Alchemy and Christianity in Fragment VIII of *The Canterbury Tales*

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Ⅰ. Introduction

The twentieth-century reception of Chaucer is in most respects a remarkably sensitive and accurate reflection both of his text and of twentieth century sensibility. The critics in the twentieth century have shown an interest in Chauce's ambiguity and irony-qualities, as Derek Brewer says, "that were not remarked on till the nineteenth century, and rarely then," but that must be counted among his most characteristic traits as medieval artist (269). In addition, there is a mid- and late-twentieth century critical heritage that sees Chaucer as a "religious poet." In this Chaucerian tradition, some critics read Chaucer as a forerunner of Protestantism, one whose Lollardist associations and sympathies led to a deep questioning of the Catholicism of his day (Fisher 1-3; Smith and Brown 8). On the other hand, though it is generally agreed that Chaucer

was a safely orthodox Catholic in doctrine, the critics have distinguished between Chaucer's doctrinal position and his religious feeling— "religiosity" (Muscatine 250; Patterson 26–37).

Though the centrality of religion in the Middle Ages is obvious, it is difficult to identify the nature and quality of Chaucer's religious feeling and belief. Unlike his contemporaries such as William Langland and John Gower, Chaucer's own attitude towards religion cannot be accounted for by the religious references in his works. He never discloses his commitment in religion and offers few judgments. However, in spite of some skeptical ideas on Chaucer's religious feeling, Chaucer was undoubtedly an orthodox Catholic in doctrine, and in the main held by the tenets of the Christian faith. As Trevor Whittock points out, "Chaucer was an artist, and his genius led him to perceive truths not always sufficiently acknowledged by Christianity" (293–94). Whittock implies an uneasy fusion of religious tenets and secular forms in Chaucer's works, especially in the *Canterbury Tales*. Alternately Chaucer might have tried to avoid getting embroiled in turmoil at all levels of religious life in his age. These might lead the readers either to make it harder to grasp his religious feeling or to misunderstand it. But a careful reading of Chaucer's tales suggests that in religion, as in most other fields of human interests, he was quite aware of what was going on.

In particular, fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales* provides a representative case for evaluating Chaucer as a "Christian poet" whose interest lies in the reconciliation of Christian discourse in the "Second Nun's Tale" with alchemical discourse in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale." Chaucer tries to place two seemingly different tales, the saint's celestial life and the alchemist's earthly life, within Christian myth. This essay aims at demonstrating that, in spite of the points of opposition between the Second Nun's religious imagery and the Canon's Yeoman's alchemical

imagery, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" symbolically ends with the idea of salvation and thereby establishes spiritual alchemy and Christianity as complementary rather than oppositional. Although the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" involves the satirical tradition or parody on a spiritual transformation in comparison with the previous tale, Chaucer's focus in the former tale is on the sacred implications of alchemy rather than on simply opposition to the saint's story. This is suggested by Chaucer's attitude toward alchemy, by his spiritual view on the alchemist's un-extinguishable quest for the "philosopher's Stone," and by his building the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" around the theme of penitence.

II. Alchemy and Christianity as Complementary

Since Charles Muscatine's general emphasis on the spirituality of Cecilia and his casual reference to Cecilia as "curiously anticipat[ing] the Yeoman's teaching" was made (216), the critical approach has illuminated the thematic questions that link the two tales and opened up the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" to much-needed analysis. However, the analysis has been unidirectional, reading the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" as the degraded inversion of the orthodox Christian view that the "Second Nun's Tale" is seen up to present. "His greatest gift," Muscatine says of the Yeoman, "is a dogged sense of the world of matter. There is not the faintest glimmer of spirituality or mysticism about him." He goes on saying that "nowhere else in Chaucer is there such a solid, unspiritual mass of 'realism,' and nowhere is its artistic function less to be doubted" (217). Muscatine understands the Yeoman's catalogue of alchemical methods and materials as the way of representing the universe of technology and "that complacent faith in science that despises God" (221). Though there are, undeniably,

the opposite elements between the two tales which are derived from the process of pursuing their common goal, the "philosopher's stone" (Christ), I do not think, however, that Chaucer's alchemists lose, as Muscatine argues, "the spiritual tradition that a community of men takes with it along the way." Moreover, considering Derek Brewer's argument that the "Second Nun's Tale" as Chaucer's early work was not even revised to suit the teller, while the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is "a fruit of his ripen years, obviously written late in the *Canterbury Tales* period and yet firmly attached to the previous one" (148-49), I am not convinced that Chaucer's intense affection for life in this world have led him simply to make contrast or opposition between the saint's heavenly faith and the Yeoman's earth-bound and slippery one. The latter tale must have been designed to be complementary to the doctrinal Christianity of the saint's life through the relationship between spiritual alchemy and Christianity, as noted in Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*: "diverse pathes leden diverse folk the ryhte wey to Rome" (43-4).[1)]

