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“This carpenter wende he were in despeir”: Misinterpretation and the Nightmare in Chaucer’s
Miller’s Tale

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I. INTRODUCTION

John the Carpenter’s reaction to the fake stupefaction of “hende” Nicholas in The Miller’s Tale provides some of the poem’s more sardonic comic elements. Not only is John characterized as foolish for believing his lodger’s warnings about the upcoming deluge, but his response to seeing Nicholas sat silent and agape in his bedroom—casting as he does a “nyght-spel” to ward off elves, wights and evil spirits (I. ll. 3479-80)—presents a picture of John as a credulous and unlearned man, completely at odds to the type of scholarly sophistication that Nicholas (ostensibly) represents.¹ This of course is confirmed at the very end of the tale, where John’s credulity, his misinterpretation of Nicholas’ pained cry of “Water!”, results in his very literal downfall. If John is a figure of ridicule for both Nicholas (as a “sely jalous housbonde” [I. l. 3404]) and the pilgrim-Miller (as a stand-in for the pilgrim-Reeve or carpenters in general [I. l. 3143]), it is a sentiment that is also shared by modern readers. For most scholars, John’s comically unsophisticated nature is a given. Discussing the absurd devotion John agrees to utter as he sits in the kneading tub (“Now, Pater-noster, clom!” [I. l. 3638]), Gerald Morgan argues that the reduction of religious sincerity to folly is a theme that lies at the very heart of the Miller’s Tale.² In a similar way, John Block Friedman, Patrick J. Gallacher and Sonja Mayrhofer each make pejorative references to “superstition” when assessing John’s fears that Nicholas is being accosted by evil spirits.³ And yet, the extent to which John’s apotropaic strategies in ll. 3474-86 can actually be considered superstitious—irrational, heterodox—is an issue that has yet to be fully resolved. Henry Ansgar Kelly’s forensic examination of the licitness of John’s actions

certainly raises the bar, but this treatment, however laudable, neglects to consider the diagnosis of “despeir” (I. l. 3474) and the enactment of the night spell within the specific context of reacting to—or, more accurately, misinterpreting—the tenor of Nicholas’ performance.⁴ With Nicholas’ reputation as a commercial astrologer established from the outset (I. ll. 3193-98), John’s reactions are entirely logical, orthodox even, when confronted with the apparent fallout of an art that in certain moralistic circles was believed to involve traffic with demons. As will be discussed in more detail below, the protective procedures enacted by John and the identification of the attacking agents (“elves”, “wightes”, “nyghtes verye”) make much more sense within the milieu of contemporary medico-magical theory about the etiology of despair and the nocturnal assault (nightmare) tradition. It is an association that seems to have been current amongst early copiers of the Canterbury Tales: the otherwise obscure phrase “nyghtes verye” is pointedly rendered as “nyghtesmare” in Cambridge University Library MS Dd.4.24 text of the tale (ca. 1410).⁵

With this in mind, Peter Brown’s analysis of the theatrics of Nicholas’ bedroom performance can be taken one step further.⁶ John may well have been persuaded after the fact that observations of the moon predicted the date and time of the flood (I. ll. 3514-21), but his initial, instinctive response to Nicholas’ stupor speaks to a belief that something other than mechanical celestial forces governed access to “Goddess pryvetee”. Following an initial overview of the reputation of astrology in medieval moralistic thinking at the end of the fourteenth century, the remainder of this article will focus on the social and intertextual logic of John’s apotropaic actions.⁷ Indeed, it is important to note from the outset that the lived reality evoked by the night spell is not confined solely to the Miller’s Tale. References to such beliefs are interspersed throughout Fragments I and III of the Canterbury Tales. The allusions to nocturnal fiends (I. l. 4288), elves (III. ll. 864, 873), fairies (III, l. 872), incubi (III, l. 880), and the makeup of demonic bodies (III, ll.1462, 1507) in the Reeve’s Tale, the

Wife of Bath's Tale and the Friar's Tale provide a framework through which to analyze the relative cogency of John's fears. John may not have fully understood Nicholas' performance—a misreading that foreshadows events to come⁸—but he cannot be considered “superstitious” in the sense that his actions were irrational. Quite the contrary. Confronted with the possibility that Nicholas had been overcome by the evil spirits used in his art, the night spell represents a coherent technique for preventing further fallout from a melancholy-induced demonic attack.

II. “HENDE” NICHOLAS: ASTROLOGER OR NECROMANCER?

At the beginning of the Miller's Tale Chaucer paints a vivid picture of Nicholas' astrological predilections. A poor scholar living partly off the charity of friends (I. l. 3220), Nicholas supplements his income by performing certain services for the Oxford population:

Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford
A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord,
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scoler,
Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye
Was turned for to lerne astrologye,
And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns,
To demen by interrogaciouns,
If that men asked hym, in certein houres
Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures,
Or if men asked hym what sholde bifalle
Of every thyng; I may nat rekene hem alle (I. ll. 3187-98).

Through the use of “interrogations”—a form of judicial astrology whereby the answer was derived from observing the constellations at the time the question was asked—Nicholas is able to predict the weather and determine a client’s fortune.⁹ We learn later that the tools of his trade include a copy of Ptolemy’s famed Almagest,¹⁰ counting stones, an astrolabe, and a variety of unnamed books “grete and smale” (I. ll. 3208-10). Traditional scholarship has argued that the vain and commercially-minded Nicholas should be seen as the antithesis of the ideal Oxford student, exemplified by the lean and threadbare pilgrim-Clerk.¹¹ Whereas Nicholas neglects his studies and squanders his money on astrological equipment, perfumes, and musical instruments (“on which he made a-nyghtes melodie / so swetely that all the chambre rong” [I, l.3214-15]), the pilgrim-Clerk assiduously avoids such frivolities, eschewing “robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrie” in favour of books of “Aristotle and his philosophie” (I, ll. 295-96). Ptolemy (and all he represents) does not factor into the idealized portrait of the pilgrim-Clerk; astrology, it is implied, is not a discipline that a true man of letters should follow.

