fact that there was no firm boundary) through most of the game. The RPG elements of the game and Andreas' role as a reliable and caring outsider give him a liminality not usually afforded to the Middle Ages; and yet, such a liminal representation is a perfect fit for alchemy as

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<sup>319</sup> Father Thomas even had his church constructed on top of the Mithraeum, a Roman ruin with artistic proof that the town's origins were Roman, not Christian, as the townspeople believed. Andreas (transporting there seemingly mystically by means of a final dream vision) and Magdalene find the Mithraeum in the finale. Like the rest of the town, and as evident by Andreas' ephemeral arrival, it is a place out of time.

<sup>320</sup> They learn that the two saints, Moritz and Satia, were not actually saints who defied Rome to become Christians, miraculously protecting young Tassing, and were martyred. Instead, Moritz was entirely fabricated based on a broken statue of Mars, and Satia was based on stories of the Roman goddess Diana.

it really was considered in the early sixteenth century. Andreas sticks out and fills both medieval and modern roles in his dialogue as it is written on screen. The text for a characters' dialogue has a certain font corresponding to their role or class. The Peasant script is sloppy and contains frequent mistakes; the Monastic script, or high-ranking clergymen, is sweeping and grand; the printer's dialogue is not handwritten but printed, block by block, until it is pressed into the speech bubble. Andreas, and other educated characters like him, speak in the Humanist script. Andreas's body as well exists in both medieval and modern terms: his design resembles a woodcut out of late medieval print; he would fit in well in the fifteenth or the sixteenth centuries (he lived in both). Older and more conservative characters tend to look flatter, as though they were drawn in a fourteenth century style; their paint has rubbed off, and their colors are duller, as though their pages had seen more sun and been touched by more hands. Younger or more progressive characters, like Magdalene the printer in the third act, resemble woodblocks like Andreas but move more fluidly. *Pentiment* is about the transition, transformation, of its setting. It complicates the borderline and instead presents a world that has both feet in both worlds at once. Such constant flux for the town and for the characters reflects the murder mystery plot, where Andreas is able to shape the history of the town, where alchemy rears its head.

The player's first interaction with alchemy is about 15-30 minutes into the first act, when the player is given a selection of possible backgrounds for their version of Andreas. One of the options for what Andreas enjoyed studying as a hobby at university is occultism, which includes alchemy and astrology but not any of the other medieval sciences.<sup>321</sup> The description says:

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<sup>321</sup> Astronomy, medicine, herbalism, and zoology are possible for Andreas to know as well, but they are kept under different background choices.

Andreas knows a soul-endangering amount of theoretical and practical knowledge on alchemy, astrology, theurgy, necromancy, and various magical rites and ceremonies.<sup>322</sup>

*Pentiment* associates alchemy with magic at this time, in context of Andreas' chosen studies (aside from the seven liberal arts and his own painting training). I must be clear that the Tassing folk are not backward or overly superstitious in *Pentiment*.<sup>323</sup> They are simply people. And it is this context that treats alchemy suspiciously, not without good reason. The categorization of alchemy within "Occultist" practice shows the assumption—by the characters—that the people who partake in alchemy might also have something more sinister in the works.

One of the investigative paths for players to lead Andreas through is the Kiersau library and the prior himself, Ferenc, who is rumored to partake in "black magic" rituals. Before the murder, when Andreas is alone in the scriptorium, Ferenc enters, carrying some circular object with constellations on it. He looks around frantically, jots something down in a large codex, and leaves quickly. Andreas had been kneeling, and Ferenc did not notice him. The secrecy is immediately suspicious: Andreas thinks back upon this event after the Baron's murder. When he checks the book, he finds some alchemical language and symbols for the zodiac alongside Greek letters. The game is preparing the player for a very standard adventure game puzzle involving codes, secrecy, deception, and dark academia.<sup>324</sup> Andreas can investigate the prior's house while

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<sup>322</sup> By 1518, astrology and astronomy were beginning to diverge. Astronomy is included in the "Heavens and Earth" backstory, so the inclusion of astrology here must implicate the study in mysticism.

<sup>323</sup> Alchemy's association with magic and mystical properties of spirit were well underway in the sixteenth century.