Most critics in their interpretations of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" agree that the tale's realism and wealth of detail suggest that Chaucer had an extensive knowledge of alchemical lore. But they disagree about whether Chaucer condemned alchemy as a heresy or esteemed it as a divine science compatible with Christianity. Although the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" may act either as Chaucer's faith in or as his warning against alchemy, it is not simply a warning against or proclamation of faith in alchemy. To read the poem primarily either way is, as Walter Curry points out, "probably beside the mark... Chaucer was no more a pamphleteer than an exponent of pure science; he was a literary artist..." (XXIV). Consideration of the tale's position in the *Canterbury Tales* and of

1) All line references to the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed, Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

its framework of penitence naturally helps us to understand the tale in the context of spirituality. Especially, as Gardner and Rosenberg have pointed out, the Canon's Yeoman's exposition of esoteric alchemical principles in lines 1427–81 implicitly establishes the "Lapis–Christus" parallel in which the "philosopher's Stone" is Christ. And the Yeoman begins his tale by asserting the impossibility of achieving the "philosopher's Stone," only to end his tale by affirming the Stone's existence and describing it as a gift from Christ.

First of all, the position of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" prepares us for the approach of the "Parson's Tale," which has been held to be the most important tale of all because it "knytte up al this feeste" (47) of all the tales. The Parson, who is asked by the Host to be "fructuous, and that in litel space" (71), responds with a sermon and an essay which close with a view of man transformed from base to pure substance, in Heaven (1078). The Parson's allusion to purification of metals, from "derk" to "cleer" is a final conjoining of man with God and the reconciliation of spiritual and physical nature.

The tales before the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" are closely connected with the themes of purifying transformations; hag to lovely woman in the "Wife of Bath's Tale," gold to fart in the "Summoner's Tale," ape to Angel by the devil in the "Friar's Tale," peasant girl to queen in the "Clerk's Tale," etc. Paul Taylor remarks that the *Canterbury Tales* opens with a metaphor of alchemy, as mentioned in the terms, *Zephirus* and *licour* with some special force to bring about a transformation and increase of matter (1–3). Even more to the point is the idea that the pilgrimage to Canterbury itself is a rehearsal of the ultimate transformation of matter to spirit, which is the ultimate goal of alchemy as well. Especially, the "Second Nun's Tale," which immediately precedes it, introduces many of the religious and moral themes handled in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" and

the "Parson's Tale" and Chaucer's "Retraction." These tales as a closure group in the *Canterbury Tales* show the thematic coherence, focusing on a clear and profound concern for man's salvation.

Within a closure group, Chaucer gradually takes a step toward closure: from the ideal and fictional world of St. Cecilia through the practical and physical world of the alchemist to the Parson's teachings in his final sections concerning spiritual transformation. Furthermore, the actual placing of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," just following the "Second Nun's Tale," clearly emphasizes its religious significance and promotes the readers to see the "Second Nun's Tale" as a significant factor in understanding the former tale. When Chaucer attached the alchemist's earthly life to the saint's legendary life, Chaucer must have realized the analogy between Christianity and divine alchemy in the Middle ages: the attainment of the "philosopher's Stone" or the moral spiritual regeneration of a believer whose soul, through God's grace, has been fitted for salvation.

Among the English translations of earlier alchemical treatises, Hortulanus' *Commentary on the Emerald Table* of Hermes Trismegistus consistently uses divine analogy to explain the preparation of the "philosopher's Stone":

> As the world was created, so is our stone composed. For in the beginning, the whole world and all that is therein, was a confused Masse and Chaos ... but afterward by the workemanship of the soveraigne Creator, this masse was divided into the four elements, wonderfully separated and rectified... so likewise may divers things be made by ordering our worke, through the separation of the divers elements from divers bodies. (Hortulanus 25-6)

God's Creation of the world here is very analogous to an alchemist's transforming process to obtain the Stone. Both are caught up in the physicality and abundance of earthly, human things. In particular, the latter mimics the divine creation of corporeal substance from chalk, earth, ash and clay, and then goes a step further to attempt the creation of a transcendent beauty from these elements such as the bones, dung, "mannes heer," and piss that are not simply the dregs but are also the substance of the human body (802-18). In addition to the similarity between an alchemist's preparation for the Stone and God's Creation, medieval alchemists conceived of alchemical transmutation as an analogue to Christ's nativity, death, and resurrection. They often associated the creation of the "philosopher's Stone" with Mary's conception of Christ, the true "philosopher's Stone" which purified mankind from sin. Moreover, alchemy in the Middle Ages became a subculture of the Church, and regarded by alchemists as the essential complement to the Christian work of redemption (Jung 34).

