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# Angelic Demons: Witchcraft and Sorcery in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

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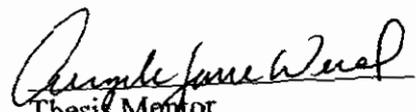
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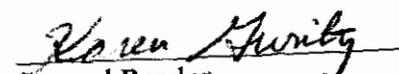
**Angelic Demons: Witchcraft and Sorcery in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales***

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Thesis Mentor

  
Second Reader

When Glinda the Witch of the North first encounters Dorothy Gale, she asks her, “Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?” While this question might seem trite and silly, the alignment of a character to good or evil could be determined by the type of sorcery or witchcraft they employed within the Middle Ages. As Christianity increased its foothold in the British Isles, the use of sorcery in order to find love, save crops, ensure stability or see the future was increasingly condemned as heresy and could be punished by harsher and harsher standards. A practicing witch or sorcerer who was caught could find him or herself burnt at the stake for heresy. Geoffrey Chaucer uses this concept while writing his *Canterbury Tales*. Characters qualified as “good” magic users would more than likely be using different types of nature magic. Characters qualified as “evil” or dangerous would be using forms of magic requiring education or prior knowledge.

Chaucer’s England would see any acts of sorcery inherently linked to demonic allegiance. The necromancer, alchemist, witch or sorcerer would face dire consequences if convicted of heresy. As time progressed, all acts of magical influence were lumped under the definition of “witchcraft,” and all were seen as inherently evil, regardless of function or intention. In “From Sorcery to Witchcraft,” Michael D. Bailey says the “heightened clerical concern over harmful sorcery and changing understandings of how magic operated combined with other factors to push authorities slowly but inexorably into accepting, defining, and promulgating the full horrors of witchcraft” (961). The local witch, who would be the go-to for problems with love, fertility or crop issues, was now seen as a threat – a local demonic agent. Bailey further says, “Witches were certainly believed to perform magic with the aid of demons, indeed via the supplication and worship of demons” (962). The Church’s position on any use of

magic made it heretical, as it was only through the supplication of the Devil that magic could be worked.

There was a working difference, however, in the usage of miraculous intervention over magic. Miracles worked through the Church would have been seen as completely acceptable. In her book *Monks, Miracles and Magic: Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church*, Helen Parish states, "Traditional hagiographical writing had established miracles, both in life and after death, as a clear sign of saintliness. The repeated intrusion of the supernatural into the realm of the material was well documented in the *lives* of the saints, in prophetic discourse and in devotional materials and sermons" (45). Neither Chaucer nor the average individual would have been ignorant of magic, whether it was enacted in the name of the Church or through the medium of the individual<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the Church would have expected there to be some remnants of magical practice during the act of transitioning from paganism to Christianity. Bernard Hamilton notes in his article "Paganism, Witchcraft and Ritual Magic," that "The church sought to make the transition from paganism easier by adopting a policy of compromise about matters which did not involve questions of principle" (149). The question became, however, who was more dangerous to the church – the educated alchemist or necromancer, who knew Latin and invoked unknown spirits to do his bidding; or the local witch, who only used herbs and stones, but had a much more far-reaching scope of influence.

Bailey says witchcraft, although of a much more simple and uneducated variety than sorcery, would essentially be more dangerous. Bailey argues:

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<sup>1</sup> In Parish's book, she notes in the chapter 'Lying Histories Faying False Miracles' that there was a certain level of expectation for clergy to perform miracles. Clergy who were able to perform miracles were put on the same level as saints. Several times, however, these supposed "miracles" were investigated for fraud, and the hope of the faithful was that these miracles would not be considered the work of the devil, or even worse, a simple deception. This need for "holy magic" was prolific during the Middle Ages.

Although throughout the Middle Ages sorcery was generally regarded as suspicious at best, and often criminal, only the development of the idea of witchcraft made possible the widespread anxiety and sheer number of executions for this crime that took place over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (962)

Pre-Christian magic would not have been seen as so dangerous. Bailey indicates, "Magic was seen as a morally neutral act that an individual would employ toward either beneficial or harmful ends" (962). Before the advent of a Christian society, the role of the witch had a much less negative impact. The sorcerer or necromancer, however, would have been considered much more dangerous simply because of the level of education required for him to work his magic. While his scope of influence would be much smaller, the danger he posed to the souls of the faithful was considered much greater.

The concept of magic as a viable force in the Middle Ages was not so far-fetched. There were religious tracts dealing with how to handle witches and necromancers, and very often, an astrologer or philosopher was a key figure in a courtly setting. This would have been very upsetting to the Church, who sought to eradicate any ruling force except its own. Bailey argues:

The church now equated the performance of common sorcery, involving only a few words or simple gestures and aimed at curing or causing illness or affecting the weather, with hidden yet necessary acts of worship and postulated a preexisting pact between the sorcerer and demons that made such magic possible.

(977)

Any sort of magic, be it educated or not, would be deemed as dangerous and therefore worthy of persecution. In order to work magic, the practitioner would have already entered into a dangerous pact which would have effectively already damned his or her soul to Hell. Any manipulation of the natural world was caused by demonic intervention, and once an individual agreed to the assistance of demons in order to gain an end, it would be a rare occurrence that he or she would be able to find his or her way back into the fold.

In Chaucer's tales regarding magic and sorcery, three stand out in particular: The Franklin's Tale, the Wife of Bath's Tale and the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. This is not to say that these are the only occurrences of supernatural influence within *The Canterbury Tales*. Rather, it is in these tales where it becomes most clear what Chaucer was attempting to say regarding the effects of sorcery within a Christian society. Several of Chaucer's tales have some sort of supernatural influence, but it is in these tales in particular where an individual invokes magic as a means by which to obtain an end. The first two tales deal with individuals who are able to work and manipulate supernatural forces to gain a benign resolution, while the last tale shows an individual who is not really magical, but attempts to use magic for the purpose of personal gain.

