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CHAUCER
AND THE MEDIEVAL SCIENCES

by

JOSHUA AARON GOLDMAN

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Signature of Author.
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Certified by.
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by.
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Abstract

Chaucer's poetry contains many references to medieval science. Drawing on sciences including physiognomy, alchemy, and astrology, Chaucer developed his characters, set the time and mood of the story, provided motivations, gave his created world a logical order, and used science for subject matter in the Canterbury Tales. Using the medieval audience's knowledge of science, Chaucer was able to convey large amounts of information in very economical descriptions. It is possible to realize a better understanding of Chaucer's view on science by examining the views of the characters he has created. Chaucer was deeply involved with the science of his day. His criticisms of science still retain their validity in the science of today.

"The lyf so short,
the craft so long to lerne."

The Parlement of Foules

Special thanks to Professor Lamson
for making the craft less long
And to my wife, Lynne,
for making the life less short

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I. Chaucer and Science

Chaucer used many elements of medieval science in his literary works. Drawings on sciences including physiognomy, alchemy, the science of dreams, and astrology, he developed his characters, set the time and mood of the story, provided motivations for the actions of the characters, gave his created world a logical order, used science for subject matter, and made comments on the sciences themselves. Before it is possible to discuss why Chaucer used science, it is necessary to explain what the medieval sciences were and how Chaucer used them in his writing.

Physiognomy is the science relating a person's physical appearance to his personality. Specific physical features could be related to specific traits. In the prologue of Canterbury Tales, Chaucer described the physical appearance of the Miller.

The Millere was a stout carl for the nones;
Ful byg he was of brawn, and eek of bones.
That proved wel, for over al ther he cam,
At wrastlyng he wolde have alwey the ram.
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre;
Ther was no dore that he nolde have of harre,
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed,
His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And thereto brood, as though it were a spade,
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A werte, and thereon stood a toft of herys,
Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;
His nosethirles blake were and wyde.
A swerd and bokeler bar he by his syde.
His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys.

(C.T., G.P., 545-559)

These vivid details create a Miller that the reader can see before him but Professor Curry has pointed out that this description told many things about the Miller's personality to the medieval audience which knew the science of physiognomy.

Of such a stocky figure Aristotle says: "The signs of a shameless and immodest man are vigorous shoulders raised upward, figure not erect but slightly bowed, rapid movements, a red body and sanguine complexion, a round face, and a chest thrust upwards,".... Not only is a man of the Miller's build known to be shameless, immodest, and loquacious, according to the physiognomists as in Chaucer, but he is apparently bold and easily angered.... Already it appears from these passages that a man of the Miller's figure and with his round face, sanguine complexion, and red, bristly beard, his short neck, great mouth, and broad nostrils may be pronounced upon sight a man easily angered, shameless, loquacious and apt to stir up strife.¹

The scientific interpretation of the description of the Miller is an extremely economical and effective way to describe the pilgrim who tells the tale of the carpenter, and his wife. The information that a scientific analysis of the description gives does show the value which it can be in understanding Chaucer as his medieval audience would have understood him.

Alchemy is the science devoted to creating gold from base metals. The Canon's Yeoman in his tale describes this work with his master an alchemist:

¹

Walter Curry, Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences (Barnes & Noble, 1960), pp. 80-81.

Of that no charge, I wol speke of oure werk.
Whan we been there as we shul exercise
Oure elvysshe craft, we semen wonder wise,
Oure termes been so clerghial and so queynte.
What sholde I tellen ech proporcion
Of thynges whiche that we werche upon—
As on fyve or sixe ounces, may wel be
Of silver, or som oother quantitee—
And bisye me to telle yow the names
Of orpyment, brent bones, iren squames,
That into poudre grounden beenful smal;
And in an erthen pot how put is al....
Noght helpeth us, oure labor is in veyn.
Ne eek oure spirites ascencioun,
Ne oure materes thal lyen al fix adoun,
Mowe in oure werkyng no thyng us availle,
For lost is al oure labour and travaille;
And al the cost, a twenty devel waye,
Is lost also, which we upon it laye.

(C.T., C.Y.T., 749-783)

This quotation is just part of his description of his work which involves many diverse ingredients and much "elvysshe loore" which the yeoman does not understand very well. But this tale is not just a confused description of alchemy. Chaucer has made the yeoman describe himself by the limited amount of things that he observes and understands.

He has a flypaper mind which collects everything and understands nothing - except that an explosion usually marks the end of an experiment. But enjoying for once the center of the stage and finding his hearers attentive, he pours forth a flood of marvellous alchemical terms - names of substances, processes, and implements mixed in a fine confusion without rime or reason - which he has heard during his late apprenticeship. He suspects that his former master is a fraud, like the alchemist in the Tale, but he is never quite certain; being entirely ignorant of the significance of processes and terms with which he is superficially familiar, he clings almost involuntarily to the belief that there may be something in the practice after all.²

²

Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, pp. xxiv-xxv

The canon's yeoman describes himself by his tale of science as vividly as the Miller was described in terms of physiognomy. To understand the tale one must discover how the yeoman views alchemy, but to do this one must explore what the medieval attitude towards alchemy was and what Chaucer's views were. An exclusively technical interpretation that does not answer these questions will yield only limited information.

In the Nun's Priest's tale there is no need to use the science of dreams to interpret Chauntecleer's dream because Pertilote interprets it for him. Chauntecleer, a rooster, awakens in the middle of his sleep with a cry and tells his hens of his dream. He saw a reddish hound who had made his way into their garden and who glowed with a look that made Chauntecleer almost die from fright. Pertilote shames him for being such a coward to fear this dream and goes on to explain what caused it.

Certes this dreem, which ye han met to-nyght,
Cometh of the greet superfluytee
Of your rede colera, pardee,
Which causeth folk to dreden in hir dremes
Of arwes, and of fyr with rede lemes,
Of rede beestes, that they wol hem byte,
Of contek, and of whelpes, grete and lyte;
Right as the humour of malencolie
Causeth ful many a man in sleep to crie
For feere of blake beres, or boles blake,
Or elles blake develes wole hem take.
Of othere humours koude I telle also
That werken many a man in sleepful wo;.

(C.T., N.P.T., 4116-4128)

Pertilote goes on to give a complete diagnosis and recommended treatment for Chauntecleer's dream. The good hen didn't spare any of her wisdom. Chauntecleer, not surprisingly, has another view of his dream, specifically that it was a vision of something soon to come true. An investigation into the science of dreams will show, as Professor Curry has done, that Pertilote's interpretation of the dream was scientifically correct.³ But Chauntecleer ignores both his hen's advice and his own interpretation and very nearly gets eaten by the fox. It is not necessary to be versed in the science of dreams to follow the tale but the medieval audience would have a much richer understanding of what was going on because of their knowledge of dreams.