Chaucer was not exceptional in this medieval notion of linking Christianity with the spiritual alchemy and the true role of the alchemist. At the end of his tale, the Yeoman tells us what the great philosophers of the past have had to say on the subject of the "elixir," the "privee stoon." Among other things, he recounts the dialogue between Plato and one of his disciples. In this dialogue, Plato says that it is called "Magnasia, (which) is a water that is maad ... / Of elementes foure" (1458-60; Magnasia here stands for mercury). John Gardner gives the following comment on this passage:

> ... a meaning completely consistent throughout the passage and consistent with Chaucer's method elsewhere in this tale ... is that Magnasia (the Lodestone, equivalent here to Christ the Rock) combines the four elements as they would be combined

> in the Incarnate, that is, elemented, God, the "roote" of that water. The water is the ceaselessly flowing fountain grace (330).

This analysis opens up an interesting link with the prologue to the "Second Nun's Tale," where it is said that Christ is lord of earth, sea and heaven (46), while a little later it is implied that he himself embodies the element fire (114) which in its turn equates the "brennynge" of charity (118).

Though it can be admitted that the satirical tradition or the parody on the spiritual transformation is inherent in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" in relation to the previous tale, Chaucer's main interest lies in setting forth the sacred implications of alchemy, chiefly by devising intricate systems of correspondence that exist between chemical processes and interactions occurring within their alembics and spiritual transformations taking place within their hearts and souls. In this case, the desired goal is purification and perfection; the attainment of the "philosopher's Stone," Christ's salvation. Central to this analogical system is, of course, the traditional idea of Christ as the "philosopher's Stone"; the agent of healing, the deliverer from sin and baseness, the author of grace and salvation and the reconciler of physical and spiritual reality. Erik Kooper demonstrates the concept of Christ as the various kinds of stone mentioned throughout the Scripture: "the living stone" (*lapis vivum*), "the corner-stone" (*lapis angularis*) and "the stone to trip over" (*lapis offensionis*) or "the rock to stumble against" (*petra scandali*). Kooper further says that all of them centered on the allegory of the stone commonly mean Christ (207-18).

In both tales fires burn brightly, appropriately enough since fire is the crux of the alchemical opus. Fire burns away the dross and proves the gold, which is "uncorrupted" by flame: in true alchemy, gold ultimately became a synonym for the "philosopher's Stone" and regarded as a permanent, incorruptible, and spiritual compound. Just as alchemists had

the power to draw forth a purified gold from base matter, so God can extract the elixir of true penitence from the human mind. In much the same way, St. Cecilia is "proved" by the fire as well. Like heaven, "swift and round and eek brennynge" (114), she is "round and hool in good perseverynge,/And brennynge evere in charite ful brighte" (117-18). And further like gold-for Cecilia is another kind of embodiment of perfection-she will lose her bodily "dross" in the fire of persecution and will be made pure spirit by it. The other characters in the "Second Nun's Tale" are touched by fire as well. Fire, sweet odors, and "stones," purification, union and transmutation, unity and perfection are these commonplaces of spiritual alchemy, but also these are used as the religious forms of expression.

III . Chaucer's Attitude toward Alchemist and the Quest for the 'Stone'

In the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," it is through his attitude toward alchemy that Chaucer implicitly tells the false alchemist whose aim simply lies in the worldly cares from the true one who lives a virtuous, Christian life. Moreover, Chaucer's interest in people, and not just saints, has led him to enunciate his spiritual view as more tolerant and comprehensive toward human fallibility in the latter tale than the simple-mindedness on which the "Second Nun's Tale" seems to focus. Chaucer through his alchemical discourse ultimately places primary emphasis on men's endless striving for the Stone, though they realize the impossibility of achieving it from the outset, and on the spiritual transformation and salvation of human soul in the penitential framework of the tale.

Through its directly asserted contrast to what has just happened in the

“Second Nun's Tale," the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale” suggests that true alchemy may exercise a powerful hold on the human mind, not as a denial of Christian revelation, but as another form of exploration of God's grace. “The lyf of Seinte Cecile,” both the spiritual story of her life and that ephemeral, otherworldly life itself, has been "ended" (554). St. Cecilia was so far removed from the life of this world that she did not perspire during her twenty-four hours in a cauldron: “She sat al coold and feelede no wo. / It made hire nat a drope for to sweete” (521-22). Now she is described as an absence without any physicality, centered on her absolute spirituality. Derek Pearsall points out that there is little or no human feeling, and no sense of pain or fear in the “Second Nun's Tale” (255).