Divination through the observation of the stars has long occupied an ambiguous place in medieval theology. Probably on account that he himself has been an eager astrologer in his Manichean youth, Augustine is particularly vehement against the practice, arguing in De civitate Dei (ca. 426) that the ascription of causal power to the stars alone contravenes the divine will of God. Likewise, he uses the example of twins who experience different fortunes in life to refute the idea that the position of the stars at one’s birth—calculated through a horoscope—decided one’s fate. Such a deterministic understanding of the cosmos also served to undermine the very concept of free will. Quite unequivocally, Augustine describes astrology as being without any value (nihil valere) at all.¹² These statements build upon assertions previously made in De doctrina Christiana (ca. 397) where, as part of a wider

diatribe against magic and superstition, he explicitly argues that using the constellations to determine someone's character and predict the future is a great mistake (magna dementia est).¹³ Simply put, astrology is a blasphemous art that encourages consort with demons:

Hinc enim fiet ut occulto quodam iudicio divino cupidi malarum rerum homines tradantur illudendi et decipiendi pro meritis voluntatum suarum, illudentibus eos atque decipientibus praevaricatoribus angelis, quibus ista mundi pars infima secundum pulcherrimum ordinem rerum divinae providentiae lege subiecta est.¹⁴

[In this way it happens that, by some inscrutable divine plan, those who have a desire for evil things are handed over to be deluded and deceived according to what their own wills deserve. They are deluded and deceived by corrupt angels, to whom in God's most excellent scheme of things this lowest part of the world has been subjected by the decree of divine providence.]

Augustine's negative views on divination through the stars have formed the basis of studies in their own right and need not be recounted here.¹⁵ For the purposes of this article it suffices to say that his works formed the fundamental touchstone where later commentaries on astrology's licitness are concerned. Isidore of Seville (d. 636), for example, records that while astronomy (astronomiae) is mainly concerned with the charting of the mechanical motions of the universe, astrology (astrologiae) is a superstitious practice that involves augury through the stars.¹⁶ As knowledge accumulation in the West became much more formalized from the twelfth-century onwards though the influx of new scientific works from the Islamic world, the vague dividing line between licit astronomy and illicit astrology remained firmly in the thoughts of philosophers and exegetes. Discussing the various categories of divination, the

Parisian teacher Hugh of St Victor (d. 1141) included the practice of determining fate via the stars (horoscopica) as one of the sub-classifications of “vain mathematics” (mathematicam vanam) alongside soothsaying and augury.¹⁷ It was a topic that also occupied the interests of the English political theorist, John of Salisbury, who explored the moral and formal differences between mathematica doctrinalis (licit knowledge; astronomy) and mathesis reprobatae (illicit divination; astrology) in book 2, chapter nineteen of the Policraticus (ca. 1159).¹⁸ Although there is much in common between astronomy and astrology, the latter, he says pointedly, “exceeds the bounds of reason” (sobrietatis mensuram excedit).¹⁹ The likening of divination to irrationality is an argument that later employed by the French philosopher and strident critic of astrology, Nicholas of Oresme (d. 1382), who notes in Livre de divinacion that (false) visions can occur when adherents of occult practices have been “put out of [their] senses by [their] art”.²⁰ This equivalence was, of course, hardly new, with Plato noting the etymological link between prophecy (mantike) and madness (manike) as early as the Pheadrus (370 BCE).²¹ The influence of such beliefs on the narratology of the Miller’s Tale cannot be overlooked. John’s musings that his lodger had lost his mind (“This man is falle, with his astromye / In some woodnesse” [I, ll.3451-52]) is not some idle denigration of Nicholas’ curiosity about the stars, a (metatextual) criticism of unproductive labor that echoes the confessional against alchemy in The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale (VIII, ll. 898-971),²² but a diagnosis based on centuries of popular polemic.²³

Even defenders of astrology, such as the pseudonymous author of the highly influential Speculum Astronomiae (ca. 1277), felt the need to qualify their art by explaining what it was not. Written, it has been hypothesized, as a response to the 1277 Condemnations of Paris, which sought to purge the teaching of heretical material—including astrology—from the Parisian schools, the Speculum Astronomiae begins with a disclaimer as to its similarities to necromancy, or black magic:

Quoniam enim plures ante dictorum librorum necromantiam palliant,
professionem astronomiae mentientes, libros nobiles de eadem fetere fecerunt
apud bonos, et graves et abominabiles reddiderunt.²⁴

(For, since many of the previously mentioned books by pretending to be
concerned with astrology disguise necromancy, they cause noble books written on
the same subject [astrology] to be contaminated in the eyes of good men, and
render them offensive and abominable.)

The author, who may have been the famed Dominican theologian Albertus Magnus, then proceeds with an overview of the various sub-categories of astrology, including “interrogations” (chapters 9, 14) and “elections” (chapter 10, 15). As intimated above, interrogations were a form of judicial astrology that involved using the situation of the stars at the client’s nativity (i.e., their horoscope), and that of the day and time of the interrogation, to answer questions about future events. In the parlance of astrology, interrogations thus had a radical intention (*intentione radicali*).²⁵ In a similar way, elections involved “choos[ing] the favourable hour for beginning any project for one whose nativity is known”.²⁶ Generally, interrogations were considered more dubious than elections: article 167 of the 1277 Paris Condemnations, for example, specifically mentions the error of practicing *interrogationes*. However, the author of the *Speculum Astronomiae* falls back on the traditional defense that since such practices only dealt with *possible* outcomes, they could not be considered deterministic. As such, judicial astrology did not contravene the idea of free will. As elaborated upon by later apologists such as Pierre d’Ailly (d. 1420), the power of the stars influenced the workings of the body, not the soul, and did not bind anyone to a single

possible outcome.²⁷ In what will have a bearing on our later discussion of “hende” Nicholas, only a fraudulent or demonically compromised astrologer ever dealt in absolutes when discussing the future.