Astrology was the basis for all other medieval science. It teaches how the universe is ordered and how the universe relates to and affects man. The history of astrology is complex and it is necessary to know it to be able to understand the many different influences on the astrology that Chaucer knew, but this will be discharged later in this paper. Horoscopes, the part of astrology that presently is still in common usage, describe the planetary influences at the time of birth and how these will affect the future. The Wife of Bath, probably the most memorable character in the Canterbury Tales, gives her own horoscope in the prologue to her tale.

³ Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, pp. 219-240.

For certes, I am al Venerien
 In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien
 Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
 And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;
 Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne.
 Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!
 I folwed ay myn inclinacion
 By vertu of my constellacioun;
 That made me I koulde nocht withdrawe
 My chambre of Venus from a good, felawe
 Let have I Martes mark upon my face,
 And also in another privee place.
 For God so wys be my savacioun,
 I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,
 But evere folwede myn appetit.

(C.T., W.B.T., 609-623)

This horoscope helps to describe the lecherous Wife
 of Bath, but it also explains in terms of astrology
 why the Wife of Bath behaves the way she does.

Of actual astrological detail we have
 very little in the Wife's horoscope,
 but it is enough. We know only that
 the ascendant sign was Taurus and that
 Mars was in Taurus, but this information
 alone is significant without examining
 any of the other planets and their
 locations. Venus also figures somehow
 in the horoscope, but we cannot be sure
 just how since we have no indication of
 her location; all that can be said is
 that she gives the Wife her lust and
 lecherousness. Mars' influence on the
 Wife probably amounts to the same thing,
 according to the astrologers, but this
 is really not inconsistent with the
 Wife's claim that he gave her "sturdy
 hardynesse."⁴

In the Knight's Tale, astrology is also used
 to describe personalities and how they have been created
 by the stars, but Chaucer has made astrological forces
 rule the entire world in which the tale takes place.

⁴

Chauncy Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars
 (Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 174-174.

Arcite believed that he and Palamon were in jail because Saturn was in an evil position at their birth. "Som wikke aspect or disposicioun of Saturne, by sum constellacioun hath yeven us this." (C.T. 1087-89.) But later in their fright in the great astrological arena Saturn reveals the total awesome extent of his power.

"My deere doghter Venus," quod Saturne,
"My cours, that hath so wyde for to turne,
Hath moore power than woot any man.
Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan,
Myn is the prison in the derke cote;
Myn is the stranglyng and hangyng by the throte,
The murmure and the cherles rebellyns
The groynynge, and the pryvee empoysonyng,
I do vengeance and pleyn correccioun,
While I dwelle in the signe of the lecun.
Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,
The fallynge of the toures and of the walles.
Upon the mynour or the carpenter.
I slow Sampson, shakynge the piler
And myne be the maladyes colde,
The derke tresons, and the castes olde;
My lookynge is the fader of pestilence.
Now weep nomoore I shal doon diligence
That Palamon, that is thyn owene knyght,
Shal have his lady, as thou hast him hight.

(C.T., K.T., 2453-2471)

Saturn leaves no doubt as to who rules this world. There is no absolute god above him that he fears, and he knows that if he decides that something is to be, neither chance, nor fortune, nor men's will can change it. Chaucer shows us that Saturn is not making empty boasts: Palamon did get his lady and it is Saturn who caused and controlled the outcome. This is an extremely naive and deterministic belief in astrology, but, though Chaucer used it in the tale, he did not necessarily believe that this was the situation in his world.

In the Knight's Tale the role of stellar influence or fate has been elevated to a position of some eminence by Professor Curry, who argued that Chaucer abandoned the mythology he found in his source and substituted "as a motivating force that formative and impelling influence of the stars in which his age believed." The problem here, however, is that if stars are in fact both formative and impelling, if indeed, as Curry says, the story is spread against the backdrop of "the destinal powers of the stars," then the motivation of the story and its backdrop have been poorly chosen, for human action of any kind is ultimately meaningless if it is accomplished in a wholly deterministic universe. Perhaps a more useful definition of the role of the stars in the Knight's Tale would note that the stoicism of Arcite and Palamon, which is engendered by their belief in astral determinism, is not to be found in Theseus, the hero of the story; differs from the belief of the Knight, who narrates it; and need not be imputed to Chaucer, who wrote it.⁵

A less awe inspiring but more poetic use of astrology is in indicating the time by astrological signs. The astrological periphrasis, which is an ancient rhetorical device for denoting the time of day or time of year.⁶ Chaucer used it to create a mood and mythological background for his tales which was much more effective than literally given the date or time. Chaucer thought so much of this device that he started the Canterbury Tales with one, which is one of the most often quoted pieces of English literature.

⁵ Wood, Country of the Stars, pp. 45-46.

⁶ Wood, Country of the Stars, p. 78.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendered is the flour;
 When Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),-
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

(C.T., G.P., 1-12)

Although there is no doubt that this is a beautiful description of spring, much more information is conveyed to an understanding audience. Professor Wood has determined from the astrological indications of this periphrasis and the mention of the date, April 18, in the Man of Law's Headlink that the pilgrimage started on April 17. It was believed in medieval times that Noah's flood started on April 17. This coincidence of dates is reinforced by "And bathed every veyne in swich liquor." Professor Wood suggests that Noah's flood and the baptism that it represented to the medieval audience is a theme which reoccurs in the Parson's Tale. The Parson explains that the flood was to punish lechery. While, in the Miller's Tale, Nicholas creates a false flood to allow him to cuckold his master.⁷ These first twelve lines of the Canterbury Tales would create for the medieval audience a strong mood and a mythological background for the tales which are about a religious pilgrimage.

⁷ Wood, Country of the Stars, pp. 161-172.

There can be no doubt that Chaucer did involve science with his writing. This is something that should not be surprising, for any artist will use elements of the world he lives in to build his created world; however, Chaucer's use of science has created obstacles for the modern reader and critic. Science today bears almost no resemblance to the science of Chaucer. Most of the knowledge of the sciences has been lost. The little that has remained is viewed as superstitions or nonsense. One must have an understanding of how the medieval audience viewed science and how much knowledge it had to be able to understand the scientific references in Chaucer. If one wants to learn how Chaucer made his writing work, one must look through the eyes of the audience that Chaucer was writing for.

One obstacle that this author has found in some critics is the present prejudice against the medieval sciences. Professor Curry remarked "that he (Chaucer) should have been impressed to the point of taking seriously-- at least for artistic purposes--these monstrosities of error, now seem almost unbelievable." Professor Wedel opens his book, The Mediaeval Attitude Towards Astrology, with, "Mediaeval astrology has long suffered a neglect which, judged intrinsically, it deserves." To be able to approach the subject with an open mind, one must accept at least the possibility that these sciences are not monstrosities of error. Otherwise there is the temptation

8
Theodore Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude Towards Astrology
(Yale, 1920), p. 111.

to give Chaucer a "reasonable" attitude towards the mediaeval sciences when it is not justified by the text. This author has noted that temptation in himself. Perhaps now, when there is so much questioning of the validity of our sciences, and when there are many who take astrology seriously, it may be approached with more objectivity. When Professor Wedel was writing it was much more difficult to do because "little more than a romantic interest now attaches to a complex divinatory art that for centuries has been looked on as one of the aberrations of the human mind."⁹ Although Professor Curry thought that the study of Chaucer and Science would be made difficult by the fact that "poetry and science are now supposed to be antithetical and mutually exclusive,"¹⁰ this author no longer finds that to be true. Science fiction, mixtures of science and art such as computer music, and writers like B. F. Skinner and George Orwell have by now reunited Science and art to the extent that the only thing now surprising about Chaucer's use of Science in his literature is the shock in finding the past so similar to the present.