But the sudden appearance of the Yeoman, the Canon with their horses is a brilliant innovation to show the realities of human life. The characters of the Yeoman's tale are not only alive but also distinctively of this world. The reader also feels himself to be on familiar territory. Their horses and they themselves are covered with a sweat, which shows a mark of their physicality. The Chaucerian narrator reports on their abrupt appearance that “it was joye for to seen hym swete!” (579). This statement is not presented in any way as distasteful, but rather as vigorous and dynamic. It is very well for the sympathetic narrator to find an earthly zest here. When we find in the “Second Nun's Tale” such concepts as “good cheere” (304), “blisse above” (281), and especially “joye” (161, 189), they refer not to this world but to translation into the next. In short, the “Canon's Yeoman's Tale” neither denies nor confirms the heavenly pleasures that the previous tale has emphasized, but instead proposes a complementary and joyously world-centered fascination of its own.

As the prologue goes on, the Yeoman tells about his master:

> “I seye, my lord kan swich subtilitee
> ....

> That al this ground on which we been ridyng,
> Til that we come to Caunterbury toun,
> He koude al clene turnen up-so-doun,
> And pave it al of silver and of gold." (620, 623-26)

On a literal level, the Yeoman's words on his master are definitely untrue. Furthermore, the alchemist in the Prima Pars has been unsuccessful and ill-conceived in his pursuit for the "elixir" (863), the possession of which would make it possible to "pave it [Canterbury toun] al of silver and of gold" (626). Here we can perceive that the alchemist has sinned against God and man because he has failed to understand the spiritual and redemptive meaning of true alchemy. Instead, he has regarded it as a tool for the accumulation of wealth. Accordingly, his failure in alchemy can be attributed to the alchemist's ignorance of alchemy's true meaning, or to his sinful motives. But, on a figurative level, this passage reflects the canon-alchemist's wish to create something unknown and new beyond the real and the human, as the creative artist does (Traversi 208). Similarly, David Raybin argues that the *Prima Pars* can be read "for its vision of the artist at work, casting for eternal truths among the solid and intransient matter of the world" (193). In terms of Christian faith, Chaucer, though he realizes the impossibility of achieving gold, synonymous for the "philosopher's Stone," through human efforts, here implicitly says man's desperate longing for "God's secret book."

Contrary to the Yeoman's introduction of his master's subtlety in the prologue, toward the close of the *Prima Pars* Chaucer portrays the tremendous explosion of the pot in the laboratory as if he were describing a living thing. The metals in the pot scatter violently through walls, sink into the ground, and even leap to the ceiling (907-15). "The image of sweeping up the refuse and sifting it out," as D. V. Harrington says precisely, "gives a memorable picture of the Canon's futile activity. All of

this sums up in a dramatic form the absurdity of pursuing alchemy as if it were a serious science" (93). Worthy of special mention is that such an allegorical science corresponds fittingly to a doubtful alchemist, who flees before his identity is revealed to the pilgrims.

From the viewpoint of the true alchemists whose ultimate goal is to restore corrupted human nature to the pre-lapsarian state, the Yeoman's master is, on a literal level, a "passyng" man as his inaccurate view of alchemy as an avenue to mere gold-production suggests. The shady connection of the canon with alchemy gives rise to the compressed expression, "slidynge science," which immediately reminds us of Criseyde, who is "tendre-herted, slydynge of corage" (Tr. V. l. 825):

> Lo which avantage is to multiplie!
> The slidynge science hath me maad so bare
> That I have no good, wher that evere I fare; (731-3)

It seems here that the imagery of the unstable and inconstant science is compared to the changeable human mind. Alchemists have no fixed abodes and walk to and fro incessantly. The word "variaunt" designates lexically "changeful in disposition or purpose" (*OED*), but from such phrases as "heere and there" and "abit nowhere," it becomes obvious that they reflect the real state of alchemy which is misused by the con-alchemist. Furthermore, unlike the true alchemist who uses alchemy as a sacred art with which to perfect himself as well as others, the con-alchemist is inclined to be inconstant and elusive, a man whose abode is difficult to detect readily. *Magnus Opus* or alchemy here is fickle, slippery, and 'elvish.' Likewise, a "maister" also is capricious and whimsical. He vanishes in an instant as soon as he appears. The Chaucerian narrator applies "slidynge" and "variaunt" to "craft" and "philosophre" respectively. Above all, the alchemist's technical terms and way of speaking in the tale

are as winding and sly as a serpent (980-81). Such a serpent image, though used symbolically, reflects the dark qualities lurking in human nature. Chaucer has transformed alchemy into a living man, whose belief in the divine, no doubt, is weak in human life. It is through the imagery linked with the canon's misuse of alchemy as a deceptive trick to obtain the material profit, ignorant of the nature of true alchemy that Chaucer implicitly shows the slippery and darker side of human nature in the absence of spiritual faith.