### **The Franklin's Tale**

In "The Franklin's Tale," Dorigen, for all practical purposes, attempts to maintain her status as a true and faithful wife. As far as can be seen, she is a good Christian woman, who truly adheres to the belief that her husband is her master. When confronted by Aurelius to commit the act of adultery, Dorigen firmly shakes him off, saying, "By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf, / Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf" (ll. 983-4). Despite her assertions to Aurelius that she is sworn to her husband, Dorigen is similar in personality to several military wives whose husbands are abroad fulfilling their military obligations. In private she laments the

loss of her husband and questions God's actions. In doing so, she lays herself open to the potential for deception at Aurelius' hands. Additionally, in putting a conditional element on her ability to love Aurelius, she sets the stage that allows Aurelius to find a means to get around a seemingly impossible situation. However, she does maintain the outward appearance of a good Christian wife. Dorigen places full trust in God returning her husband to her, and if He chooses not to, she places full trust in the belief that Arveragus has been called back to God, and that this is the way her life is meant to be.

Dorigen could also be seen as the cause of Aurelius' deviation from the church. Claire Marshall argues in her article "The Politics of Self-Mutilation: Forms of Female Devotion in the Late Middle Ages" that, "'Woman' was positioned in the principle of disruption in the human psyche: the flesh. Her body was seen as pervious and excessive and her character both corruptible and corrupting" (11). Dorigen, as a woman, could not control the fact that she indirectly seduces Aurelius. Marshall adds, "although the discourse of the female mystic was originally constructed out of the disciplines designed to regulate the female body, it is, paradoxically, through these same disciplines that the mystic achieved her power" (14). Dorigen is in a lose-lose situation. There is no one to teach her how to control her female charms, and therefore she is bound to cause havoc within the male construct. Her only power is located in her body, and as she cannot change the fact that she is female, she will use her magic of seduction and fertility – a natural state – regardless of intention.

Aurelius seems to agree with Dorigen's method of thinking at first, if not with the non-intentional seductive pull she is subtly giving off. He sadly accepts Dorigen's condition that the only way she will ever love him is "whan ye han maad the coost so clene / Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene" (ll. 995-6). He does not further tempt Dorigen into adultery, nor does he

attempt to take what he wants by rape, as did the knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale. As a result, he slips into illness derived from despair to the point that Aurelius appears to be on the verge of death. Aurelius' brother, desperate not to lose him, turns to sorcery in an attempt to save Aurelius' life. Note that Aurelius' brother is an educated man who has been schooled in France. There is no indication that neither Dorigen nor Aurelius have had any sort of specialized education other than that which would have been received in their local areas. As Aurelius' despair deepens and he grows sickly, his brother, who is educated, turns to the philosophic sciences to solve the problem of his brother's distress.

The role of the alchemist here is essential to the understanding of Aurelius' fall from grace. Bailey says:

Throughout the early Middle Ages, sorcerers were often depicted, not as powerful agents of evil in their own right, but as unfortunate victims of the deceits and temptations of the devil, and thus the church reacted to them with correction and penance rather than will calls for severe persecution. (964)

Aurelius' alchemist is able to redeem himself through the forgiveness of Aurelius' debt.

Although he has employed a devil in the form of the Greco-Roman gods, he is not fully at fault for two reasons: first, he is a man, and witchcraft is a primarily female enterprise<sup>2</sup>, and second, he forgives the debt in the name of God and not in the name of one of the pagan gods of old.

Even so, it is interesting to note that in the eyes of the Church, the philosopher might have been redeemed anyway. Bailey notes, "But even clerics could be caught in uncertainty about the exact nature of specific magical acts" (965). Adding to this, Lauren Kassell, in "All was this

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Muchembled's article "The Witches of the Cambrésis" gives a detailed account of the number of females accused and executed of witchcraft as opposed to the number of males. The statistics are startlingly lopsided, with females running over 75% of those accused overall.

land fill'd of faerie,' of Magic and the Past in Early Modern England," states, "Magicians practice unlawful magic; the magic of priests and natural philosophers was natural and lawful" (114). As a student of philosophy, the philosopher finds himself in a state of immunity from persecution for his magic. The Wife of Bath's Loathly Lady would not find herself in such a state of grace, nor would the Canon's Yeoman's alchemist.

The Church would also be painfully aware of the philosopher and his operation, much more so than any common garden variety witch. Bailey argues:

Quite naturally this was the form of sorcery that the pope understood and feared. By the fourteenth century many large courts had their share of attendant magicians, mainly astrologers and other prognosticators... who practiced ritual magic for the amusement, health, and political advantage of their employers.

(967)

It is interesting to note that nothing is done against the philosopher to stop him from wrecking Dorigen's marriage. His ranking as a court male places him above Dorigen, and therefore she is jointly at his mercy and the mercy of his employer. The act of contacting a prognosticator would have been an accepted practice during this time period, and no one would have thought less of Aurelius for contracting out with a magician to obtain his desire. Much like today, many viewed the services of these men as "entertainment," but there were some, in states of desperation, who would turn to these men as a last resort in their attempt to obtain their desires.

Aurelius' brother, who is not given a name, recalls a book of natural magic left upon the desk of one of his school mates. The book discusses nocturnal magic, specifically the powers of the moon. However, in the same sentence, Chaucer denounces the magic, saying, "swich folye /

As in oure days is nat worth a flye - / For hooly chirches faith in oure bileve / Ne suffreth noon illusioun us to greve” (ll. 1131-4). Chaucer argues that people who put their faith in the Church will have an easier time withstanding the illusions of the magicians. The problem found with Dorigen and Aurelius is that they appear to have at best a flawed faith in religion, which gives the philosopher a better chance at working his magical spells. If any of the players within this tale were free from doubt, then their faith should be able to withstand this outside attack.