<sup>324</sup> A similar level of puzzles is quite common among point-and-click adventure games, though usually the puzzles are relatively unintuitive and require a willingness to embarrass the character by trying every object on every object. The more notorious games with these types of puzzles are *The Secret of Monkey Island* and *Broken Sword: The Shadow of the Templars* (Revolution Software, 1996). *Pentiment* plays into genre expectations with this set of decoding puzzles, but its focus is still on how Andreas discovers more mystery and secrets, not on unintuitive puzzle-solving gameplay.

Ferenc is out. Within, Andreas makes a charcoal rubbing of a sheet of paper with light marks, as though it were underneath a sheet which Ferenc had used to write a letter. In that letter, once Andreas reveals it, Ferenc admits to being blackmailed into conducting a necromantic ritual for Baron Rothvogel, a ritual which he refused. Andreas with an occult background wonders, “It’s one thing to read books on magic, but few are foolish enough to attempt to actually practice what’s written in them.” He will otherwise think, “No wonder Ferenc was so unsettled when Lorenz arrived. The baron could have gotten him executed for witchcraft.” Without that occult background, Andreas thinks directly about the murder investigation and what motive Ferenc may have had—and indeed, it’s a compelling possibility. But in either case, the emphasis is on Ferenc’s secrecy and attempt to practice magic that goes against Church doctrine and allowance. The alchemy itself is not in question, for there is no mention of experimentation with metals or elements, or even a lab. Ferenc’s fault is in the attempt to conduct secretive rituals, which have an association with alchemy through esoteric codes and transmission.

Ferenc’s alchemy casts aspersions on the nature of his motive, as well. Ferenc was left a note that invited him to the Chapterhouse (where Lorenz was murdered) at Matins (when the murder took place). As Andreas investigates, he discovers that all five potential suspects received a personalized note, all of which end by saying, “Matins. Chapter.” The notes tend to remind their recipients of what Lorenz had done wrong to them, or for what they should desire vengeance. Ferenc’s note is unique in two ways, both of which cast more doubt on him as an alchemist. The first is that he had tossed his into the fireplace. More than the other suspects, he sought to get rid of the note and all evidence pointing to a possible motive. Burning the note does not mean that Ferenc must be guilty, of course, but it cements his desire for secrecy and his fear

for implicating himself in black magic, even if he were not guilty of murder.<sup>325</sup> The second unique facet of Ferenc's note is the reference to the "red bird," a punning reference to the name Rothvogel. Most of the notes say, "The red bird flies," centering Rothvogel as the target. However, Ferenc's puts the recipient in the active role. The charred remnant of the note, written in beautiful purple ink with a Monastic hand, says in German: "Keine Gerechtigkeit. Angeklagt wie die Frauen von Innsbruck. Die Inquisition ist sein Hammer. Fangt den roten Vogel. Matutine. Kapitelhaus." [No justice. Accused like the women from Innsbruck. The Inquisition is his hammer. Catch the red bird. Matins. Chapter House.]<sup>326</sup> The "red bird" reference is in the accusative; Ferenc, the recipient of the note, is active in the sentence, being commanded to "catch" the baron. Unlike the others, he doesn't need to act quickly because the bird (Lorenz) might fly away. He needs to act quickly because of what the rest of the note implicates: the Inquisition might come for him, at the baron's request. Unlike Lucky, Matilda, and Ottilia, all of whom have a reason for exacting vengeance upon Lorenz, Ferenc's motive is his own privacy.<sup>327</sup> Ferenc is certainly guilty of several corrupting influences on the abbey and the town. His secrecy earlier is cast into harsher darkness. Alchemy led the player, in its suspicion, to a clear motive and an even darker practice.

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<sup>325</sup> *Pentiment* never reveals who actually killed the baron. History is malleable in the game, and while the player cannot escape some fates (like the abbey burning down in Act II, Father Thomas being the one to leave those purple-inked notes, or Magdalene leaving at the end), some answers are never revealed beyond what the player discovers during their investigations. All five suspects in Act I have potential murder weapons, motives, opportunities (through the notes), and a lack of alibis.

<sup>326</sup> While Andreas speaks a translation for all the other notes, for this one he only says it contains the words "red bird." My translation.

<sup>327</sup> Lorenz is a truly despicable man. He consistently treated the people of Tassing and Kiersau Abbey as objects and obstacles, so wanting vengeance against him was not uncommon. For example, Lucky Pfeiffer the Stonemason's daughter had an affair with Lorenz. He impregnated her and left town, leaving her to handle the situation alone. She attempted to terminate the pregnancy, but without any help she lost too much blood. Her unborn child was buried with her, and their gravestone says, "Two Innocents." Ferenc's motive sticks out.