In spite of his realizing that there are some falsehoods or follies in the human mind which might hinder "the old man of Adam" from being transformed into "the new man in Christ," the Yeoman as the Chaucerian narrator does not abandon the possibility and the hope to attain the goal in the future, as represented in the alchemist's hope and faith set on the Stone. What keeps the alchemist going on, in spite of his perennial failures, is the inextinguishable hope (868-74). He hopes that the mistakes of the moment will provide success for the next experiment in the chancy world of science (951-52). Muscatine maintains that the Yeoman's mistake lies in believing that something will come of the alchemists' experiments: "to expect an end, a 'conclusion' to the cooking of this hopeless stuff is the real irony of the alchemists' failure" (219).

But the Yeoman has already known that alchemy does not work. He has repeatedly remarked that alchemists "kan not conclude" (773) and that practitioners of the science experience material loss, not gain (883, 1404). It is with full consciousness of alchemy's failure to achieve its end that he continues to pursue the "elixir," the "privee stoon" with his master (712-14). Even as he speaks of the hope of success that sneaks into alchemists' hearts, he reminds us that it produces no results: "Swich supposyng and hope is sharp and hard;/I warne yow wel, it is to seken evere" (873-74). Nonetheless, the Yeoman has become fascinated by the

search itself, independent of the final goal. He himself comments on the fact that alchemical "raving" tends to persist beyond the failure of the experiment (958–59).

Furthermore, though the Yeoman insists that the con–alchemist's alchemy is far removed from the salvific nature of true alchemy, his own fascination with the alchemical processes, paralleling that of the other observers, runs against his disapproval of alchemy. His inability to break from his participatory role, to observe dispassionately the scientific activity, tells the other merits that the alchemic processes have something attractive and intelligent. This is suggested not only in the Yeoman's ambivalence of his commentary on the alchemists but also in his apparent compulsion to condemn everything he associates with his alchemical experiences. He is at pains to make clear that his purpose is neither to vindicate nor discredit the science of alchemy. He just tries to demonstrate that its fundamental premises can be misused and then hints at the types of misuse.

The poet narrator does not scorn alchemy itself even in the *Pars Secunda*. In the *Pars Secunda*, the Yeoman is very careful not to discredit alchemy and the alchemist's project in such a way as he was in the *Prima Pars*. Before he rebukes the canon's misuse of alchemy for fraud, the Yeoman implicitly says that the true work of the alchemist does not oppose the redemptory act of Christ, but is complementary to it (998–99, 1001–3). In addition, he is not talking about honest alchemists (992–94) or his master (1088–90), but is warning others (1306). That is, he only condemns the avarice and falsehood of deceiving alchemists, not the true meaning of alchemy in relation to spirituality. Chaucer stands masked behind the Yeoman's narrative on alchemy and the alchemists, and strains not to get the true alchemy confused with the false one.

The narrator's ambivalent stance peeps out when he bitterly talks about

the alchemist:

> It weerieth me to telle of his falsnesse,
> And nathelees yet wol I it expresse,
> To th'entente that men may be war therby,
> And for noon oother cause, trewely. (1304-07)

The narrator's voice here contains the Yeoman's bifurcated act of proclaiming his master, the canon, as a "feend," and on the other hand, his inability to break from that activity. This means a tension between the Yeoman's realization of folly while pursuing the "philosopher's Stone," because he knows that the pursuit can succeed only when God allows it, and because he is overwhelmed by his unquenchable desire for the pursuit of the "forbidden knowledge." Robert Longsworth argues that at the conclusion of his tale, for all his disillusionment, the Canon's Yeoman remains a true believer. He further says that the Yeoman appears to astonish himself as well as his audience with the proclamation that the power of transformation in alchemy, though secret and inaccessible to him, is real (89). In short, the real reason for the Yeoman's frustration comes from the tension between his inexhaustible hope for the Stone and its secrecy and inaccessibility. The Yeoman continues to believe in the alchemical experiments as a possibility, but he is repeatedly frustrated by the inaccessibility of the goal. Donald Howard comments on this, saying that "in the background is the true practice of a Gnostic spiritual alchemy not tainted by abuse" (295).

Considering that the quest of both the alchemist and the Yeoman aims at obtaining the "philosopher's Stone" symbolizing Christ, though it turns out failure, the alchemist might be regarded, as Bruce Rosenburg thinks, as "a devil or anti-Christ figure" who reminds us in life's journey we have to tell true coin from false (566-80). Moreover, it appears that the Yeoman's

portrayal of the Canon as a kind of devil, for instance, implies a more theological interpretation of alchemy as an attempt to arrogate to man the divine powers to change the nature of things and to create anew that are God's alone, and a direct challenge to God's authority. But, the Yeoman's caution of not criticizing alchemy itself and his waging hope and possibility on its future success say that Chaucer thought of alchemy not as a grotesque travesty of the Christian faith, but as an earthly and externalized spiritual experience. Until the last moment when the Yeoman and the other pilgrims realize the true nature of spiritual alchemy, the Chaucerian narrator considers the alchemist's endless passion for the Stone not simply as futile and silly, but as sympathetic and tolerable.