The contamination of astrology with necromancy is a topic to which the author of the Speculum Astronomie returns in chapters 11, 16 and 17. Here, he acknowledges that licit astrological and illicit necromantic images are similar in construct and intention (to harness the power of the celestial rays), but that necromantic rituals also involved more arcane procedures, such as the creation of suffumigations and the invocation of the names of demons.²⁸ The question as to whether astrologers actually harnessed animate demonic power in their predictions of future events remained a topic of contention throughout the fourteenth century. Writing in response to the latent astrological interests of his friend and master Pierre d’Ailly, Jean Gerson, the Chancellor of the University of Paris (d. 1420), composed numerous rebuttals against the astrological arts as part of his wider attempts to purge the universal Church of what he deemed irregular and divergent practice.²⁹ In De erroribus circa artem magicam et articulis reprobatis, for example, Gerson expresses his disdain for those who display a “lustful curiosity” (curiositatem libidinosam) for trying to ascertain future events. Such people, he says, will surely become the victims of demons.³⁰

Gerson of course was not the only late medieval writer devoted to exposing the material and spiritual fraud of judicial astrology. Nicholas Oresme, noted above, and Henry of Langenstein (d.1397) were equally strident critics.³¹ Although Oresme and Langenstein’s anti-astrology tracts did not enjoy wide circulation, their arguments were certainly borne out of wider contemporary concerns about the trusting the stars rather than God. Chaucer himself echoes this pessimistic view of astrology in the Franklin’s Tale. When the brother of lovelorn Aurelius remembers that while studying at Orleans a fellow student had in his possession a volume of “magyk natureel” (V. l.1125), he confides in Aurelius that such a book may

contain knowledge of how to create illusions, thus solving the quandary of Dorigen's flippant vow to marry Aurelius should he remove all the rocks from the Brittany coast. On describing the book, which contained "pak muchel of the operaciouns / Touchynge the eighte and twenty mansiouns / That longen to the moone" (V. ll. 1129-31a), the Franklin—whether in-character or as Chaucer's mouthpiece—makes the following interjection:

... and swich folye

As in oure dayes is nat worth a flye—

For hooly chirches feith in oure bileve

Ne suffreth noon illusioun us to greve. (V. ll. 1131b-34).

Although it appears that the Clerk utilizes natural magic rather than conjuring spirits as part of his astrological practices, the fact that he greets Aurelius and his brother with the ominous statement that he knew "the cause of [their] comyng" (V. l. 1176) and entertains them with fantastical illusions at supper, clouds the reader's understanding as to what type of power is at play in order to make such unerringly an accurate prediction and create the "sight[e]s merveillous" (V. l. 1206). Such ambiguity is compounded by the Clerk being described equally as a "tregetours" (trickster) "magicien" and "philosophre" (V. ll. 1141, 1184, 1585).

³² Either way, in lines 1261-96 we are provided with a detailed description of the Clerk of Orleans in his element. From using his "Tolletanes" (Toledan Tables) to predict the movements and motions of the planets relative to the fixed stars, to ascertaining the "firste mansioun" of the moon, the Clerk gives a virtuoso performance of his craft, using his "magik" to make it seem as though the rocks had disappeared.³³ Even here, the Franklin (or Chaucer?) cannot resist editorializing that the Clerk knew other "observaunces / for swiche illusiouns and swiche meschaunces" (V. ll. 1291b-92), casting further doubt as to how he

actually achieved his result: was it the successful calculation of an unusually high tide using mathematical virtuosity, or secret traffic with demons to obfuscate the senses?³⁴

Beyond theological polemics and literary texts, the implication that astrologers practiced necromancy is something that can also be discerned in the wider historical record. The mathematician and Arabic-Latin translator Michael Scot (d. 1236) enjoyed much contemporary fame as an astrologer. Beginning his career in the (presumed) hotbed of necromantic activity that was Toledo before joining the retinue of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (ca. mid 1220s),³⁵ Scot's reputation was sealed with the publication of his trilogy of original works: the Liber introductorius, Liber particularis, and the Physionomia (ca. 1232). The Liber introductorius, especially, was concerned exclusively with the art of astrological computation and divination. With this introductory text betraying Scot's understanding (if not moral acceptance) of how to use demons to divine the future—mentioning, for example, that astrolabes could be used to summon evil spirits and that spirits of the air could be conjured through knowledge of the stars—it is not surprising that on Scot's death rumors abounded as to the source of his powers.³⁶ The declaration made by Henry of Avranches in a poem to Frederick II that “the announcer of fate had succumbed to fate” (l. 84) may not imply that Scot was in league with demons per se, but it does highlight his unusual competency as an “augur” and “scrutinizer of the stars” (ll. 57-58).³⁷ For some, perhaps too unusual. The inclusion of Scot in the fourth bolgia of the eighth circle of hell in Dante's Inferno (Canto XX, ll. 115-17), a place reserved for sorcerers and astrologers, shows quite explicitly the negative attitudes that could be attached to astrologers who were just a little too good at their job—in Chaucerian terms, a little too adept at peering into “Goddes pryvetee”. The circulation of necromantic texts in Scot's name in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries only confirms the belief that such unerring accuracy could only have been accomplished through diabolical means.³⁸

While Scot would likely have been horrified by his post-mortem reputation as a magician, this is not to say that other, less cautious astrologers did not flaunt their reliance on demons. In a commentary on Johannes de Sacrobosco's influential astronomical text De sphaera mundi (ca. 1230s), the Italian polymath Cecco d'Ascoli (d. 1327) argued that the terrestrial and celestial spheres were in fact governed by evil spirits.³⁹ In a nod to a similar argument made in the Speculum astronomiae, he also notes that astrological images could be constructed to allow communication with demons.⁴⁰ With such heretical views as these, it is not surprising that d'Ascoli was condemned by the Inquisition and burnt at the stake, even if the exact details of the indictment are lost to time.