Andreas also finds a volvelle, which he realizes is the object Ferenc had been holding when he wrote marginalia into the codex. The volvelle has elemental symbols (Fire, Earth, Water, and Air) around the edge of the circle, and each star of the constellations displayed, labeled with a Greek letter, is in fact a hole through which Latin letters appear. By turning the wheel to align with a different element, Andreas can see four different sets of Greek-to-Latin encryption. If the player chose the Occultist background for Andreas, then Andreas is able to interpret alchemical and astrological symbols on the volvelle and in the prior's private journal. If the player chooses a different background, then Andreas can still decipher them if he finds the right book in the library, but it will take longer.

Alchemy is only the first suspicious trait of Prior Ferenc, which sets the players into the investigation, associating alchemy not just with distrust but with interest. Alchemy, as secretive as it is, is also the system of symbolism by which Andreas is able to figure out Ferenc's motives. The secretive nature of the mystical science—as it was in the sixteenth century and as *Pentiment* presents it—entices the player to investigate further. Alchemy's associations are slowly revealed and indict Ferenc as a practitioner of black magic and blood rituals. Alchemy in Ferenc's journal leads Andreas to find a way to sneak into the library (which is the domain of the nuns, not the monks) after hours. In the library, Andreas learns enough to decode the cypher and, either with the help of Abbot Gernot or Otto Zimmerman, Tassing's carpenter, has the option to dig up a grave of a long-gone monk. In that grave is a possible murder weapon (a rod stained with blood) and other implicating evidence for black magic and blood rituals. Alternatively, Andreas has the option to eat lunch one day with the charcoal burner who lives just outside of town. During that meal, the burner reveals that Ferenc had once come into the forest to spill his own blood in a, as Smokey the charcoal burner says, "black magic" ritual. Eyewitness and material evidence

coalesce and agree that Ferenc has been pursuing interests which, as the baron had told him, might bring down the Inquisition upon him. Alchemy, then, doesn't merely connote distrust and a target for investigation. It leads the player to more and worse mystical practices, none of which befit a trustworthy clergyman. Discovering that the Abbot is an alchemist leads Andreas to information about Ferenc's necromancy and a headstone in the abbey's graveyard. *Pentiment's* alchemy is, therefore, not an entirely negative portrayal; rather, it seems to be useful and inquisitive, though it cannot shake off its association with deception and secrecy. After all, secrecy can be useful, and decoding it even more so for the investigator. Ferenc is not guilty of practicing alchemy: Andreas (and, ideally, the player) is far more concerned with the blood rituals and the baron's attempt at blackmail.

*Pentiment* ultimately holds that the real practice of alchemy is a farce, and an entirely distrustful one at that. Not only does Andreas consider it "foolish," but also the necromantic ritual evidence, which Andreas discovers, tells of a path of failed experiments and spells. Digging up the grave of Brother Gerhard reveals Ferenc's failed necromantic rituals for more than just gossip. He used the grave to store his old equipment, perhaps leaving it and the code for someone after him to find, and to hide the evidence of his practices. Ferenc had begun to refuse to practice this magic for Baron Rothvogel, but calling the baron's bluff might have resulted in the baron contacting the Inquisition.<sup>328</sup> Like in *A Plague Tale*, alchemy in *Pentiment* is associated with both arcane and scholarly intelligence; unlike in *A Plague Tale*, alchemy as an extension of scholarly or scientific interest remains only in the domain of fraud and deception.

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<sup>328</sup> We are reminded in the game that there had been witch trials in Innsbruck by the Inquisition in 1485, still in living memory of many in Tassing and Kiersau, including Ferenc. The threat, while not ubiquitous in the Middle Ages, had some strength and possibility behind it. The threat is in the note: "Accused like the women from Innsbruck."

Alchemy here is secret, unknowable both to the vast majority of Tassing's citizens and to any player who does not choose the Occultist background. With that background, Andreas is able to tell that Ferenc is using alchemical symbols, zodiac symbols, and Greek letters to make a cypher, but that alone does not mean much. Even as an occultist, Andreas is not able to read the cypher without more effort and a trip to the library.<sup>329</sup> If Ferenc is hiding his practices behind obscure symbols, ciphers, metaphors, and the study of heretical ideas, then, the player might wonder, what else is he hiding? The game begs the next set of questions, as well, all just from Ferenc's proximity to alchemical study: Can I know when he is lying? Has he lied already? Can he use his secrecy to hide evidence permanently?