Because the medieval sciences were influenced by pre-Greek science, Greek mythology, the Greek scientists, the Romans, Arabians, and Christian Church, among others,

⁹ Wedel, Mediaeval Attitude, p. iii

¹⁰ Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, p. xi

it is possible to find such diverse elements as the Christian ideal and Greek mythological gods in Chaucer. It is difficult for a modern reader to overcome the obvious contradictory assumption that each depends on. But the medieval audience evidently could accept these diverse metaphors in their literature. It is necessary to understand the rather complex history of mediaeval science to understand how these ideas can co-exist in Chaucer.

II. History of Medieval Astrology

Medieval astrology developed from many diverse elements. The most influential predecessor was classical Greek astrology and astronomy. The Greeks were introduced to astrology by the Chaldeans. Although we have very few records from the pre-Greek period, it seems likely that the Chaldeans had developed astrological divination to an intricate degree. "Some pretend," says Cicero, "that the Chaldean astrologers have verified the nativities of children by calculations and experiments over a period of 470,000 years."¹ Cicero then expresses justified doubt that this statement is true, but the possibility of this being true indicates the level of sophistication that the Chaldeans must have reached. Further evidence of astrology reaching the Greeks in a highly developed state was the relatively unchanging astrological interpretations of the Greeks. A less developed art would be more likely to undergo changes especially after it has just been assimilated by a foreign culture.

We know even less about the philosophy and science behind the pre-Greek astrology than we do about the astrology itself. The reason for this is that in Greece the foreign astrology fused with indigenous philosophy and science, becoming an inseparable unit.

¹

Theodore O. Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude Towards Astrology (Yale, 1920), p. 11.

Thus it is impossible to know what philosophy or science the Chaldeans had because it was not transmitted through the Greeks. The Chaldean astrology also fused with Greek mythology if only because the planets and the gods have the same names. There had been an indigenous Greek divinatory system including the lucky and unlucky day that Hesiod sung of in, "Works and Days."² Although astrology, in the middle ages, was considered part of science, it first found allies in Greece among philosophers and diviners.

In the earlier centuries, no necessity manifested itself of basing astrology upon a scientific conception of the universe. Astrology looked for its first support, not to science, but to philosophy and to religion, and the Chaldean diviner found his first friends, not among the astronomers, but the soothsayers and oracle-mongers.³

Astrology did not get much support from the science of Aristotle. While the science made no claims that astrology was wrong, it did not really concern itself with the divinatory art.

To those familiar with mediaeval astrology, this seems strange indeed. In the scholastic writers of the thirteenth century, the cosmology of Aristotle furnished the very axioms of the science; it was the authority of Aristotle, more than anything else, that caused its theoretical acceptance by the Church. Thus Aristotle's theory of the fifth essence,

2

Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, p. 1.

3

Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, p. 5.

teaching that the substance of the stars was of a nobler order than that of the sublunary sphere, was found admirably fitted to form the basis of a science ascribing to the stars the arbitrament over human destinies. This view also found support in Aristotle's physics of motion. All the transformations undergone by physical bodies on earth, it taught, trace their origin to the local motion of the imperishable beings which constitute the fixed stars.⁴

It was not until Ptolemy that an astronomer took serious interest in astrology. He rationalized and defended astrology on the basis of the sciences of the time. Because he answered the critics of astrology so effectively and because of his great fame as an astronomer, astrology gained general theoretical acceptance.

With the almost universal theoretical acceptance of astrology was joined, however, a general distrust of the astrologer himself. The commercial practitioner stood low in the social scale, and was often a mere charlatan. Astrology in practice, furthermore, was seldom dissociated from necromancy and vulgar magic, and the astrologer in time became of public nuisance. As early as Augustus, laws were enacted against the Chaldoeri and the mathematici, and succeeding rulers issued decrees of increasing severity....So that it was when Christianity, at the close of the second century, began to assume a position of prominence in the social and intellectual life of the Roman Empire, it found astrology everywhere, battenning on the superstitions both of populous and kings. The Church attacked astrology with all available weapons.

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Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, p. 3.

The reasons for its hostility are fairly obvious. As part of paganism, the practice of all divinatory arts was forbidden the Christian; and, in the writings of the earlier apologists, astrology is hardly differentiated from soothsaying, oracles, and magic. In its philosophical dress, astrology was even less acceptable. The fatalism implied in the belief that the stars are the arbiters of human destinies never found more unyielding opponents than the Church fathers.⁵

The early Christian Church was very persistent and effective in its condemnation of astrology. They did not claim that astrology was false or didn't work, but rather that it was evil to do. This repression was so effective that after Augustine, astrology virtually disappeared from the social and intellectual life of Western Europe for the next eight centuries. During this time the only contact with astrology was through the earlier critiques of astrology. Most of these critiques condemn astrology on the grounds that it is evil and will often accept the fact that astrology is effective and does work.⁶ People knew that astrology was so effective that the early Church had to stop it but the Church was not punishing astrologers at that time because they did not exist in any numbers. This created a situation in which the ground was fertile for the rebirth of astrology.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Latin literature was rediscovered and studied in France. Reading

⁵ Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, pp. 14-16.

⁶ Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, p. 16.

these manuscripts with open minds led to a climate where conditions were favourable for the intellectual acceptance of astrology. Astrology had been introduced to the Arab world in the ninth century by Jewish scientists. They had studied the astrology of Ptolemy and of many other Greeks. They were also well versed in the Jewish tradition of cabala, a religious mysticism. The Moors were the first to combine Aristotle's physics with astrology. They made many encyclopedias of astrology including horoscopes, elections, and interrogations. The first predicts the future from the planetary alignment at the time of birth. Elections are means of finding the time most propitious to act. Interrogations are means of answering questions to find out unknown facts. The Arabs did not insist that astrology be able to predict everything exactly. They were satisfied if they could find out how the stars give us inclinations. This last is very important because one reason the Church was adamantly opposed to astrology is because astrological determination eliminates the possibility of free will and heavenly control over events.

There was indigenous pagan magic England before the introduction of astrology in the thirteenth century. It included the Celtic magic of Merlin and the complex, accurate astronomy of the Druids who built Stonehenge. The Celtic magic became mixed with astrology over a period of time. In the early Merlin legends, Merlin is a

magician not an astrologer, but after the thirteenth century he is turned into an astrologer.⁷ It is impossible to discover what happened to the Druids' knowledge of the stars because their culture was kept secret from others and it soon disappeared. But it is not impossible that some of the Druids' ideas were assimilated into English astrology and were passed down.