Not all court proceedings against astrologers were as vague as the d'Ascoli affair. In one of the more famous historical examples dating to 1441, the astrologer and Oxford native Roger Bolingbroke, along with Thomas Southwell, John Hume, Margery Jourdemayne ("The Witch of Eye") and Eleanor Cobham, the Duchess of Gloucester, were accused of performing treasonous black magic against Henry VI. The crime originated in a horoscope purportedly drawn up by Bolingbroke and Southwell that predicted the king's early death.⁴¹ Following his arrest and public display at St. Paul's cross, where he was forced to renounce his "craft of nygromancie", Bolingbroke was found guilty and hung, drawn, and quartered. For their part in the affair, Jourdemayne was burnt at the stake and Southwell died in prison a day before his scheduled execution, with Hume being pardoned and Eleanor Cobham forced to undertake public penance. Echoing John Ashenden's assertion (ca. 1350) "nigromancy [is] sometimes confused with astronomy",⁴² and Roger Bacon's complaint (ca. 1267) that those who work with licit astrological images are almost always denounced as magicians,⁴³ the Bolingbroke plot is a perfect example of the lack of true demarcation between the two disciplines in the popular mindset. For most critics, the Venn diagram was almost a circle.

To return to the Miller's Tale, the above overview of the moral status of astrology adds extra nuance to the portrait of "hende" Nicholas. Given Oxford's reputation as a seat of astrological learning, with the above-mentioned John Ashenden (d. 1368), Walter of Evesham (d. 1330) and Simon Bredon (d. 1372) forming some of the more well-known experts in the field, Nicholas is well placed to follow in his illustrious forebearers' footsteps.⁴⁴ In this respect his desire "to lerne astrologye" as an Oxford student can hardly be considered unorthodox. Neither can his forays into local, commercial astrology through the casting of "interrogaciouns" be seen as unusual. Although, as noted by Sophie Page, written evidence for the working habits of low-level astrologers in England is scarce, especially in the fourteenth century, the surviving notebook of Londoner Richard Trewythian (BL MS Sloane 428, ca. 1455) provides a tantalizing analogue to the type of services Nicholas himself offered.⁴⁵ According to his notes Trewythian also conducted such mundane tasks for clients as predicting the weather, taking personal horoscopes, and performing interrogations (see against MT, II, ll. 3196-97). However, unlike Nicholas, Trewythian also used his knowledge to predict the most astrologically advantageous time for medical treatments.⁴⁶

In light of the above, the description of Nicholas' astrological equipment also needs re-evaluation. Much like the Toledan Tables employed by the Clerk of Orleans in the Franklin's Tale, Ptolemy's Almagest was a foundational text for computing the motions and movements of the stars; more astronomy than astrology. By itself, anyone who owned a copy of the Almagest could hardly be accused of necromancy. Read against the allusive reference to "bookes grete and smale" (I. l. 3208), however, and doubts start to arise. The fact that these "bookes" are unnamed is more telling than has previously been given credit. Here, Chaucer seems to be making a lexical distinction between a named (licit) volume and a collection of unnamed (perhaps illicit) textbooks, between a key part of the scientific curriculum and texts that needed to be kept secret so as not to incite the interests of the religious authorities. As

Richard Kieckhefer famously argued, the “clerical underworld” of the school and university system was rife with practitioners of dubious magic, including necromancy.⁴⁷ Unnamed books containing powerful rites and spells, drawing from the same wellspring of cosmological knowledge as works of judicial astrology, were highly prized by scholars and students seeking advancement and extra income in a saturated job market.⁴⁸ While most magical works circulated anonymously without a title—a bricolage of spells, curses, and charms that makes it almost impossible to trace an exact textual history—some of the more prominent magical texts were indeed named. The Ars Notoria and Liber Juratus Honorii (both ca. 1200s), two works of ceremonial magic that were known to have circulated in fourteenth-century England, are precisely the type of handbooks that so troubled the author of the Speculum astronomiae: dubious texts that contaminated a pure, orthodox science with devotions to dangerous and animate forces.⁴⁹

The reference to “bookes grete and smale” occurs in a passage that includes descriptions of visual, olfactory, and aural ostentation. Nicholas’ room is adorned with an expensive red woolen cloth and sweet-smelling herbs. It is a place where he nightly “made melodie” on his psalter (I. ll. 3205-7; 3212-13). Such frivolities may also have extended to Nicholas’ reading habits. Unnamed, potentially illicit manuscripts were precisely the type of “curious” text that did indeed circulate amongst medieval student populations, as attested by the Franklin’s Tale (V. l. 1120). If astrolabes were used in necromantic rites as Michael Scot suggests, then the cumulative evidence in these passages forces the reader to recognize from the outset that Nicholas was no pilgrim Clerk. He is as far from the ideal as can be. Framed by the enduring popular belief that astrology and necromancy were one and the same,⁵⁰ Nicholas’ poor scholarly habits force John to respond to his lodger’s “wyle” as only a pious churchgoer knew how. Nicholas is scolded not just for unlocking “Goddess pryvetee” and the hidden knowledge contained therein (I. ll. 3454, 3463), but for how he was presumed to have

gone about it. Performing a nyght-spel was the only possible recourse when there were demons in the house.

III. PERFORMING AND CURING THE NIGHTMARE: INTERPRETING NICHOLAS' "WYLE"

Nicholas and Alisoun hatch their adulterous scheme on a Saturday while John is visiting nearby Osney, likely on business (I. l. 3400). The reader is conspicuously kept in the dark as to the details of their plan. Although we are told that two days' worth of supplies are to be brought to Nicholas' room and that Alisoun should feign ignorance as to his whereabouts, we are not made privy to the rules of the game. Nor, indeed, are we told how Nicholas intends to use his clerical learning to his and Alisoun's advantage (I. ll. 3299-3300, 3405).⁵¹ Ironically the reader is unable to pry into Nicholas' own "privetee". It is only on the Sunday evening that John finally realizes something is amiss. Worried that his lodger might be dead, John commands his young servant Robin to go up to Nicholas' room to "look how it is" (I. l. 3433).⁵² Hearing no response after calling and knocking, Robin proceeds to peer into a cat hole near the bottom of the door:

And at that hole he [Robin] looked in ful depe,

And at the laste he hadde of hym a sight.