Indeed, Dorigen’s stipulations are nothing new, as William Schofield notes in “Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale.” Schofield says, “...the magician Merlin transported the great rocks from Mt. Killaraus in Ireland to build the celebrated Giant’s Dance at Stonehenge” (417). Merlin’s feat would have been known to Chaucer and to his audience, thereby making Dorigen’s request not so fantastic, as it had already been accomplished before. Those who believe in the Church will not have to deal with the heartbreak such illusions of magic will cause. There is also some indication that the magic is a sort of placebo for Aurelius. There is no definitive way of seeing if the magician’s cure will work – Aurelius and his brother need to have simple faith that it will, just as Dorigen is supposed to have simple faith that God will watch over her. Chaucer also suggests that those who put their trust in magic over faith will be fooled even when the magic is put in full relief of the midday sun, and those whose faith is imperfect will be just as susceptible to magical trickery.

Sadly, the philosopher of the Franklin’s Tale appears to have some of the traits of a swindler. Desperate to heal Aurelius, his brother spares no expense to the philosopher, giving him the best food and drink, and making sure he is given every possible comfort. The philosopher does not even begin to discuss how he is going to cure Aurelius until after he has had dinner at the expense of Aurelius and his brother. After he has been adequately fed, then the

philosopher informs the pair that he is going to charge a thousand pounds for his services. Aurelius heartily agrees to any price, as long as the philosopher can give him his lady. It is interesting to note, that when negotiating a magical contract, the philosopher calls upon the name of God and swears by God's name that his powers will work. If anything, the philosopher's powers would be deemed demonic, even though they are being wrought for the sake of love. The philosopher's magic is worked through a combination of factors: first, his knowledge and understanding of natural science, second, the willingness of Aurelius and his brother to believe in the "miracle," third, the willingness of the countryside to believe in the "miracle," and fourth by Dorigen's despair over her missing husband. Bailey asserts in his article that "Anytime a demon performed any act for a human, even when no obvious rituals of invocation and worship were present, that was sure evidence that the human had at some previous time offered worship to the demon" (984). Aurelius' philosopher has to be, by definition, a heretic who would be damning the souls of any who sought him out. Additionally, the fact is the philosopher is seeking to deny the holy contract of marriage, and therefore is using his supposed power in direct opposition to what would be considered God's will.

To obtain his end, the magician plans on to use superstition and mathematics. Chaucer writes:

To maken his japes and his wrecchednesse  
 Of swich a superstitious cursednesse.  
 His tables Tolletanes forth he brought,  
 Ful well corrected, ne ther lakked nough.t" (ll. 1271-4)

The magician's powers are based in illusion, and, arguably, if Dorigen is deemed worthy enough by God, she should be immune to such illusion. Also note that the philosopher is taking

advantage of his superior education to fool Dorigen into believing the rocks of the coast have vanished. Kassell argues, "The branding of natural philosophers and especially mathematical practitioners as magicians had been an enduring problem" (108). In this case, Chaucer appears to abide by the stereotype, making the philosopher a student of mathematics and natural science. He is seduced by his own knowledge and understanding of the earth's working, and attempts to use this knowledge as a means to achieve his goals. Further, Kassell states, "Abraham was the first to discover the powers of astrology, and he instructed the Chaldeans, Phoenicians, and Egyptians in mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and divine knowledge" (112). The study of magic is not new to members of the Church or even the court, and in certain instances, would even come to be expected. Upper-level magic, more than ever, is a product of advanced education. Bailey argues, "[Necromancy] involved skill, training, preparation, and above all education. A necromancer, whatever else might be thought of him, had to be intelligent and have a certain force of will to work his magic" (126). That the philosopher is an educated man is easily apparent. If he were not, there would be no method by which he would be able to make the rocks of the shore disappear. As a member of upper-class society, Dorigen would still be subjected to a woman's education, which would be easily outstripped by a man's. Sadly for her, Dorigen really does not have much of a chance to repel the philosopher's attack.

It is interesting to note that when the task has been completed, Aurelius does not thank God for giving him his lady. Rather, he offers his thanks to the philosopher and to Venus for granting him love. Kassell notes, "Witchcraft, [Reginald] Scot argued, was not caused by the devil, but by the fraudulent religion of Rome" (118). Further, Aurelius never in the course of the poem ever prays to the Christian God for Dorigen's love. He first appeals to Dorigen directly, and then after that fails, he goes to the pagan gods, apparently understanding that under Christian

beliefs, God would never impugn upon Dorigen's free will to stay faithful to her husband. It is also interesting to note that Dorigen is said to reside in a "temple" not a simple house or even a church, but in a building of supposed pagan worship. Dorigen's location gives her a status tantamount to being a goddess, as she appears to have control over Aurelius' emotional states.

After the philosopher keeps up his end of the bargain, Aurelius immediately goes to Dorigen to force her to keep her word. Appalled, she still attempts to abide by her Christian vows to be faithful to her husband. Despite her chastity and faith, she is still subject to the work of the philosopher; she is not immune to his illusion. Neither, apparently, is her husband, who upon his return forces her to uphold her word to Aurelius and does not see through the philosopher's magic. This failure to be free from illusion would indicate flaws in the faith of both Dorigen and her husband. Chaucer could also be commenting on flaws within those who are leading the faithful, as they do not prepare them to withstand demonic attack.