By the thirteenth century, knowledge of Aristotle had spread over all Europe. With Aristotle's physics of motion, astrology soon reached all the intellectual centers of Europe. Although the Church still condemned astrology, it did not actively oppose it. Many people became attracted to astrology while the knowledge was openly available, and the Church soon found that the new believers in astrology could not be convinced that astrology was wrong.

This general acceptance of Aristotle as the arbiter of human knowledge could not fail to anger well for astrology.... Aristotle's doctrine of the Prime Mover, endowing the heavens with a motion which they in turn impart to the lower spheres and to the earthly elements, fitted easily into a Christian scheme of the universe.... And astrological theory had, since the days of Ptolemy, become so inseparable a part of Aristotelian cosmology that the Christian theologians, in welcoming the one, were inevitably compelled to offer a favorable impression to the other.⁸

Christian theologians could not accept astrological determinism, but they could easily accept astrological medicine,

⁷ Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, p. 107.

⁸ Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, pp. 63-64.

elections to determine the most favorable time to attempt something, and the ability of stars to create inclinations in people. The Church could accept astrology as a science, but they continued to condemn any predictive astrology that did not allow for man to have the ability to ignore his inclinations. Thomas Aquinas was the theologian who gave the final formulation to the Church's changing view of astrology. The stars may rule over physical things but they cannot rule over man's intellect as well. The intellect can be affected by changes in the body's physical composition, but a man with a strong will can ignore the passions created by physical changes in his body. Astrology, seeking acceptance, adapted itself to the Church's requirements. The astrology that Chaucer learned had been influenced by many forces: the original Chaldean astrology, Greek myths, Greek philosophy and science, the early Christian Church, the Jewish and Moorish astrologers, the mediaeval Church, and the Druid and Celtic cultures. Because of this, Chaucer referred to the mythological Greek gods and the astrological planets together in the description of the temples in the great arena built by Theseus in the "Knights Tale". This combination might be confusing to a modern audience, but, apparently, the medieval audience accepted the unity of the subject.

What was medieval astrology and what did the mediaeval audience think about astrology? These simple questions have caused much confusion for Chaucer's critics.

Professor Wedel points out that many people who claimed they were against astrology actually believed in stellar influence. He concludes that they go as far as they dare in freeing astrology from the restrictions placed upon it by the Church.⁹ But Professor Wood points out that there is an important difference between believing in stellar influence and believing in astral determination.¹⁰

One famous medieval opponent of astrology is Nichole Oresme. He did believe that the planets and stars do have an effect on people. But he questions whether it is impossible for astrologers to interpret any but the most simple situation from the stars. He denied that the stars effect anything controlled by man's will, but he did believe that the stars could give people inclinations and passions.¹¹ In Chaucer's time almost everyone believed that the stars had some influence over earthly affairs, but there was serious disagreement on whether astrologists could accurately interpret the stars and on whether the stars cause something to happen, causes something to probably happen, or just indicates without causing events.

⁹ Wedel, The Mediaeval Attitude, p. 68.

¹⁰ Chauncy Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars (Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 36.

¹¹ Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars, p. 8.

III. "The Knight's Tale"

Astrological forces dominate the "Knight's Tale." They are the cause of desires in men and they alone determine the outcome of all events. It is strange to find the philosophy of absolute astrological determinism in Chaucer for other evidence shows that Chaucer could not possibly have believed in astrological determinism. To what purpose does Chaucer use astrology in the tale?

And so bifel, by adventure or cas,
That thurgh a wyndow, thikke of many a barre
Of iron greet and square as any sparre,
He cast his eye upon Emelya
And therewithal he bleynte and cride, "A!"
As though he strongen were unto the herte.
And with that cry Arcite anon up sterte,
And seyde, "Cosyn myn, what eyleth thee,
Thou art so pale and deedly on to see?
Why cridestow? Who hath thee doon offense
For Goddes love, taak al in pacience
Oure prisoun for it may noon oother be.
Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.
Of Saturne, by sum constellacion
Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn:
So stood the hevene whan that we were born.
We mostly endure it; this is the short and playn."

(C.T., K.T., 1074-1091)

Arcite tries to console Palamon's grief from imprisonment by telling him that it was foreordained that they would be in prison and that it was an unchangeable fact. This strong argument of astrological determination might have consoled Palamon, a believer in astrological determinism, if he had been grieving at being jailed, but he was, in fact, grieving from the sight of Emily. It may be that the forces of the stars have made Palamon yearn for the fair maiden he sees, but then he would have been comforted by what Arcite says.

This Palamon answerde and seyde agayn:
"Cosyn, for sothe of this opinioun
Thow hast a veyn ymaginacioun.
This prison caused ~~me~~ nat for to crye,
But I was hurt right now thurghout my ye
Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.
The fairnesse of that lady that I see
Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
Is cause of al my cryng and my wo.

(C.T., K.T., 1092-1100)

Arcite has seen in Palamon grief that he thinks has been caused by fate when the grief is actually from the sight of Emily and from Palamon's inclination to be affected by the sight of a fair maiden. The Knight narrating the tale believes that this sighting was caused by "aventure or cas" not fate. However, Palamon also quickly shows his ability to attribute earthy things to heavenly forces.

'I noot wher she be womman or goddesse,
But Venus is it soothly, as I gasse."
And therwithal on knees down he fil,
And seyde: "Venus, if it be thy wil
Yow in this gardyn thus to transfigure
Bifore me, sorweful, wrecched creature,
Out of this prisoun help that we may scapen.
And if so be my destynee be shapen
By eterne word to dyen in prisoun,
Of oure lynage have som compassioun,
That is so lowe ybrought by tirannye."

(C.T., K.T., 1101-1111)

Palamon, when attempting to describe fair Emylea decides that she must be a goddess. Emily is not a goddess, though she may be distant, unreachable, and beautiful. Emily is a woman, not a goddess. Arcite after seeing Emily and falling in love with her points out to Palamon the mistake he made.

For paramour I loved hire first er thow.
What wiltow seyen? Thou woost nat yet now.
Wheither she be a womman or goddesse!
Thyn is affeccioun of hoolynesse,
(C.T., K.T. 1155-1159)

It is clear that both of them have a tendency to involve the stars in things that there is no reason to. The consequences of the absolute determinism that Arcite and Palamon believe lead to a grim reality. The desires of man are caused by the planetary configuration at his birth and all achievements depend only on the strength of the various planetary forces. There is no room in this theory for any free will or any Christian God to give mercy and justice to the world. Chaucer may have been making the statement that all who believe in absolute astral determinism are just falsely attributing all chance happenings to the stars. After Arcite is allowed to leave the prison, Palamon attributes his imprisonment to Saturn. "But I moot been in prisoun thurgh Saturne/ And eek thurgh Juno, jalous and eek wood,/ That hath destroyed wel ny al the blood/ Of Thebes with his waste walles wyde;" (C.T., K.T. 1328-1331) Palamon continues to believe that Saturn caused his imprisonment even after he is shown that Arcite's imprisonment was not caused by Saturn and was not unalterable. Palamon is deterministic and pessimistic even in the face of contrary evidence. This does not bode well for the reality of his

judgement.¹ Professor Curry disagreed with this.