This Nicholas sat evere capyng upright,

As he had kiked on the newe moone.

Adoun he gooth, and tolde his maister soone

In what array he saugh this ilke man (I. ll. 3442-47).

This, of course, is exactly what Nicholas intended. Drawing upon his knowledge of the stars, his performance has been precisely calibrated to correspond the rising of the new moon, that is, when the moon and sun are in conjunction and night is at its darkest. In this way, he offers a wholly theatric yet suitably portentous one week countdown to the prophesized flood (“That now a Monday next, at quarter nyght / Shal falle a reyn” [I. ll. 3516-17a]).⁵³ Given Nicholas’ attested skill in judicial astrology—he would not have a lengthy client list otherwise—his later statement to John that he divined the future by “look[ing] in the moone bright” (I. l. 3515, my italics) is less a metatextual criticism of his astrological inexpertise, an inability to tell a full moon from a new moon, and more, I suspect, a joke relating to his mark’s ignorance of the technicalities of lunar prognostication.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is an ignorance of the mechanics of astrology, a misunderstanding of how the future is divined, that governs John’s reaction to what Robin has to say:

This carpenter to blessen hym bigan,
And seyde, “Help us, Seinte Frydeswyde!
A man woot litel what hym shal bityde.
This man is falle, with his astromye,
In some woodnesse or in som agonye.
I thoghte ay wel how that it sholde be!
Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee
Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man
That noght but oonly his bileve kan!” (I. ll. 3448-56)

There are many layers of meaning to unpack here. As mentioned above, the belief that the practice of astrology caused madness is a commonplace criticism, expressed most notably by

Chaucer's contemporary, Nicholas of Oresme. Astronomy's designation as a false and spiritually barren art is of course similar to how alchemy is portrayed in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Just like the confessional of the hapless Canon's Yeoman, which details the depths to which alchemists plummet in their futile efforts to turn base metals into gold ("but to hir purpos shul they nevere atteyne" [VIII. l. 1399]), so too the term "woodnesse" in the Miller's Tale line 3452 suggests a similarly frenzied and unproductive obsession on the part of Nicholas.⁵⁵ The alchemist and astrologer are each frantically driven by curiosity yet both are spiritually blind. Indeed, the Yeoman's declaration that the pursuit of alchemy turns mirth to sorrow, bleeds practitioners of their wealth, and that Christ himself does not wish the secrets of the Philosopher's Stone to be revealed ("wol nat that it discovered bee" [VIII. l. 1468]) finds a ready echo in John's own concerns about the licitness of astrology and dangers the pulling back of the veil of the everyday sensory universe. The Yeoman's final warning that alchemists "blondreth forth and peril casteth noon" (VIII. l. 1414) could easily have come from the mouth of John. For John and the reformed Yeoman, it is better to be a lewd man and follow the precepts of Romans 11:20—*noli altum sapere, sed time*, "be not highminded, but fear"—rather than to be a Nicholas or Canon and pursue one's curiosity beyond the rational extreme.⁵⁶

The Canon's Yeoman's statement that the "feend" walks with the alchemist unseen (VIII. ll. 916-17) applies just as well to the practice of other fallen crafts, astrology included. Indeed, it is significant that out of all the holy names John chooses to invoke, he makes his plea to Frideswide (d. 727), venerated abbess and patron saint of Oxford. The supposed daughter of King Didan of Oxford, Frideswide was particularly known for her ability to cast out demons.⁵⁷ In both the Latin and Middle English recensions of the Life of St. Frideswide—The shorter English Life based on Latin Life A (ca. 1100-30) and the longer English Life based on the expanded Latin Life B (ca. 1140-70)—particular emphasis is given

to the episode in which the devil appears to Frideswide in the guise of Christ and tries to make her to pay homage to his glory.⁵⁸ Frideswide, however, is not swayed by the devil's ruse. While the shorter Life of St. Frideswide gives only a brief notice of the outcome of the encounter ("Fare fram me, thou foule fende with thyn byheste! / Heo made the croys, and he fley away with noyse and grete cheste" [ll. 35-36]), the longer account makes pointed mention of Frideswide's ability to see beyond the devil's surface form ("Hire inwit hire sede sone that it the devel was" [l. 42]). Angry at being foiled, the devil entices King Algar of Mercia to take the virgin Frideswide as his unwilling wife, driving the king insane in the process of his temptations ("That ar the dede were ido he was wel ny wod" [l. 62]). Not only do these episodes reflect contemporary concerns about discretio spirituum and the fear that angelic or holy visitors were actually demons in disguise,⁵⁹ a contrast is also being made between the madness demonstrated by Nicholas (and Algar) and Frideswide's God-given sense of reason. Whether this connection is being made in character by John, who was likely familiar with Frideswide's story, or metatextually by Chaucer, there was no better saint to help assuage the demonic aggravation of the senses. Assuming it was always Nicholas' intention to beguile John with his astrological expertise—material learnt while studying (I. l. 3299)—he appears to have misjudged his audience ever so slightly. John does not read a mechanical explanation into Robin's words. By his reckoning his lodger has simply become thrall to the devil.