Even though Aurelius does not appeal to God for Dorigen's love, nor does he thank God for providing a means to gain that love, he does demand through God that Dorigen uphold her vow. Aurelius says, "And in myn hand youre trouthe plighen ye / To love me best – God woot, ye seyde so" (ll. 1328-9). As Dorigen has put her faith in God and in the natural world, she does not know how to process what has happened to her. She cries, "For wende I nevere by possibilitee / That swich a monster or merveille mighte be! / It is agayns the process of nature." (ll. 1343-5). Dorigen placed her faith in the world God had made to save her, and never thought for a second that she would be betrayed in placing her faith in something greater than herself. She does not understand why her simple faith has been betrayed, and laments, "Hath ther nat many a noble wyf er this, / And many a mayde, yslayn hirself, allas, / Rather than with hir body doon trespass?" (ll. 1364-6). For Dorigen, suicide is not an option within Christianity, as it would

damn her soul to hellfire for eternity. In despair, she turns to her husband, who would be her earthly master. His response is simple: "Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!" (1475). Arveragus is determined that his wife should abide by what she swore, no matter what the outcome may be.

Grieving, Dorigen goes to Aurelius to fulfill her oath, but as he loves her, he cannot make her go through with it. Aurelius' first concern, however, after the incident is over is about the money he owes, not about the cost of going to a philosopher and obtaining magical favors has put on his soul. The philosopher appears to have a heart, however, and releases Aurelius from his debt. The philosopher does not forsake his magic for Christianity, but forgives the debt in the name of God. None of the men have to pay for their dabbling within the magic arts, but Dorigen, who attempted to stay a Christian wife, pays spiritually and emotionally for the actions of others. The fact that she is female probably plays a good deal into this. Dorigen is subject to potential public shaming. Dorigen is the one who faces physical death. Dorigen's salvation comes in that she does not deviate from her Christian belief system, and therefore she is spared most punishment.

### **The Wife of Bath's Tale**

The Wife of Bath's Tale takes a different perspective on the uses of magic, and the tale starts off almost immediately incorporating this new perspective. Before we even meet the crone, the reader is told that the action will take place in a land of fairy. King Arthur's court is often associated with magic, and this magic is usually wrought through the hands of women, the most famous being the Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay. The tale opens with the lines, "Al was this land fulfild of fayerye. / The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye" (ll. 859-60). The

reader knows from the outset that something other-worldly is going to happen here, and given that the magic is going to come from nature, it can be assumed the magic will be non-invasive or “good.”

The difference between masculine and feminine also has a place within this tale. The tale is told by a woman, and concerns the violation of a woman by a male, and the resolution of the tale through a woman’s intervention. The female’s magic, just as in the case of Dorigen, is to be expected, as she cannot control what it is that she is doing. This is not necessarily the case with the Wife of Bath’s Loathly Lady, though, as her plans are well laid-out and executed over the course of the tale. The fact that she is female, however, is not one which should be simply overlooked. Just a few lines removed from the opening of the tale, the Wife of Bath explains how the land of fairy is being driven from Britain by the displacement of nature. The tale reads, “This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes. / For ther as wont to walken was an elf / Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself” (ll. 871-4). The displacement of the countryside is a primarily masculine activity, even though the Wife of Bath is a businesswoman in her own right. The Wife of Bath still lays the blame for the loss of magic on the male, and this limitation is seen as a bad thing – one which makes the catalyst for the story occur, as there are no longer fairies to protect the innocent virgin from harm.

This lack of natural magic is dangerous to women. Stripped of their ability to defend themselves, women find themselves at the mercy of Arthur’s knights. While these men are expected to uphold the codes of chivalry and defend and protect women, the fact remains that they are human and sometimes their nature gets the better of their vows. Just as the countryside has been raped through the encroachment of civilization, an unsuspecting female is going to be raped by an errant knight who cannot control himself. The loss of magic found within the

natural world is partly to blame for this offense, as it would not have happened if man had left the countryside alone, and given the fairies free reign to take care of those too weak or pure to fathom violence against themselves.

Once the knight is taken into the court of Arthur, he is told not by the king, but by the queen what his task is to be. It is almost as if Guinevere has used magic of her own to coerce Arthur into listening to her will as opposed to dealing with a masculine crime in a masculine manner. The task of correcting an errant knight would normally fall under the jurisdiction of the king. It is highly unusual that this type of punishment is placed within the hands of a woman, regardless of rank. It is important for this crime against femininity be corrected by another female, even though Guinevere will not be the female to ultimately be able to do this. She is not magical enough – she is contained within the realm of the male and is therefore subject to his laws, just as Dorigen. However, just like Dorigen, Guinevere is able to use enough of her feminine magic to persuade Arthur to release the matter from his hands and place it within hers. As retribution for his crime, Guinevere charges the knight, who is not given a name, to search for a year and a day to discover what it is that women really want.

During his quest, the knight does not discover any information which he would find useful. The problem is that all of the information is contradictory, and no two women appear to agree on what it is that women really want. Nearing despair, the knight spies a circle of women dancing, and he hopes to get an answer out of these women. The text reads:

And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,  
 In al this care, under a forest side,  
 Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go  
 Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;

Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne.

In hope that som wisdom sholde he lerne.

But certeinly, er he cam fully there,

Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where. (989-96)

The knight has his first encounter with magic just prior to meeting the Loathly Lady. He is shown an illusion of what it is he really wants – put simply, the female form. This illusion draws him into the witch’s sphere of influence, which is what the knight will need if he intends to survive his ordeal. This type of magic does not negatively impact the surrounding countryside. In fact, after the dance disappears, he comes across the Loathly Lady sitting by herself in the meadow.

The old woman’s magic is not evil, nor does it take away the knight’s free will.