In recasting the story for his mediaeval audience the artist has apparently found it necessary or perhaps expedient to discard much of the ancient mythological machinery, which would encumber his narrative to no purpose, and to substitute as a motivating force that formative and impelling influence of stars in which his age believed. . . . Chaucer, in order to furnish such a motivating force for the final stages of action, has skillfully gone about transferring the power of the ancient gods of his sources to the astrological planets of the same name; that the real conflict behind the surface action of the story is a conflict between the planets, Saturn and Mars.²

To what kind of Gods do Palamon and Arcite pray? The lovers portrayed on the Temple of Venus show what kind of love she ruled over.

Wroght on the wal, ful pitous to biholde,
The broken slepes, and the sikes colde,
The sacred teeris, and the waymentynge,
The firy strokes of the desiryngge
That loves sevantz in this lyf enduren;
The others that hir covenantz assuren;
Plesaunce and Hope, Desir, Foolhardynesse,
Beautee and Youthe, Bauderie, Richesse,
Charmes and Force, Lesynges, Flaterye,
Despense, Bisynesse, and Jalousye, . . .
Lo, alle thise folk so caught were in hir las,
Til they for wo ful ofte seyde "allas!"
(C.T. K.T. 1919-1952)

Venus is the goddess of love, but what kind of love is

¹ Wood, Country of the Stars, p. 70

² Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, p. 119

portrayed here? Love that includes sleepless nights, terrors, fiery passions, lustyness, idleness, Narcissus, Medea, and Circes. These are only distorted evil kinds of love.. There can be no courtly love and there can be no desire unless it is accompanied by jealousy, lustfulness, and woe.. What kind of life would Palamon have with Emily if he won her hand with the aid of this Goddess? The description of the Temple of Mars is even less inviting.

Ther as Mars hath his sovereyn mansioun.
First on the wal was peynted a forest,
In which ther dwelleth neither man ne best,
With knotty, knarry, bareyne trees olde,
Of stubbes sharpe and hideouse to biholde, . . .
Ther saugh I first the derke ymaginyng
Of Felonye, and al the compssyng;
The crueel Ire, reed as any gleede;
The pykepurs, and eek the pale Drede;
The smylere with the knyfe under the cloke;
The shepne brennyng with the blake smoke;
The tresoun of the mordryng in the bedde; . . .
Yet saugh I Woodnesse, laughyng in his rage,
Armed Compleint, Outhees, and fiers Outrage;
The careyne in the busk, with throte yeorve;
A thousand slayn, and nat of qualm ystorve;
The tiraunt, with the pray by force yraft;
The toun destroyed, ther was nothyng laft.

(C.T. K.T. 1974-1978, 1995-2001, 2011-2016)

Such is the desolation and despair of the Mars that Arcite prays to. If there ever was any honour in wars or battles, this Mars had no part in it. What kind of chivalry can there be with this God in the battle? There could be no justice, honour, or knightly code. There could only be fear, treachery, and pointless slaughter. The two gods that Arcite and Palamon pray to could not be

the order of the world for these gods know only disorder and confusion. If they were the forces that rule the world, chance or fortune would be preferable to their consistent madness.

Arcite and Palamon have chosen these two gods to help them obtain Emily. They have chosen different gods and each prays for a different goal. Palamon, in his prayer to Venus, makes clear what he hopes to achieve.

I kepe noght of armes for to yelpe,
Ne I ne axe nat tomorwe to have victorie,
Ne renoun in this cas, ne veyne glorie
Of pris of armes blowen up and doun;
But I wolde have fully possessioun
Of Emelye, and dye in thy sevyse.
(C.T., K.T. 2238-2243)

Palamon clearly has no interest in his fight with Arcite. He only cares about obtaining Emily and not the method by which he does it. This is an appropriate request for Venus because she controls love and not fighting. Arcite requests a very different help from Mars, god of war.

Thanne help me lord, tomorwe in my bataille,
For thilke fyr that wilom brente thee,
As wel as thilke fyr now brenneth me
An do that I tomorwe have victorie.
(C.T., K.T. 2402-2405)

He is asking, specifically, for victory over Palamon in battle. Obviously, this is something appropriate to ask

of the god of war. Palamon and Arcite, although they both have supposedly the same goal, ask for different things..

What kind of response do Palamon and Arcite expect the gods to give their requests.. They do not expect the gods to have mercy for them or to care about their welfare. Palamon explains what he expects from the gods.

"O crueel goddes that governe
This world with byndyng of youre word eterne,
And writen in the table of atthamaunt
Youre parlement and youre eterne graunt,
What is mankynde moore unto you holde
Than is the sheep that rouketh in the folde?
For slayn is man right as another beest,
And dwelleth eek in prisoun and arrest,
And hath siknesse and greet adversitee,
And ofte tymes giltelees, pardee.
What governance is in this prescience,
That giltelees tomenteth innocence?
And yet encresseth this al my penaunce,
That man is bounden to his observaunce,
For Goddes sake, to letten of his wille",
(C.T., K.T. 1303-1317)

The gods have absolute power and they treat men as animals. Man may be punished or reward by them without regard for what man deserves. But even though the gods act without justice or concern for mankind they must be obeyed. There is no doubt in Palamon's mind that these gods should be obeyed. He says that it must be this way and leaves it to the theologians to prove it. This unthinking acceptance that both Palamon and Arcite possess should make them wary of favours that these gods appear to grant them, but it seems that they know that the gods do not care for men and that they hope for favours from these gods, not seeing the contradiction.

Emily is concerned with the outcome of this battle also.. Her first request of Diana is that she stay a virgin all her life, but if that is not possible she would like to get the one who loves her the most.(C.T., K.T. 2304-2325) But her goddess, Diana, the goddess of virginity and hunting, does not have much to be admired or exalted.