John's diagnosis of demonic incursion is confirmed when he sees Nicholas' frozen and agape form with his own eyes, albeit slightly modifying his initial, unseen diagnosis of "woodnesse" (that is, the choleric form of madness). Unhasping the door, he immediately and instinctively falls into action:

This carpenter wende he were in despeir,

And hente hym by the sholdres myghtily,
And shook hym harde, and cride spitously,
“What! Nicholay! What, how! What, looke adoun!
Awak, and thenk on Cristes passioun!
I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes.”
Therwith the nyght-spel seyde he anon-rightes
On foure halves of the hous aboute,
And on the thresshold of the dore withoute:
“Jhesu Crist and Seinte Benedight,
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,
For nyghtes verye, the white pater-noster!
Where wentestow, Seinte Petres soster?” (I. ll. 3474-86)

Previous interrogations of this scene by Henry Ansgar Kelly have rightly noted that the apotropaic provisions taken by John may well have caused the church authorities to raise an eyebrow or two, but they do not veer completely into unorthodoxy.⁶⁰ Kelly correctly surmises that John uses all the tools at his immediate disposal to protect Nicholas from an attack by nightmare-creatures—teased by the in-text reference to “elf” (to be discussed shortly) and confirmed by the Cambridge MS. Dd.4.24 emendation of “night verie” (night spirits) to the more typologically concrete “night-mare”. Even so, Kelly does not fully elucidate how the diagnosis of despair feeds into the performance of the night spell, content only to mention that the instruction to “think on Cristes passioun” was often said to those in danger of dying. The imploration to meditate on the Passion was a commonly used remedy to help those stricken by despair, especially on the deathbed.⁶¹ The linking of lines 3474 and 3478 to the earlier comment made by John (“God shilde that he deyde sodeynly!” [I. l. 3427]) and,

metatextually, to the emergence of ars moriendi death literature, has long enjoyed scholarly consensus.⁶² But even this reading does not take into account the specific, medicalized connotations of despair, and how this relates to the interpretation of Nicholas' performance as a form of nightmare.

In modern medical parlance, nightmares occur when REM sleep, characterized by the suppression of muscle activity (sleep paralysis) and the experience of vivid dreams, intrudes into the period immediately preceding sleep and the onset of wakefulness. Partially awake, unable to move yet still experiencing strange and often terrifying hallucinations, sufferers often cohere their experiences into the belief that they are being choked, strangled, or pressed in their beds by unknown, usually supernatural assailants. Although nightmares are a universal dysfunction of the human body, the interpretation of the experience is of course wholly contingent on the cultural context to which the sufferer belongs.⁶³ From the Greek ephaltes to the Arabic kabuus, from the Japanese kanashibari to the northern European mara and "old hag", societies from across the globe have given name (and sometimes agency) to the phenomenon. Medieval nightmare sufferers were no exception. As the evidence from contemporary medical handbooks and historiographies attests, a fluid interpretive spectrum existed between those who adhered to natural diagnoses on one hand and those who favored supernatural explanations on the other. Not only were there disputes amongst learned physicians as to the exact etiology of the nightmare (acute head disease; chronic humoral imbalance, and more), but for the credulous, too, there was little agreement as to what type of entity actually caused a nocturnal assault: was it a demon (incubus), hag (vetula), or a restless ghost? The answer, of course, was wholly dependent on the idiosyncratic expectations of the sufferer and observer.⁶⁴ Given the essential holism of the medieval Christological worldview—the interrelation between the macro- and microcosm and the ontological uncertainty that entailed—it was impossible to truly disentangle the supernatural (and

preternatural) from the natural and vice versa. This is why John's presumption that Nicholas had succumbed to despair is so important for understanding the logic of his subsequent actions.

In the framework of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine, a healthy body was a balanced body. The correct admixture of the four bodily humors—blood (hot and wet), phlegm (cold and wet), yellow bile (hot and dry), and black bile (cold and dry)—caused good health, while humoral imbalance led to disease and ill-health.⁶⁵ Although it is not the intention here to delve deep into the minutiae of medieval medical theory, it suffices to say that the feeling of despair was believed to result from an excess of cold, melancholic humors (black bile), an imbalance that could occur “naturally” through the mismanagement of one's bodily regimen or “supernaturally” via the manipulation of the humors by evil spirits.⁶⁶ Often it was seen as a combination of the two. For churchman such as William of Auvergne (d. 1249), Vincent of Beauvais (d. 1264) and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), living a sinful, immoderate life engendered the required physiological conditions—a conceptually open body—that allowed demons to enter and cause further physical and emotional damage, incursions that could imbalance the body's humoral makeup to such an extent that the melancholic sufferer was compelled to take their own life.⁶⁷ But regardless of whether the instigating factor was environmental or demonic, physicians and moralists tended to agree that on physiological level despair was caused by an overabundance of black bile. A contemporary reader of the Miller's Tale, even one with only a modicum of medical knowledge, would likely be aware that melancholy was considered one of the main causes for the feeling of pressure during sleep.⁶⁸ According to this belief, which was based on the “digestive” theory of sleep exemplified by Aristotle's *De somno et vigilia*,⁶⁹ poor digestion and/or bad sleeping habits led to the retention of the coarse, melancholic humors that would have otherwise have been refined in the heat of the stomach. In the normal processes of sleep,

the refined vapors rose to the head, cooled, restricted the passage of the spirits, and then descended back down to the rest of the body, drawing further heat from the brain and leading to unconsciousness. Dreams were caused by the impact of the vapors on the brain's imaginative apparatus. In cases where full digestion did not occur, the cold and heavy vapors retained by the body caused an undue feeling of pressure, clogged the spirits, and led to the creation of more turbulent, violent dream images—the precise symptoms of the nightmare.

For populaces not schooled in humoral theory, the nightmare experience was not so easily reducible to a simple medical explanation. As remarked upon by Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) in his discussion of the medical qualities of the mineral gagate, fantasmata caused by melancholic complaints were often interpreted by local populations as demons.⁷⁰ Similarly, the physician Bernard of Gordon (d. 1330) lamented the fact that his patients still believed they were being suffocated in their beds by the hag (vetula) when, in fact, their incubi experiences were likely due digestive problems and/or corrupted humors impacting on the heart or brain.⁷¹ Chaucer was of course highly attuned to the satiric value of such tensions. The denigration of the pretensions of Symkyn and his “dame” wife in the Reeve’s Tale are compounded by her reaction to Symkyn falling on top of her during the culmination of the bed-swapping farce. Her cry of “Awak, Symond! The feend is on me falle! / Myn herte is broken; help! I nam but deed!” (I. ll. 4288-89) speaks to an instinctive fear of being molested and killed by an incubus demon, forming a pointed counterpoint to John the Carpenter’s own nightmare fears and reflective of the type of vulgarity (in its widest sense) that so irritated Bernard of Gordon and other such learned physicians.⁷² In a similar manner to John the Carpenter, Symkyn’s wife also misinterprets her sensory experience. Just as John petitions St. Frideswide and recites the nyght-spel, so Symkyn’s wife also invokes protection from two separate sources: the “hooly croys of Bromeholm” and the biblical passage Luke 23:46 (“In manus tuas! Lord, to thee I calle!” [I. ll. 4286-87]).⁷³ Not only was Luke 23:46 recited as a