Hamilton notes, “Yet although beneficent magic was technically considered an act of diabolism by the church its practitioners were rarely brought to trial; the majority of the cases of magic tried by the church courts concerned *maleficium*, attempts to cause harm” (151). The purpose of the Loathly Lady is to teach the errant knight the difference between right and wrong. He is to be educated at her hands, and hopefully become the true embodiment of chivalry. Hamilton further notes, “Few people were practitioners of ritual magic, though involvement with folk magic was certainly more widespread, but the imagination of the Catholic West throughout the Middle Ages was affected by the persistence of pagan traditions” (155). The Loathly Lady would have been just one of the many – simple, uneducated by Christian standards – who posed a minor threat to the ability of the Church to continue its spread. The harmlessness of the Loathly Lady is what makes it so simple for the wandering knight to approach her and ask for

answers after the dancing girls have gone away. If there had been a necromancer in her place, the story of the knight might have worked out quite differently.

As it is, the knight chooses to investigate the gathering of women, when he could have just as easily passed them by as silly girls, who would not have been able to give him an answer. The Loathly Lady's magic does not manipulate what is seen by a whole populace, just what is seen by the knight. This indicates her magic is not as strong as that of the alchemist in the Franklin's Tale. The Loathly Lady's magic does not last long, nor does it affect many. It does not rise out of a desire to take away free will, nor does it make the knight see what he does not wish to see. The Loathly Lady's magic plays upon what is already there, and simply heightens the experience. Once the knight has come to the old woman of his own free will does she extract the promise from the knight to give her the first request she makes after the queen frees him. Desperate, the knight agrees, not realizing what it is that he has signed up for.

The story unfolds, and the witch tells the knight that what women want is their own sovereignty. They want freedom to make their own choices and to live their own lives. In a way, this is very similar to what nature would have asked from men, if they had asked her. In the process of displacement, nature has been raped of its ability to sustain its magical creatures and keep its mortal counterparts safe. In short, its magic has been stifled, and it is attempting, through the intervention of magic worked by the Loathly Lady and Guinevere, to gain a small fraction of it back. The knight readily agrees to the Loathly Lady's demands in the hope that her answer will spare his life. It is very important to notice, however, that the witch does not tell him that this is what all women want. Rather, she gives him the answer she says the queen will want to hear. The Loathly Lady says to the knight, "Thy lyf is sauf, for I wol stonde thereby; / Upon

my lyf, the queene wol seye as I' (ll. 1015-6). The magical creatures in this story are in league with each other, if only in the attempt to teach a male a lesson in how to treat a woman.

This collusion is furthered after the knight gives Guinevere the Loathly Lady's answer. Apparently still ignorant of his lesson, the Loathly Lady appears before Guinevere, begging her to uphold the promise that the knight will not honor. She cries, "My sovereyn lady queene! / Er that youre court departe, do me right. / I taught this answeere unto the knyght" (ll. 1048-50). From one magical being to another, the Loathly Lady begs the queen to intervene yet again, which she willingly does. Guinevere makes the knight hold true to his promise, even though it is not what he wants to do. The knight is not even a "man" about his sentencing, as he takes to his newfound marital state with dread and loathing, to the point where the Loathly Lady is saddened by his irrational behavior. She beseeches her knight:

For thogh that I be foul, and oold, and poore  
 I nolde for al the metal, ne for oore  
 That uner erthe is grave or lith above,  
 But if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love. (ll. 1063-66)

The Loathly Lady is not gifted in alchemy. She cannot be – she lacks the ability and the education. She realizes that her simple nature magic is not going to be enough to hold onto her knight without introducing some form of masculine element.

She tricks her knight into providing this very same masculine element that she will need in order to make her magic hold. Up to this point, the Loathly Lady cannot sustain any magical influence over the knight. Guinevere can incorporate a legal contract, but it still does not give the Loathly Lady what she really desires – the knight's love. While her initial magic has given her the knight's physical body, it does not provide her with his love. In order to make the

illusion reality, the Loathly Lady finds she needs to combine her simple magic with the more enduring magic of the male. In order to gain that end, she provides the knight with a choice: she can be beautiful but her faithfulness will be called into question, or she can remain old and ugly, but the knight will never have to worry on questions of fidelity. In almost a sense of defeat, the knight gives into the witch, and tells her whatever makes her happy will be the very thing which will make him happy as well<sup>3</sup>.

However, with this magic, there comes a price. The witch in essence loses her capability to perform any further magic, as her ability to speak seems to have been removed from this point forward. The tale ends with the Wife of Bath telling us that, "A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse, / And she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (ll. 1254-6). In allowing the masculine influence on her magic, the witch gives up all of her own magic, and is no longer able to work any further spells. Guinevere is a parallel to this, in that her magic is conducted through the grace of her husband's will, not because she can exercise it on her own. While the influence of masculinity is needed to make female magic more permanent, it also appears to have a negating factor on the female's ability to even work magic once she is in effect bound to a male.

That the crone was available to speak to the knight speaks volumes about Chaucer and his views on the female and sorcery. In his article "The Witches of the Cambrésis," Robert Muchembled observes:

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<sup>3</sup> Like many other love spells, the witch needs physical contact for her magic to come to fruition. She is delighted with the knight's decision, but needs that one last element to make her spell complete. She says to the knight, "Kys me...we be no longer wrothe, / For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe" (ll. 1238-9). Just as in several fairy tale style stories, the knight's act of sealing the vow with a kiss is enough to make the witch's magic more permanent and binding. Instead of an old, decrepit woman, she has been transformed into a beautiful young maiden, much to the knight's pleasure. The combination of female charm with male power is enough to make the spell binding and permanent, as the witch will be visible in this form to all others who see her.

Even on a fairly simple descriptive level, the relationship of the village to its witches cannot be understood without referring to a whole complex of factors, all of which played a part in the persecution phenomenon: ties of blood, clientage, and neighborhood; economic and social tensions among the villagers; the role of the well-to-do, the nabobs, and the local political cliques – in sum, the network of relationships that made up the rural community, a community whose membership was by no means defined simply by the fact of residence in the village. (231)

Even though Muchembled's research is limited to coastal France, the same precepts may appear to hold within British culture and society. The Wife of Bath's Loathly Lady must depend on much more than just her village alone in order to sustain herself. That Queen Guinevere is so willing to listen to what the Loathly Lady has to say is some indication of the ties of sisterhood the Loathly Lady was able to play upon. That Chaucer allows the Wife of Bath to play upon feelings of sorority in a magical construct is also telling. Just as Chaucer gives the Wife of Bath her own sovereignty as a businesswoman and land-holder, he appears to do the same for the Loathly Lady.