Now to the temple of Dyane the chaste,
As shorly as I kan, I wol me haste,
To telle yow al the descripsioun.
Depeynted been the walles up and doun
Of huntyng and of shamefast chastitee,
Ther saugh I how woful Caslistopee,
Whan that Diane agreved was with here,
Was turned from a womman til a bere,
And after was she maad the loode-sterre;
Thus was it peynted, I kan sey yow no ferre,
Hir sone is eek a sterre, as men may see.
Ther sugh I Dane, yturned til a tree,—
I mene nat the goddesse Diane,
But Penneus doghter, which that highte Dane.
Ther saugh I Attheon on hert ymaked,
For vengeance that he saugh Diane al naked;
I saugh how that his houndes have hym caught
(C.T., K.T. 2453-2472)

After Palamon, Arcite, and Emily made their prayers to the gods, there was a great fight in heaven. Mars and Venus were fighting each other to see whether Arcite or Palamon would win Emily. Jupiter was attempting to stop the fight when Saturn intervened.. Although Saturn usually creates strife, He ended this fight. Saturn, the power that ultimately determines the outcome of the battle is more malevolent than the other forces. In his description of

of himself he describes his great power and his control over prisons, strangling, rebellions, and treasons. Indeed just his looking at a place causes pestilence. (C.T., K.T. 2453-2472) Saturn decides that Arcite will win the battle but die before he can claim Emily, who will be left for Palamon. Saturn does not decide this because he feels this is what Palamon, Arcite, and Emily deserve.. He is only appeasing Venus and Mars. Although Arcite gets the glory and victory in battle that he asked for, it is a hollow victory. All the suffering he has gone through and all the work he has done to get Emily have become futile and meaningless. Palamon does get Emily and supposedly lives happily ever after. But what kind of love can this Venus provide? It could not be worth the long years of prison and loneliness. Arcite comments on how people pray for the wrong things after his imprisonment ended years before the battle.

Allas, why pleyne folk so in commune
On purveiaunce of God, or of Fortune,
That yeveth hem fal ofte in many gyse
Wel bettre than they kan hemself devyse?
Som Man desireth for to han richesse,
That cause is of his moerdre or greet siknesse;
And som man wolde out of his prisoun fayn,
That in his hous is of his meynee slayn.
Infinite harmes been in this mateere.
We eiten nat what thing we preyen heere:
(C.Y., K.T. 1251-1260)

This author feels that not only are Arcite and Palamon asking for the wrong thing in their prayers but that

they are also praying to the wrong gods.. Because of the nature of the gods that they pray to there can be no results based on compassion. The gods are cold and so must the life that Arcite and Palamon live under these gods be cold. Effectively, by choosing these gods, they have created them. The idea that men create gods that they want is as old as ancient Greece where the evilness of Jason created a god that would rescue Medea, murderer of her own children.³ Palamon, Arcite, and Emily have chosen these gods and must suffer the whims of them. Two sworn friends must hate each other and fight to the death for a love that will probably be as unpleasant as all the suffering to attain it.

Theseus, the only compassionate person in this tale, does not have the same gods although he does call them by the same names.

When Theseus listens to the plea of the women in the temple of "Clemence" and with "herte pitous" swears to avenge their wrong, it is Mars who "So shyneth in his white baner large,/ That alle the feeldes glyteren up and down" (C.T., K.T. 976-977)⁴

Theseus has been in the service of the Goddess of Love, but time has tempered him.. He can now look at love objectively and not kill because of its hot passion. (K.T. 1801-1814) Theseus has served Diana in the delight he takes in hunting. (K.T. 1679-1682) Although his gods have the same names as

³ Euripedes, Euripides 1, The Medea, (University of Chicago Press, 1955 line 1317

⁴ Wood, Country of the Stars, pp. 73-74

the gods of Arcite, Palamon, and Emily, because he is wiser he expects his gods to be more reasonable and they consequently are. His gods are reasonable, honourable, and worthy of his service.

Considerteh eek how that the harde stoon
Under oure feet, on which we trede and goon,
Yet wasteth it as it lyth by the weye.
The brode ryver somtyme waxeth drye;
The grete tounes se we wane and wende.
Thanne may ye se that al this thyng hath ende.
Of man and womman seen we wel also
That nedes, in oon of thisse termes two,
This is to seyn, in youthe or elles age,
He moot be deed, the kyng as shal a page;
Som in his bed, som in the depe see,
Som in the large feeld, as men may see;
Ther helpeth noght, al goth that ilke weye.
Thanne may I syn that al this thyng moot deye.
What maketh this but Juppiter, the kyng,
That is prince and cause of alle thyng,
Converynge al unto his propre welle
From which it is dirryved, sooth to telle?
And heer, agayns no creature on lyve,
Of no degree, availleth for to stryve.
Thanne it is wysdom, as it thynketh me,
To maken vertu of necessittee, . . .

(C.T.,K.T. 3021-3042)

Theseus also believes that the planets or gods determine absolutely what the events on earth will be. But while Palamon and Arcite cursed the gods and tried to escape their predicament, Theseus knows that attempts to change fate are useless. But he does believe that one may choose to follow his destiny with or without honour. Theseus knows that Palamon and Arcite would not stop fighting so he accepted the situation as it was fated but did his best to assure that the final outcome was reached in an honourable manner. The

only difference between the fight that Theseus stopped and the fight that he arranged was that the second was more formal, polite, and honourable. Theseus did attempt to stop the fight from continuing until death, but the fates could not be changed and Theseus could not even intervene to that extent.

But what was the opinion of the knight, "a worthy man", on the subject of predestination and astrological determinism? The knight was the most respected and honoured member of the company and Chaucer gives him a speech on fate that he had derived from Dante.

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over-al
The purveiaunce that God hath syn biforn
So strong is that, though the world had sworn
The contrarie of a thyng by ye or nay,
Yet somtyme it sahl fallen on a day
That falleth nat eft withinne a thousand yeer.
For certainly,oure appetites heer,
Be it of werre, or pees, or hate, or love,
Al is this reuled by the sighte above.

(C.T.,K.T. 1663-1672)

This one explicit statement by the narrator, the knight, about the relationship of destiny and human freedom is somewhat different. At first glance it appears that the knight endorses a kind of astral determinism, for he says that destiny can perform a thing that might not happen again for a thousand years; but a closer look reveals that on the one hand destiny is only the agent of God's providence, and on the other its designs are accomplished through the prompting

of human appetites and emotions. Man should be able to control his inclinations so that when the stars only influence man's inclinations he still has the ability to ignore the stars.

The opinions in the "Knight's Tale" on predestination range from unthinking acceptance of astrological determination, to the acceptance of astrological determination with the possibility of man having dignity allowed, and to the acceptance of astrological influence tempered by a Christian God. Although Arcite and Palamon are shown several times that they have drawn false conclusions, Chaucer never denies their views all validity. Although the gods of the Arena may be thought of as creations of Arcite, Palamon, and Emily, they do exist and they do act as Arcite, Palamon, and Emily could reasonably expect them to act. They are not at all concerned with order or dignity, and Saturn himself denies the possibility of anyone or thing stopping his wishes from coming true. None of the characters appears to have any faith in horoscopes or elections being able to predict exactly what will happen, but they all believe in at least some degree of astrological control of human destiny. From the worthiness and honour that Chaucer gave to each character it is obvious that the knight's and Theseus' opinions should have more weight than Palamon's or Arcite's opinion. But Chaucer has not revealed what he thought of the matter in this tale.

IV The Canon's Yeoman's Tale

The "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is a description of the practice of alchemy. As soon as the yeoman realizes that the pilgrims will not respond to his usual sales talk, he reveals that the canon borrows gold which he is unable to return because his experiments always fail. The canon overhears this and rides off in shame. The yeoman tells us of his seven years with his master. It has been seven years of dreary failure after failure. There is always the glimmer of hope ahead, but each experiment though it may be different from all the others before ends with the same explosion.. Not only has gold not been created, but all the gold borrowed for the experiment has been lost and there are now debts that can not be paid. The canon and his yeoman have lived in poverty among thieves and dress themselves in rags. After the yeoman gives a long elaborate, though rather confused account of the experiments, he relates how they all end.