form of protection during sleep—like the “nyght-spel,” a perfect prayer to say against nightmares—but the relic to which she alludes, the fragment of the True Cross at Bromholm Priory, was said by the chronicler Roger of Wendover to be particularly good against demons (obsessi a daemonibus liberantur), fortified the body against despair (infirmus... incolumis et sanus recedit) and restored the dead to life (mortuis vita... restituitur).⁷⁴ Much as we have seen previously with John, Symkyn’s wife reacts to the presumed fiend in her midst in a credulous yet supremely rational way.

To return, then, to the Miller’s Tale: the diagnosis of “despeir” may on the surface seem like a generic response to Nicholas’ plight, but an awareness of despair’s humoral connotations confirms that John is not just scared of demons—demons mishandled during an astrological experiment gone awry—but more specifically pressing demons, incubi, the presence of which are felt most keenly by melancholics. As will be discussed below, the reference to elves, hitherto seen as a function of John’s rusticity, simply confirm this diagnosis.

IV. ELVES, INCUBI, AND THE TYPOLOGY OF NIGHTMARE-DEMONS

Although from an orthodox standpoint “feend” is a much less ambiguous term than “elf” (or, indeed, “wight”),⁷⁵ elves have long been a part of northern European folklore. Indeed, there was a pronounced typological, conceptual, and linguistic overlap between incubi, demons, elves and fairies in popular medieval English discourse.⁷⁶ The elf as a manifestation of the medical nightmare finds one of its earliest incarnations in Old English medical literature. The tenth-century compilation known today as Bald’s Leechbook (BL MS. Royal 12, D xvii, comprising Leechbooks I and II, and a separate Leechbook III), the more magically-inclined Lacnunga (BL MS. Harley 585), and the vernacular translations of the Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius, each contain numerous remedies against the mare and nihtgengum (“night-walker”,

often translated by scholars as “nightmare”).⁷⁷ But out of all the remedies for elf diseases and elf shot in the medieval medical oeuvre, the close causal connection between the elf and sleep dysfunction can be seen most clearly in Leechbook III. Here, instructions are given to create a salve (sealfe) against elf-kind (ælfcynne), night-walkers/nightmares (nihtgengan), and “the people with whom the Devil has intercourse” (þam 7 mannum þe deofol mid hæmð).⁷⁸ The fact that those afflicted by elves, night-walkers, and incubi warranted the same protective strategies presupposes that the somatic symptoms of being harassed by ælfcynne and night-walkers were the same as those for the more orthodox sexual pressing demon.⁷⁹ The Leechbook II instructions to mix jet shavings into wine to protect against the ælfe and uncupum sidsan (strange visitors) may be slightly more oblique with regards to its connection to the nightmare, but the recognition that gagate, as a choleric substance, was a key ingredient in lapidary traditions for neutralizing melancholic complaints lends credence to the theory that this remedy, too, was used to prevent physical attacks during sleep.⁸⁰

By the later Middle Ages, the English elf had become synonymous with the French fée or fairy, both of which were used as vernacular transliterations of the Latin term incubus. A further example of this typological overlap can be discerned in the textual traditions surrounding Merlin’s conception, first recorded in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum Britanniae (ca. 1136). After hearing that Merlin’s mother—a nun—had been intimate with a man who used to appear and disappear in her cell at will, Maugantius, King Vortigern’s mage, theorizes that she had been visited by an incubus, a type of entity known to sleep with women.⁸¹ While the majority of the extant versions of Wace’s vernacular Roman de Brut (ca. 1155) tend to retain Geoffrey’s appellation for pressing demons (incubi demones unt non [l. 7445]),⁸² some, like Durham Cathedral, MS C.iv.27.1 (ca. 1200s) substitute incubus for fairy (“Faez sunt, car formes faees / Prenent suvent si devienent fees”).⁸³ And as Richard Firth Green further illustrates, the conceptual circle is completed by the thirteenth-century

chronicler, Robert of Gloucester (fl. ca. 1260-1300), whose own retelling of the Merlin story has Vortigenrn's "clerkes" remark that these airy, shape-shifting creatures were called "elves" by common people ("wiȝtes... þat men clupeþ eluene").⁸⁴ For its part, Layamon's Early Middle English Brut (ca. 1216) retains the Latin term "incubii demones" (l. 7877) but adds the pointed observation that such entities also "oppress" (swencheð [l. 7879]).

Chaucer's own writings also reflect the popular synonymy between the elf, fairy, and incubus. Surprisingly, no explicit mention of incubus beliefs can be found in the famed demonological disquisition between the Summoner and the devil-yeoman in the Friar's Tale. Responding his interlocutor's enquires, the disguised fiend states only that he and his kin are able to harass the body and soul at God's discretion, making reference to the woes inflicted upon Job but giving no firm details as to any other types of torment (III. ll. 1489-96).⁸⁵ Much more insight is given in the Wife of Bath's Tale. In the preamble to her romance, set in the "olde dayes" (III. l. 857) of King Arthur, the Wife laments that once where fairies and elves used to roam, there now only wanders the licentious begging friar:

This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.

For ther as wont to walken was an elf

Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself...

Wommen may go saufly up and down.

In every bussh or under every tree

Ther is noon oother incubus but he,

And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour. (III. ll.872-74, 878-81).