The Chaucerian voice which remains hidden in the Yeoman's narrative does not condemn the alchemists' quest for the Stone, by extension, man's exploration of something spiritual and sublime. Instead of this, David Raybin say the he "rejoices in them, pulling us in their world until we, now like the Yeoman, discover that we have become strangely one with those searching for a knowledge beyond their ken" (197). Just as we go beyond a simple condemnation of Adam, Eve, and their progeny for eating the "Forbidden Fruit," Chaucer does not simply denounce human effort to climb up the tower of Babel, seeing it with his sympathetic eyes. This is the significance of the Yeoman's reference to the fair apple that is not good (946-65)-to an exploration and even enjoyment of what it is in the human condition that renders such eating both exciting and inevitable, what it is that makes us seek to transcend. Here, we can read Chaucer's religious mind which does not aspire not simply for the ideal heaven but for the earthly-bound humanity. He does not regard man's effort to attain God's salvation, though ultimately in vain, simply as silly or fiendish. Instead, he tries to accept the corruptible and fallible human mind in the temptations of the world with sympathy.

We can perceive Chaucer's attitude of intense humanness for man's pursuit of the “philosopher's Stone,” something unattainable and unaccessible, when the Yeoman lists materials and processes for the project in the laboratory. The appeal of the alchemical language here entices the readers as well as the Yeoman into the world of alchemist's mysteriousness, despite his skeptical thinking about it. Jane Hilberry has explored the appealing qualities of (the) alchemical language of the *Prima Pars*:

> But the repetition of sounds in the passage is more subtle and pervasive than these local examples suggest. Certain words and syllables recur throughout the entire catalog to create a dense, musical quality compelling to the ear... Like popular music piped into the lobby during intermissions of an opera, the colloquial cadence of the lines makes one realize that *the music* one has been hearing belongs to another order ...a more general phenomenon in the Yeoman's alchemical catalog: *the merging of language and form* (440-41). (Italics mine)

The result is indeed, in Hilberry's phrase, “the equation between the content of the lines and their verse form suggests how technical language can be poetic, can in fact become poetry (441-42). Here we can find the answer to the question of why the audience as well as the Yeoman was drawn to alchemy, though they recognize the material loss that alchemy inevitably brings. The appeal of alchemical language—the musical effect inherent in the alchemical discourse—drives both the Yeoman and the reader to rejoice in, not to reject alchemy whose ultimate goal lies in the attainment of the ”philosopher's Stone.“ Instead of revealing his attitude toward alchemy and the alchemist's quest for the Stone directly through

his words, Chaucer as a medieval artist technically conveys it to the readers through euphonization of the alchemical signs/language.

Both artists, alchemist and Chaucer, seek to find something higher from the earthly elements that are not simply the dregs but are also the substance of the human body. The Yeoman's catalogue of the substances required by the alchemist (806-13) has been served as the key factor by critics who are inclined to draw the strict line between the saint's spirituality in the "Second Nun's Tale" and the alchemist's world of materiality (Pearsall 112; Muscatine 200; Cooper 379). Chaucer's intent here is to remind the contemporary readers of the divine analogy between God's Creation of the world in chaos and the alchemist's transforming process for the Stone. In his faulty "erthen pot[s]" (761, 791 and 934), the alchemist strives to sublimate gold and silver from the "bones," (759), "unslekked lym, chalk," "asshes, donge, pisse, and cley" (806-07) that are the matter for his experimentation.

These words quoted here are frequently used in the Scripture to express the dark and corrupt human mind. As mentioned earlier through Hortulanus' discussion of the relationship between the spiritual alchemy and Christianity in his *Commentary on the Emerald Table*, Chaucer might have kept it in his mind that the role of the true alchemists is essentially complementary to Christ's work of redemption. With success, Chaucer also includes various kinds of people caught up in the physicality and abundance of earthly, human things in the sustainable whole that is the world of the *Canterbury Tales*. Like the alchemist who tries to transform the material into something spiritual and divine through his alchemical process, Chaucer aims to mediate between man and God, and to reconcile spiritual and physical human nature through the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," in a broader sense, through the framework of the pilgrimage.

Contrary to the alchemist's process in the *Prima Pars* which attracts

both the readers and the Yeoman, though it ends with a failure, one of the most striking qualities of the *Pars secunda* is that the different characters, the various settings and even the narration itself are grossly repulsive. Undeniably, the *Pars Secunda* in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" discloses how human intervention and ingenuity for material purposes is stupid and rather wicked, seen from the view of orthodoxy Christianity. No dreams or hopes illuminate the *Pars Secunda*; one sees only deceit, ugliness, ignorance and perversion. It displays in coarser terms the human inability to rise above the material, to move beyond original sin. Thus there is a good deal in the imagery of the *Pars Secunda* to support Muscatine, who compares it to Dante's Hell (Muscatine 221), or Glending Olson, who suggests that "Chaucer had the *Purgatorio* in mind, in some way, as he shaped Fragment VIII" (230).