" . . . ful afte it happeth so
The pot tobreketh, and farewell, al is go!
These metals been of so greet violence,
Oure walles mowe not make hem resistance."
(C.T., C.Y.T. 906-909)

A violent explosion and no gold seems to end every experiment. The gold and other ingredients, the pots, and sometimes the walls all go up in smoke.. The canon and his

assistants are left with nothing but debts and discolored faces. After describing his seven unrewarding years with the canon, the yeoman tells a tale of an other alchemist who is also a canon. This canon is a hundred times more crafty than his former master and has betrayed people many times. (C.T., C.Y.T. 1090-1092) The yeoman relates how the canon dupes a greedy priest into believing that he could turn quicksilver, a base metal, into true silver. Then he sells this method to the priest and disappears before the priest tries it himself. The yeoman retains some hope that there is a secret which can only be revealed by heavenly inspiration, but he has little faith in any alchemist.

There can be no doubt that Chaucer had an extensive knowledge of alchemy. The following passage is a description that the yeoman gives of his work.

Of tartare, alum glas, berme, wort, and argoillee,
Resalgar, and oure materes enbibyng,
And eek of oure materes encorporyng,
And of oure silver citrinacioun,
Oure cementyns and fermentacioun,
Oure yngottes, testes, and many mo.

(C.T., C.Y.T. 813-818)

This kind of detail is not something that one would have if one only had a casual interest in a subject. Professor Manly pointed out that this incredible detail and Chaucer's "profound and detailed mastery of the technical terms and processes of alchemy"¹ could not possibly have been the results

¹ John Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer, (Peter Smith; 1959) p.240

of casual reading or of research done for this tale.

Anyone familiar with the subject will testify that no single treatise or small number of treatises would have provided all the technical terms and ideas exploited by Chaucer in this tale and prologue. Such breadth and accuracy of knowledge as he displays could have been the fruit only of a profound and prolonged devotion to the subject—at least as long and serious as that which gave him his knowledge of astronomy and astrology.²

It is difficult to discover Chaucer's opinion of alchemy from this tale; however, it is instructive to study the opinions of the canon's yeoman. In the Knight's Tale, Palamon and Arcite are ruled by the kind of god that they expected to exist. What did the Canon's Yeoman expect of alchemy? His dream is to have a heavenly messenger come to him to reveal the secret way to make gold from base metals. He has no desire to learn the secrets of the universe. He would be satisfied if he could make gold even if he was told that this process could never be understood by humans.³ The Canon's Yeoman wants to find out the secret of alchemy so that he would be able to make money quickly and easily. If the yeoman would open his eyes he would see his dream before him. The canon in his tale has perfected a way to make money quickly and easily. But the yeoman condemns the canon for accomplishing exactly what he dreams of doing. The canon in the tale gets a supply of gold by playing on other people's

² Manly, Some New Light, p. 242

³ Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale", 1457

greed. The yeoman wants money quickly and with little work; however, he refuses to recognize the greed in himself and will never be able to find a situation in which he will be satisfied.

The yeoman is almost completely convinced that alchemy is a fake. He thinks all alchemists are thieves, although some may be more effective than others. But the canon's yeoman's opinion is not worth a fly because he has no understanding of the principles of alchemy.

Names of materials and implements of alchemy, technical terms for some of the processes, glimpses of unfortunate experiences in actual experiments, are all jumbled together by Chaucer in order to produce a picture of an ignorant helper with no clear understanding of the mysterious undertakings in which he has borne a part.⁴

The Yeoman has no appreciation for science and can only give a superficial description of his experiences.

Chaucer has made the yeoman show himself a fool, but Chaucer is also criticizing experimental science. He says it is difficult to discover any philosophical truth when one spends all one's time doing tedious, technical manipulations. This is especially valid when the immediate goal of science is monetary gain. This author believes that this criticism of science is still valid. The scientific method

⁴ Manly, Some New Light, pp. 238-239

can limit the truthes thah man can see. When man is looking for some specific thing he will often create it, if necessary, in order to find it. Palamon and Arcite were looking for a kind of god and found it.. The Canon's Yeoman was looking for a way to make money queickly and consequently could find nothing else.

But what remains a question in this author's mind is what was the yeoman's master like. He was not a fraud as was the canon in the yeoman's tale. He did not attempt to get rich quickly by fooling others. Perhaps his master is a true alchemist. He puts all his money and effort into his experiments. Although all his experiments have failed, he does not use any of the gold they borrow for his personal expences. He does not want to spend money on housing or clothing because that would mean that there would be less money for his experiment.

For whan a man hath over-greet a wit,
Ful oft hym happeth to mysusen it,
So dooth my lord, and that me greveth soore;
(C.T., C.Y.T. 648-650)

Is the yeoman complaining because his master uses his wit to design different experiments rather than to obtain money? But from the little that the canon says we can tell that the years of failure have affected him.

Whil this Yeman was thus in his talkyng.
This Chanoun drough hym neer and herd al thyng

Which that this Yeman spak, for suspecioun
Of mennes speche evere hadde this Chanoun.
For Catoun seith that he that gilty is
Demeth alle thyng be spoke of hym, ywis.
That was the cause he gan so ny hym drawe
To his Yeman, herknen al his sawe.
And thus he seyde unto his Yeman tho:
"Hoold thou thy pees, and spek no wordes mo,
For if thou do, thou shalt it deere aby.
Thou sclaudrest me heere in this compaigne,
And eek discoverest that thou sholdest hyde."
(C.T., C.Y.T. 684-696)

Is this the suspicioun and speech of a man who does not want these pilgrims to know that he never repays his loans or is this from a man who has spent his whole life trying to find the right formula and who is ashamed for having failed? This is an interesting possibility, but "he fledde away for verray sorwe and shame," (C.T., C.Y.T. 702) leaving this author wondering.

V. Chaucer's Attitude Towards ~~Medieval~~ Sciences

At one time there was a tendency to believe that the pilgrims opinions of astrology were Chaucer's own opinion;¹ however, studies on the subject have shown this not to be true. There are two many different views in the Canterbury Tales for Chaucer to be speaking through his characters. Furthermore, Chaucer purposely undercuts some of his characters making their opinions highly suspect.

Theodore Wedel, in Mediaeval Attitude Toward Astrology, points out that Chaucer was the first artist of his era to use astrology artistically. Before him astrology had not quite established itself and any reference in literature would have to include the author's opinion on this fairly controversial subject; consequently, writers were limited in the poetic ways that they could use astrology. But in Chaucer's time, astrology was widely accepted and understood. Chaucer could allude to it and use it in many ways without having to tediously report his exact views on the once-controversial subject. Because Chaucer is using astrology in an artistic sense it is much more difficult to determine his opinions. Professor Wedel points out that there is astrological determinism in the Knight's Tale, the Wife of Bath's horoscope, and the misfortune of Constance in the Man of Law's Tale.² In the Astrolabe, a technical treatise

¹ Chauncy Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars, p. 3.