Furthermore, Muchembled notes, "Sex plays a starring role therein: for example, the judges forced each suspected witch to confess...that she gave the devil 'a hair from her shameful parts.' Isn't this purely and simply a denunciation of sexuality outside of Christian marriage?" (241). The crone is not allowed to have an active sexuality. When she becomes the beautiful maid, she is silenced in her devotion to her husband. Dorigen's sexuality gets her into trouble in the first place, and is then controlled by Arveragus when he tells her what she must do with her

body. Guinevere is likewise controlled by Arthur – she must request his permission to have an active role in the knight’s punishment. Even the victim of the knight’s passion is controlled by sexuality – it is her physical form which causes the knight to fall from grace initially. Once the female is symbolically castrated by the male who is deemed to have control over her, she can no longer work any sort of magic which would cause a man to fall from his Christian calling.

### **The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale**

The Canon’s Yeoman deals with magic and illusion quite differently from the Wife of Bath and the Franklin. In his tale, the topic of magic is brought up through the use of alchemy, which is the same educated form of magic in which the unnamed philosopher of the Franklin’s Tale deals. In this tale there are no women, and the one who takes the ultimate fall for the use of this magic is the priest, whose love of money outweighs his common sense. If the priest had a solid faith, he might not have been so easily subjected to the “magic” performed by the alchemist in this tale. Like Dorigen, he is the victim of his own human nature. Additionally, in opposition to the two preceding tales, no real magic is being worked in this tale. Rather, it is the concept of illusion, of seeing what an individual wishes to see no matter how slovenly the trick is enacted, which is really the issue of the story. Because the priest wishes to see an increase in wealth despite his vows of poverty speaks volumes regarding his character. Because the alchemist is able to trick the priest with no real effort on his part and with no lasting repercussion for his actions gives a strong indication of Chaucer’s view of the miraculous and God’s ecclesiastical representatives as well.

The concept of “holy money” in the Middle Ages is an intriguing one. In “Religion and the Decline of Magic,” Keith Thomas states, “It was also inevitable that around the Church, the clergy and their holy apparatus there clustered a horde of popular superstitions, which endowed

religious objects with a magical power to which theologians themselves had never laid claim” (208). Through the Church, priests were assumed to work a sort of magic of their own, and objects such as the Host or holy water took on supernatural properties which could be used to help crops, heal the sick or catch criminals. While priests would very rarely claim that they had the power to do any of these things, it did not stop the average individual from securing a bit of Communion wafer to plant in his field to make sure that he had a good harvest. This concept of supernatural holy power even touched on money. Thomas notes, “Even the coins in the offertory were accredited with magical value; there were numerous popular superstitions about the magical value of communion silver as a cure for illness or a lucky charm against danger” (208). Holy money was not meant to make one materially wealthy. It simply took the place of pagan nature charms in protecting one from the hostile world. In this matter, the Church was willing to turn a semi-blind eye. Depending on what exactly was being taken as a shield, the Church was willing to grant her followers small concessions to a pagan past.

Not all Christian magic was good; however, as Thomas also notes, “The ceremony [Mass] could even be perverted into a maleficent act by causing masses for the dead to be celebrated for persons still alive, in order to hasten their demise” (209). Again, the concept of the religious state as a medium for magic would be one that Chaucer would have known about and would have recognized being practiced. If Christian magic could save, it could also do harm. Medieval priests would have had a difficult time stemming the rising tide of parishioners who wanted a small piece of the Church to aid them in their attempts to find the miraculous. Religious fervor became integrated with pagan belief, and it is not surprising that a uneducated parish priest would have trouble differentiating between what is holy and what is magical at times.

The tale opens with an indentured servant discussing how he got in the position of being in debt in the first place. He blames his desire for money as the cause, and he still is not cured of his malady. The servant cries, "And yet I am endetted so therby / Of gold that I have borwed, trewely, / That whil I lyve I shal it quite nevere. / Lat every man be war by me for evere!" (ll. 734-7). The servant realizes he is not going to be cured of his illness any time soon and attempts, in vain, to warn others of his condition. The servant then goes on to explain how he went to an alchemist to increase his wealth with disastrous consequences. The servant calls the practice of alchemy an "elvysshe craft," already entwining it with magic and the supernatural. In lines 819-29, the servant goes forward to discuss further those entities which assist in the process of alchemy, naming each. This description shows it is learned that the alchemist needs to be in possession of four base metals, and then has to combine those metals with spirits named for heavenly bodies.

Unlike the Loathly Lady in the Wife of Bath's tale, to be an alchemist requires some education and knowledge of astronomy and astrology. The servant intones, "Al is in veyn, and parde, muchel moore. / To lerne a lewed man this subtiltee" (ll. 843-4). Additionally, the concept of creating precious metal from base is a concept most people would be interested in, and would be willing to attempt to cross certain boundaries in order to obtain this goal. The need for prosperity would be a concept Chaucer's audience would have understood and sympathized with. That some might attempt to find the base metals needed in Chaucer's tale to attempt alchemy for themselves would not have been necessarily far-fetched, nor would there have been oddity seen in trying to figure out how an alchemist worked.