Additionally, in order to present alchemy as a strange, secretive, and suspect discipline, *Pentiment* refers to medieval figures who should be so entwined with alchemical study that they might not be praised without praising alchemy as well, yet it is not so. Separating alchemy from the earlier philosophers and theologians who wrote about and practiced it serves to further cast alchemy into mysticism and secretive suspicion. Early in the game, Andreas is tasked with collecting a few errant books for the librarian, Sister Illuminata. As he does so, with each book he picks up, the visual point-of-view shifts, and both Illuminata and Andreas walk along the manuscripts' pages.<sup>330</sup> One of them is an early copy of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake in 1310 for her heretical beliefs. Other theologians pop up in their conversation on the freedom of the intellect and whether certain books should be destroyed (regardless of other player options, Andreas is not thrilled with the idea of Illuminata burning the book): one of these great thinkers is Albertus Magnus, or Albert

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<sup>329</sup> Andreas can solve the volvelle immediately if he has both "Occultist" (which gives him the alchemy) and "Heavens and Earth" (which gives him the zodiac) backgrounds.

<sup>330</sup> They become pentiments themselves.

the Great.<sup>331</sup> In the game, Andreas and Illuminata a nun briefly praise Albert's work in natural science and theology; they do not mention his incredible influence on alchemy. While defending the preservation of even heretical manuscripts, depending on the background, Andreas might say, "Both Albertus Magnus and Aquinas recognized the role of the intellect in allowing humans to exercise free will." The game here gives the player everything *around* alchemy in a positive manner, specifically the now-gone admirable people who studied it. Alchemy itself, though, remains centrally secretive. The fact that Albert the Great practiced it is not enough for the characters or the town to treat it with respect. Indeed, despite other great scholars before him, Ferenc does not have such a high standing or prestige in his studies, so he keeps them hidden.

In all, alchemy appears at once as a useful tool for telling the story and in order for the player to associate it with trickery and suspicion. Alchemy as a code-breaking mechanism works as a plot device, one best featured in an interactive fiction adventure game, allowing *Pentiment* some literary alchemy, even as a twenty-first-century videogame without symbolic use of alchemical references. Ferenc is dragged into the light as an alchemist, and the player has complete discretion with whether to share that information with Jacob Estler, in the office of the Prince-Bishop, who presides over the trial at the end of Act I. Alchemy stirs suspicion for Ferenc, and that suspicion is rewarded almost immediately in the prior's marginalia commentary, journal and volvelle, and rituals. The alchemy, as presented across some medieval British poetry, therefore did not die at the turn of the Renaissance, nor in the eighteenth century when alchemical literature saw its greatest decline. Representations of alchemy in a historical setting still maintain its associations with secrecy, deception, and fraud. It is precisely by the same

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<sup>331</sup> Albertus Magnus was an extremely influential thirteenth-century philosopher, theologian, alchemist, and natural scientist.

suspicion, the same distrust in *Dame Sirith*, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, and *The Moral Fables* that the players of *Pentiment* can first judge and investigate Prior Ferenc, driving on one of the more important subplots of Tassing's transformative story.

## CODA

Whether in Papal Bulls or in videogames, in heavy metal or in medieval fables, alchemists cannot shake accusations of fraud. They were so closely associated with fraud, and their anxiety so encompassing about interpreting texts correctly, that alchemists cultivated a literary attitude like paranoid conspiracy theorists, always on the lookout for detractions and criticisms. While alchemists maintained some prestige in early university settings, and afterward in royal and noble courts, much of the literature of the Middle Ages was not kind to them.

Whether in alchemical hermeneutics, or in literary alchemy, the study of medieval alchemy and its representation in contemporary literature is of utmost importance to understand modern reception of and audiences for medieval texts and ideas. Representations of alchemy and alchemists have continued and seem not to be slowing down.

In this dissertation, I have specifically looked at medieval texts that depict an alchemy associated with fraud—or, in the case of *Dame Sirith*, a trickster tale concerned with agency, control, and transformation. There are others that deal with fraud, which I could not fit into the present work. There are still others that deal with alchemy pleasantly and with great support. Scholarly work has increased concerning these alchemies and these literatures about alchemy, but more yet remains.

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