² Chaucer, Canterbury Tales. Man of Law's Tale, l. 204.

by Chaucer on the use of an astronomical instrument, Chaucer says that he has no faith in horoscopes or in astrology whenever it attempts to make predictions.³ Professor Wedel feels that Chaucer should not be held to this statement and that this was just a disclaimer that was necessary because he was not in a position in which he could publically espouse astrological determination, especially because he was writing to his son Lowys. Professor Wedel believes that Chaucer was very close to believing in absolute astrological determinism, and, that although he apparently does leave God with the final control of all events, he does not make any allowance for man's free will.⁴ This author believes that the retraction in the Astrolabe must be given more emphasis than Professor Wedel does and that Chaucer's artistic use of astrology demands more than a mere reporting of what the characters think.

Professor Curry believes that characters speak only for themselves and that Chaucer has not expressed his opinion at all. Chaucer was primarily an artist not a philosopher or scientist. He feels that Chaucer stands outside of his creation and does not allow his own personal beliefs to enter his writing.

3

Chaucer, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,
 edited by Rev. Walter Skeet (Oxford, 1900)
 p. 192, l. 36.

4

Theodore Wedel, Mediaeval Attitude Toward Astrology, pp. 145-152.

Only a biographer would be interested in knowing what Chaucer's opinion on astrology was. But Professor Curry is interested in what kind of use that Chaucer makes of the scientific material. Curry feels that Chaucer created characters with personality and what they said and did was only a consequence of that personality. This author believes that the tone in which Chaucer uses astrology is very important and what Chaucer's opinion on astrology is determines what kinds of tone he is capable of using. It is also necessary to find what Chaucer's opinions are as part of the larger problem of determining what was the opinion of the ~~medieval~~ audience. Professor Curry is nonetheless able to make some very appropriate remarks on how an artist views his world.

Curiously enough your literary artist in any age, standing in the midst of contemporary influences and participating in the flux and flow of social, political, moral, and religious ideals, seems to possess a sort of dual personality. On the one hand, as a human being he is inescapably a part of the society in which he lives and...On the other hand, as artist -- particularly if he is endowed with a dramatic instinct -- he seems to withdraw himself from life and to view it objectively and from a distance as a kind of marvelous spectacle...⁶

Professor Wood disagrees with Professor Curry because he feels that in the middle ages there was a pattern of normal living values

5
Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, pp.

6
Curry, Mediaeval Sciences, p. xiv.

that were much more rigid and stationary than the present society which has almost no normative values. If the reader knows what the acceptable norm was in the middle ages, he can interpret the opinions of the characters as it compares to this normal value. Professor Wood gives much more weight to Chaucer's special declaration in the Astrolabie than Professor Wedel.

Natheles, thise ben observauncez
Of judicial matiere; in which my
spirit hath no feith, ne no knowinge
of hia horoscopum; for they seyn
that every signe is departed in 3 evene
parties by 10 degrees, and thilke
porcioun they clepe a face.

This section of the Astrolabie seems to indicate that Chaucer had less faith in astrology than most people of his time, although he still had some faith that the stars had some influence on the lives of men. Professor Wood feels that Chaucer should indicate his true feelings in a scientific work rather than a literary one in which there are other much more important things to do other than make the author's views known.⁷ This author feels that Professor Wedel's argument that Chaucer had to put this disclaimer in to make his work socially acceptable can not be true in the light of the fact that Professor Wedel himself points out, namely, that in Chaucer's time astrology was almost universally accepted and that Chaucer especially wrote of astrology without being controversial.

⁷ Wood, Country of the Stars, pp. 13-21.

⁸ Walter Skeat, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, (Oxford, 1900) p. 192

Professor Wood believes that Chaucer uses astrology more for its poetic effect than for a scientific reason. He supports his belief with examples from the middle ages of astrological symbols being used in non-astrological settings. The labours of man, a common fresco, used the signs of the zodiac to illustrate Christian principles.⁹ Professor Wood explains the astrological setting of the Knight's Tale as a poetic method to allow Arcite and Palamon to get the fate that they have asked for.¹⁰ This author finds Professor Wood's arguments compelling, but believes that Chaucer, who has shown his great interest in astrology and science by the amount that he uses it, is making a statement on man's relation to science and to the gods.

It is difficult to interpret the science that Chaucer uses because he uses it in many different ways. This author found that studying how the characters viewed the sciences led to some insight into how Chaucer was using the sciences.

Palamon and Arcite believe in absolute astrological determination. This is the system that they recognize and the system that they live in. But they must live the consequences of their beliefs. The gods that they pray to can not give them justice, mercy, or courtly love. They can not achieve happiness under these gods. The happiness that Palamon and Emily are said to possess could not exist under

⁹ Wood, Country of the Stars, p. 53

¹⁰ Wood, Country of the Stars, p. 69

their gods.

The Canon's Yeoman believes that alchemy is a way for him to get rich quickly; consequently, that is all that he can see in alchemy. He can have no understanding of the principles of science. He will never achieve happiness because he also believes in a set of morals which does not allow stealing. He will never be able to achieve his goal because he can not recognize it in the canon of his tale. The canon is making all the money that he dreams of making.

In both of these tales a person has limited what he sees in science and must live by his vision. There are often problems because his view of science is a limited one which may be self-contradictory or may clash with the views of others. Chaucer does not seem to endorse any of the views of his characters, but he does point out the consequences of the belief.

The Wife of Bath has a naive faith in astrology. She, consequently, has a simple faith in the good of her way of life. She can be happy because she does not impose many restraints on the world and on herself.

Chaucer uses the theme of the consequences of limited vision in fields other than science. The carpenter in the Miller's Tale is made a fool because he believed that a flood would come. The knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale is able to see beauty in ugliness and then does find beauty. The fate of Chauntecleer in the Nun's Priest Tale depends on how

he understands the science of dreams. The Pardoner bases his livelihood on his ability to make people believe something untrue.

Chaucer does not tell us what reality is. He does make it clear that different people see different realities, and that what one chooses not to see limits what one is capable of doing. Chaucer does not tell us whether he "believes" in science. He tells us that any belief can be limiting and that we should question and be aware of the danger of taking anything for granted.

But al thyng which that shyneth as the gold
Nis nat gold, as that I have herd it told;
Ne every appul that is fair at ye
Ne is nat good, what so men clappe or crye.
Right so, lo, fareth amonges us:
He that semeth the wiseste, by Jhesus!
Is moost fool, whan it cometh to the preef;
And he that semeth trewest is a theef.
That shul ye knowe, er that I fro yow webdem
By that I of my tale have maad an ende.

(C.T., C.Y.T. 962-971)

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