In the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, the concept of money being the root of all evil is also in play. The smell of the alchemist is one that is related to Hell, and there is other demonic imagery

used in relation to the alchemist as well. The servant describes the alchemist as, "Men may hem knowe by smel of brymston. / For al the world they stynken as a goot; / Hir savour is so rammyssh and so hoot" (ll. 885-7). This is ironic, for even though the alchemist is claiming to do demonic magic, in effect, what he does is no more than illusion and sleight of hand. His magic does not have the potency that the Franklin's philosopher does. The smell of the alchemist is indicative of his danger, however. None of Chaucer's other magic users have such a strong presence to them. They are redeemable, essentially honest, if not misguided, individuals. The difference is that the alchemist is conniving and untrustworthy and seeks to unseat one who is meant to do the work of God in the world. The priest is no more innocent than the alchemist, however, as he allows the alchemist to cheat him out of not only his money, but his friends' as well, without even a second question. The alchemist cannot change lead to gold, nor even make the illusion that he does. It is ironic, therefore, that he is described with much more of an evil slant than the philosopher. Where the alchemist has power, though, is through the play upon the priest's secret greed, which he never acknowledges. This is a common flaw of human nature which the alchemist siezes upon gladly.

The "magic" of the alchemist will differ from that of the philosopher or from the crone is that it will be a tangible, quantifiable result. In giving the priest something he can see and touch with his own hands, the alchemist is in effect doing the work of the devil. As Andrew Roach argues in his article "The Devil's World: Heresy and Society, 1100-1300":

The Cathars seem to have been largely successful in imparting the basic doctrine of dualism, of creation being an unending war between God and the Devil, with the Devil responsible for the corrupt, visible things of this world, although whether evil was an

independent force or originally part of the creation of a beneficent  
 God was left uncertain. (174)

Despite not working any magic of his own, the alchemist is still engaging in a work of heresy. In going outside of the natural order, he is imbuing the priest with a belief that something can essentially be made from nothing. In this respect, the alchemist is more dangerous than both the necromancer and the crone, as he is corrupting an individual who is supposed to be incorruptible. In hoodwinking the priest, the alchemist is opening the door for the corruption of others who would be in the priest's care. Without magic, the alchemist is causing more harm than both the powerful magic of the philosopher and the simple nature magic of the crone.

The alchemist is also dangerous in that he is working the magic that the priest should be able to do by rights. In his article "Chaucer and Wyclif: God's Miracles Against the Clergy's Magic," William Kamowski argues, "The contemporary Church, in an age of established faith, would need no capacity to work miracles, and in any case God no longer granted such power" (7). Obviously the need for miracles is still present, as it is a member of the clergy who is actively looking for one. Kamowski further states, "Much of the blame for the Church's decline can be laid on ecclesiastical materialism" (7). As noted earlier, the essential flaw in the priest is his love of money. He is willing to go into debt in order to obtain the means by which he can persuade the alchemist to give him even more money, without thought to the damage he is doing to his soul. The alchemist is able to do what the priest cannot – change the substance of matter. In the act of the Mass, the priest should be engaging in a type of alchemy himself: he is changing the bread and wine on the altar into a physical representation of the body and blood of Christ. Yet, even after the words are spoken and the ritual observed, physically, what is lying on the altar of the Church is still simple bread and wine if beliefs regarding transubstantiation are not

taken into account. Kamowski says, "But for Chaucer's audience in the 1390s, when the Wycliffite controversy over transubstantiation was in the air, the image of clergy engaged in failed or counterfeit chemical permutations, might at least call to mind that more noble permutation in the Eucharist with which these clergy could have been occupied" (17). If the priest cannot work this greatest of miracles himself with the help of God, it gives him some hope that he can find one who is able to work a miracle of transformation, even if the end result has nothing to do with spiritual gain.

The difference between the philosopher of the Franklin's Tale and the alchemist of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is multi-leveled. The philosopher has redeeming qualities, whereas the alchemist appears to be no more than a con-artist and swindler all the way through his tale. The philosopher forgives the debt against Aurelius, where the alchemist appears to enjoy making money off the priest and even looks for other ways in which he can continue to swindle him. The philosopher is redeemed for his magic at the end of the tale, where the alchemist does not seek nor desire any sort of redemption for his acts. Perhaps the very power of the philosopher lies in the fact that he is not out for complete personal gain, and is willing to sacrifice the money he could have made for the chance at spiritual salvation. The alchemist does not desire spiritual salvation at this time, and scorns philosophers as often and as thoroughly as he can throughout the Canon's Yeoman's Tale.

Indeed, the alchemist appears to make fun of philosophers, citing them as company he would not keep. Whether this is because the alchemist really feels superior to them or because he is afraid they will expose him for what he really is, it is not clear. The alchemist states, "In name of Crist, so wexe a philosopre. / Ther been ful fewe to whiche I wolde profre / To shewen hem thus muche of my science" (ll. 1122-4). The alchemist appears to believe philosophers are

beneath his notice. However, as evidenced in the Franklin's Tale, philosophers are men with just as much educational background as the alchemist, if not more. Further, philosophers appear to have the power of true illusion, not cheap magic tricks. It would be more probable that the alchemist would fear exposure at the hands of the philosopher, and therefore dismisses him out of hand to avoid confrontation.

The alchemist shows no respect for religion when he attempts to hoodwink the priest. The priest, on the other hand, is be on the lookout for a true miracle, if for no other reason than to substantiate that God was still at work on the Earth itself. Parish notes, "If true miracles had ceased once the faith of Christ had become firmly established, it was suggested, the miracles recorded in the Catholic church were not miracles at all, but rather deceptions, frauds and diabolical wonders" (48). The reader, being outside of the action, knows that the work of the alchemist falls unequivocally into the latter category. The priest, blinded by both his greed and his need for a miracle, would not be so open to believing what is really occurring. The priest sees what he wants to see, which is inherent to magic being worked successfully in the first place – the petitioner needs to believe that the spell will work; the victim has to believe that s/he is being cursed. The alchemist takes full advantage of this shortcoming of the priest's in order to work his ability to deceive to the fullest. The alchemist prays upon Man's human frailties – a propensity for indulgence in alcohol, a desire for increased wealth, to work his greatest scam of all: the deception of a man of the Church.