Unlike Chaucer's human sympathy directed toward the alchemist's striving for the Stone in the *Prima Pars*, no sympathy is evinced by the inhuman, irrevocably fiendish alchemist in the *Pars Secunda*. The story is full of hypocrisy and perversity in the alchemist's repeated references to God and Christ (1046, 1064, 1122, 1327, 1361, 1372), which might support Muscatine's argument that "there is not the faintest glimmer of spirituality or mysticism" in the tale (217). However, as I mentioned earlier, through comparison between Judas among Christ's twelve apostles and false alchemy, as well as manifestation of the narrator's intent (998-99,1001-13), we can read the Chaucerian narrator's cautious attitude in distinguishing the false from the true alchemist. Moreover, in spite of the diverse and dichotomous subjects of "debaat" that distinguish *Prima Pars* and *Pars Secunda*,[2] as David Raybind notes, therein as well

2) The *Pars Secunda* in the Ellesmere manuscript (972-1481) in the Robinson edition) is to be regarded as an originally separate composition which Chaucer wrote at an earlier time for a special, anti-alchemical occasion. This view was fostered by J. M. Manly and has been revived by Albert E. Hartung in an

lies “the all-encompassing nature of Chaucer's forgiving vision for a fallible humanity” (207). Chaucer accepts the flaws of the characters in the *Pars Secunda*--the alchemist, the priest and even the Yeoman--as tolerable rather than as damnable. There is also reason for seeing in the misty movement of the *Pars Secunda* a commentary on human behavior in this world.

In the *Pars Secunda* we are asked to note our own dark fascination with deceptive tricks wrought for material gain, and tempted to the slippery path which might be any human life. Like the canon, we may err intentionally; like the priest, we may be drawn into error by the desire for material gain. And like the Yeoman, we may be given erringly to the illusionary game. The Yeoman's narrative style, in particular, shows that the corruption in the *Pars Secunda* surfaces as an emblem of the tendency to corruption which threatens each of our lives. The Yeoman seeks almost desperately to build a sense of confederacy with the other pilgrims. He seems to be willing to share what he experiences so that he may receive sympathy and understanding for what he did. He consistently interrupts himself in his tale to bewail the “false dissymulynge” (1073) of his principal character, or to warn his listener about such behavior (“taak kep and be war!” [1265]), or otherwise to comment on aspects of his story. In this way, the Yeoman seems to aim at establishing between himself and the others a common sense of ignorance, and then at deriving sympathy for human failing from them. Chaucer's aim lies in illustrating the dark qualities commonly lurking in all human minds through the characters of the tale.

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attempt to use "internal, textual and historical evidence" to prove that the Second Part was originally a separate work. J. M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926), 235-52, and 246-47. Albert E. Hartung, “*Pars Secunda*' and the Development of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale,“* *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977): 111-28.

Chaucer's tolerable vision for ignorance and darkness which commonly inhere in human nature culminates in the penitential framework of the tale. In particular, the ending of the tale delivers with complete seriousness and with confident reference to learned authorities a verdict on the nature of true alchemy in terms of spirituality. Chaucer embodies the process of the alchemical transmutation of base metals into gold in the Yeoman's narrative; the Yeoman has been converted from a raving gold-maker with a false view of alchemy to a sober philosopher affirming the truth of spiritual alchemy. The Yeoman's narrative in the prologue and the *prima pars* clearly says that he, like the con-alchemist, ignorant of the spiritual meaning of alchemy, has been living contrary to the precepts of true alchemists. Now, he moves from his false view of alchemy and his misuse of it for procuring material profit to his spiritual understanding of alchemy.

IV. The "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" in terms of the Penitential Framework

Before we talk about the closing ninety-four lines of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" with the penitential framework, let's examine the Yeoman's place in Chaucer's creative intent. It might help to provide the readers with the yardstick with which to judge the Yeoman's religious and philosophical teachings at the end of the tale without distortion. Above all, the Yeoman is not the dunce that some critics like Lumiansky or Owen have taken him to be. David Harrington has cleared up such misunderstanding about the Yeoman. He has put an end to speculation about the Yeoman's ignorance or naivete by showing that "though he is very discursive and certainly guilty of foolishness in the past, [the Yeoman is] a person who is informative and at least sensible, if not intelligent, in

his recitation" (85–97). Jackson Campbell shares Harrington's notion, commenting that Chaucer invented a "half-organized" manner of speech for the Yeoman which helps to characterize him as a person at a major turning point in his life. Campbell's conclusion is that the Yeoman, though he is "at the moment of doing something about his former life," cannot free himself from material trammels and is thus an "imperfect paradigm" for the full process of penitence soon to be described in the *Parson's Tale* (174, 178–79).