Sadly for the priest, he is roped in by the alchemist's cheap magic tricks, and he is willing to part with his true worldly possessions, and those he can procure from others, in an attempt to make more money. It is made clear in the Pardoner's Tale that those who put money before salvation are going to meet with a tragic end. As the priest gets more entwined in the alchemist's

scheme, he becomes more and more unable to see what is really going on. The servant relates, “But therof wiste the preest nothyng, alas! / He demed alle the coles yliche good, / For of that sleighte he nothyng understood” (ll. 1201-3). In his desire to increase his wealth, the priest forgets his vows of poverty. He decides that whatever the alchemist is doing is good, since he is not hurting anyone. In truth, the alchemist is hurting the priest both monetarily and spiritually. The priest appears willing to look the other way in regard to what can only be demonic sorcery, and lets the alchemist go forward unimpeded.

While the priest is looking the other way, the alchemist in effect pantomimes a bait and switch without the priest even knowing what is happening. The alchemist exchanges the lump of metal in his cauldron for a lump of pure silver. The priest, who at this point is drunk, does not notice the blatant replacement and believes that the alchemist has actually created magic. He begs the alchemist to show him how it is done, but the alchemist shies away from telling the priest his trick, saying:

Sire preest...I kepe han no loos  
 Of my craft, for I wolde it kept were cloos;  
 And, as ye love me, kepeth it secree.  
 For, and men knewen al my soutilitee,  
 By God, they wolden han so greet envye  
 To me by cause of my philosophye. (ll. 1368-73)

Even though his magic would be considered demonic, the alchemist maintains that his magic is actually a gift from God, and that he has been instructed to keep the means by which it is accomplished secret. Further, the alchemist takes his opportunity to further discredit the philosopher, saying, “Philosophres speken so mystily / In this craft that men kan nat come

therby” (ll. 1394-5). The philosopher, whose magic is in actuality stronger than the alchemist, is not given the means to defend himself.

The alchemist ends the tale with a further jab at philosophers who also practice illusion. He says, “The philosophers sworn were everychoon / That they sholden discovere it unto noon, / Ne in no book it write in no manere. / For unto Crist it is so lief and deere” (ll. 1464-7). The alchemist knows his magic is false, yet attempts to hide this fact through sleight of hand and alcohol. The witch in the Wife of Bath’s Tale and the philosopher in the Franklin’s Tale both appear to have real magic, and do not attempt to downplay or belittle the magic of others. In this sense, Chaucer’s only false magician is the one who is not capable nor desires redemption, and the alchemist the only one who needs to promote himself through the belittlement of others. The commentary Chaucer is making here is obvious: the truth will defend itself, whereas the lie will need glamour and befuddlement to survive.

### **Conclusion**

In all three of the tales examined, a “miracle” of sorts has occurred. Reality is suspended at the very least for a short enough period of time in order for something more to take a part in the telling of the tale. For Chaucer, there would be a blending of the line between what was miracle and what was magic. According to Helen Parish, “Miracles merged with magic, the *lives* of the saints with superstition, in a rhetoric of reformation that used the vocabulary of fraud and deception as a shorthand for traditional religion” (70). All three of Chaucer’s magicians are in direct opposition to the Church and its teaching. However, aside from the true liar, the alchemist, the magicians are able to find a niche where they are able to work their magic and yet still find some salvation despite going against the status quo. It is possible that Chaucer is arguing that the intent is more important than the actual act. For the philosopher and the crone,

the intent is to help another to understand who they really are. For the alchemist, the intent is personal gain.

The philosopher assists Aurelius in coming to understand that breaking the commandment of coveting another man's wife is harmful in both the physical and spiritual sense. In desiring Dorigen, Aurelius comes very close to both physical and spiritual death. When Aurelius finally comes to understand the pain he is causing, he is able to put his own desires aside to allow for the correct path to prevail. In the case of the Loathly Lady, she effectively teaches the knight what it means to be a true and honorable man, and how that man should relate to women. Both magicians achieve their ends without damaging the potential spiritual salvation of those who require their services. None of the primary players in either the Franklin's or Wife of Bath's tales suffer any damage either physically or spiritually. The same cannot be said of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, whose alchemist effectively damns his own soul by practicing demonic magic and damns the soul of the priest in furthering his pursuit for earthly monetary gain.

In a way, the magicians are actually more effective teachers of the moral code than the Church. Kamowski observes:

In lieu of the Church's magical and easily purchased means to salvation or moral validation, such as trentals and indulgences, Chaucer, like Wyclif, represents the greater importance and efficacy of the righteous individual's knowledge, strength and resolve: in the Loathly Lady who converts a rapist into a husband, in Virginius's and Virginia's adherence to the Roman ethic of individual honor against a corrupt judicial system, in the

converting appeal of Cecilia's unsilenced virtue in Custance's faith and doggedness, and, of course, in the Parson's unpretentious ministry. (21)

Just as the Pardoner is exposed at his attempts to swindle the pilgrims, so Chaucer calls out the Church for its methods of swindling the faithful. Salvation cannot be purchased; rather, it must be a lesson openly received and learned. Magic does not appear to be a bad thing in Chaucer's eyes. While it would be seen as heretical by the Church, the magicians appear to be the most effective teachers in Chaucer's tales encompassing magic. In fact, Kamowski argues, "The term 'heretic' can be a counterproductive label in literary as well as in theological debate" (22). The false magician is the one who is unable to teach the priest a lesson in desiring worldly possessions; however, the alchemist was able to teach the outside observer the difference between right and wrong.

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