My point is to show a steady development in the Yeoman's mind through his narrative, a development which reveals him to be a morally attractive person whose penitence in the epilogue is true and serious. While several critics like Gardner, Grenberg, and Whittock have stressed the fact that the Yeoman is at a turning point in his life, there has been very little optimism about his chance for permanent penitence (Donaldson 946; Ryan 297–310). Though we do not know if the Yeoman succeeds in freeing himself completely from his involvement in the misuse of alchemy for gold-making, and in finding salvation, undeniably, he does manage to break a bad habit. In fact, the Yeoman deserves our sympathy because he is sincerely trying to give up his involvement with the false alchemy that threatens our lives. The Yeoman wants to do more than avoid becoming a swindling alchemist: he wants to warn his new companions against making the same mistake that he made. "Lat every man be war by me for evere!" (737) says that he does not mind using himself as a negative example to instruct others. In short, there is no reason to distrust the Yeoman's own statement on his experience.

The Yeoman is faced with a choice: stay with the Canon or join the pilgrims. When he accepts Harry Bailly's invitation to tell his story, he frees himself from the Canon, though not completely from the temptation of alchemy. After freeing himself physically from the Canon, he is likely to

free himself mentally by revealing the failures of alchemy. Though Harry Bailly does not purposefully assume the role of a father-confessor, his questioning of the Yeoman nonetheless resembles the way a priest would examine the penitent to elicit a confession of sin. Consequently, the Yeoman, revealing his false view of alchemy and the canon's failures of it, struggles to become a penitent sinner. To develop the tale's penitential theme in relation to alchemy, Chaucer intimates that the Yeoman's conversion from a man obsessed with his worldly matters and blind to spiritual life to a penitent "new man" in Christ depends on his recognition that he has failed to understand the nature of true alchemy and the alchemist's role. In a word, the Yeoman's intercourse with the Host itself is a kind of true alchemy that brings the Yeoman's false mind into contrition and wisdom much like the alchemist manipulates the *prima materia* to transform base metal to gold.

Obsessed with continuing their experimentation, both the Yeoman and the Canon have failed to understand the salvific nature of alchemy, and thus have been living contrary to the precepts of true alchemy. The Yeoman's reference to Arnald of Villanova's *Rosarium Philosophorum* at the end of the tale indicates that he has some knowledge of true or spiritual alchemy.[3] After reflecting on Arnald's words, the Yeoman concludes that alchemy is the "secree of secretes," and recalls the words of Plato in the *Tabulum Chemicum*:

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3) According to Edgar Duncan, though the Yeoman cites Arnald's *Rosarim Philosophorum* as the source for his quotation(1430-40), the quote actually comes from Arnald's *De Lapide Philosophorum*; see, "Chaucer and 'Arnold of the Newe Toun," *Modern Language Notes* 57 (1942): 31-33. Though it is hard to determine Chaucer's intention of identifying the lines as being from the former instead of the latter, it is likely that Chaucer kept the relationship between the "rosary"(the Virgin Mary as an intercessory role in redemption) and the penitential framework of the tale. Even Arnald's name, "Arnald of the Newe Toun" evokes the image of New Jerusalem.

For unto Crist it is so lief and deere
That he wol nat that it discovered bee
But where it liketh to his deitee
Men for t'enspire, and eek for to deffende
Whom that hym liketh—lo, this is the ende.

Similarly, the Yeoman's admission that alchemy is a gift from Christ to those who are divinely permitted or inspired suggests his understanding of the truth of spiritual alchemy.

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Abstract

Alchemy and Christianity in Fragment VIII of *The Canterbury Tales*

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Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales* provides a representative case for evaluating Chaucer as a "Christian poet" whose interest lies in the reconciliation of Christian discourse in the "Second Nun's Tale" with alchemical discourse in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale." Chaucer tries to place two seemingly different tales, the saint's celestial life and the alchemist's earthly life within Christian myth. In spite of the points of opposition between the Second Nun's religious imagery and the Canon's Yeoman's alchemical imagery, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" symbolically ends with the idea of salvation and thereby establishes spiritual alchemy and Christianity as complementary rather than oppositional. Although the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" involves the satirical tradition or parody on a spiritual transformation in comparison with the previous tale, Chaucer's focus in the former tale is on the sacred implications of alchemy rather than on simply opposition to the saint's story. This is suggested by Chaucer's attitude toward alchemy, by his spiritual view on the alchemist's un-extinguishable quest for the "philosopher's Stone," and by his building the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" around the theme of penitence.

Key Words: alchemy, Christianity, penitence, 'Philosopher's Stone,' Canon's Yeoman
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