Much scholarship has been conducted on the likening of friars to sexually-charged incubi and it need not be reiterated here.⁸⁶ But beyond the satire of "lymytours" being altogether

demonic in their lust—an appropriate framing device for a story that goes on to describe a horrifying sexual transgression by one of Arthur’s knights⁸⁷—the chain of associations from incubus to fairy to elf ensures that similar connotations of physical violence become attached to these latter two creature-types. This is not to suggest there is an explicitly sexual component to the elf reference in the Miller’s Tale, only that John reads into Nicholas’ performance all the base somatic symptoms of the nightmare: a body overcome by melancholy (“This carpenter wende he were in despair”), the inability to move (“Nicholas sat ay as stille as stoon”), and oppression by malevolent outside forces (“I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes”).

Believed to have stumbled into Nicholas’ silent struggle with an incubi-demon—the price paid for Nicholas having messed with forces beyond his ability to control—John deploys the most appropriate night spell in his apotropaic arsenal: the White Paternoster.⁸⁸ Notwithstanding the oblique reference in Robert Grosseteste’s Scriptum est de levitis to a charm that uses the phrase “Grene pater noster / Petris leue soster”, included as part of a wider diatribe against superstitious old women (ritus vetularum), the Miller’s Tale represents one of the earliest extant mentions of this folk prayer in the written record. Indeed, the fact that John uses a similar rhyming couplet to that recorded by Robert—“For nyghtes verye, the white pater-noster! / Where wentestow, Seinte Petres soster?” (I. ll. 3486-87)—suggests that Chaucer is drawing upon a prayer-type that enjoyed much currency in the Middle Ages, and even beyond.⁸⁹ From the “Petite Patenôte Blanche” included in the Enchiridion Leonis Papae necromantic handbook (ca. 1502 [1660]),⁹⁰ to the “Popish Charm” recorded in Thomas Ady’s witchcraft treatise A Candle in the Dark (1656) (“Matthew, Mark, Luke and John / The Bed be blest that I lye on”), variations of the prayer have circulated in the oral tradition for centuries, surviving into modern times as a nursery rhyme.⁹¹ The performative aspect of John’s night spell—that is, the need to bless all four corners of the house and ritually

strengthen the thresholds—is of course a common strategy for warding off evil spirits, but one that finds a particular structural echo in an anti-witchcraft charm included in Reginald Scot's Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584). Drawing upon material previously collated in the Malleus Maleficarum witchcraft manual (1487), Scot notes that to ensure no evil presences lurked within the household, horseshoes were often nailed to the front door, or else the names of Christ, the Virgin, and the Four Evangelists were “written crosswise, in everie corner of the house”.⁹² This is not to suggest that a direct textual link exists between the two prayers, only that the habitual repertoires involved in the protection of domestic space drew upon the same deeply entrenched selection of efficacious words and practices. Either way, we can see how Nicholas modulates his performance based on the reactions of his audience. Betraying a familiarity to how nightmare sufferers were released from their torments, he pointedly waits until John has finishing blessing the four corners of the house before feigning emergence from his stupor to reveal the secret knowledge he gained from his vision.

V. CONCLUSION

The practice of judicial astrology occupied an ambiguous place in medieval moralistic thinking. What for some was a purely mechanical art, for others involved paying conscious or unconscious fealty to demons. For those immersed in the precepts of traditional Augustinian teaching, the ability to portend the future derived not from reading the “book of the universe, the vellum of heaven” (libro universiatis, quod est Caeli pellis), as the author of the Speculum Astronomiae suggests, but through the help of evil spirits.⁹³ Astrologers who, in Gersonian terms, displayed a “lustful curiosity” about the future and pretended to know exactly how events would transpire were particularly suspect in the eyes of the Church. In any case, Nicholas and John occupy completely different ends of the spectrum: the former, gleefully taking up an art that had been practiced by Oxford students for generations; the latter, wary of

the spiritual fallout from prying too deep into the mysteries of the universe. Such differences in worldview are pointedly played out in Nicholas' trick. Whereas Nicholas had always intended to beguile the "sely jealous housbonde" (I. I. 3404) into thinking his knowledge about the flood had been revealed through mechanical contemplation of the moon—intentions confirmed in lines 3514-21—John views things quite differently. Seeing his lodger paralyzed in the dead of night, having already made his mind up that too much curiosity into the arcane arts can lead to demonic torment and spiritual ruin (I, l. 3452), he interprets the scene as only an unlettered observer knew how: as an attack by a nightmare-creature on the unbalanced body of an extreme melancholic. All these fears are codified in the word "despeir" and confirmed, as we have seen, with the Cambridge MS. Dd.4.24 interpolation of "nyghtes verye" to "nyghtesmare." John may well have misread Nicholas' performance and had to be corrected accordingly, but this does not discount the viability of his actions. Accusations of superstition speak more to modern sensibilities than medieval. For a religiously-inclined tradesman in late fourteenth-century England, the casting of a night spell to ward off sleep demons was about as lucid a practice as can be.

¹ Quotes from the Canterbury Tales and other Chaucerian works are taken from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, 3rd edition (Boston, MA, 1987), by fragment and line number.

² Gerald Morgan, "Obscenity and Fastidiousness in The Miller's Tale," English Studies 91 (2010), 492-518 (at p. 512).

³ John Block Friedman, "Bottom-Kissing and the Fragility of Status in Chaucer's Miller's Tale," The Chaucer Review 54 (2019), 119-40 (at p. 135); Sonja Mayrhofer "'This sely jealous housbonde to bigyle': Reading and Performance in Chaucer's The Miller's Tale,"

Philological Quarterly 97 (2018), 515-29 (at p. 521); Patrick J. Gallacher, "Perception and Reality in the 'Miller's Tale,'" The Chaucer Review 18 (1983), 38-48 (at p. 42).

⁴ Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Canon Law and Chaucer on Licit and Illicit Magic," in Law and the Illicit in Medieval Europe, ed. Ruth Mazo Karras, Joel Kaye, and E. Ann Matter (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 211-24 (at pp. 219-24).

⁵ E. T. Donaldson, "Chaucer's Miller's Tale, A 3483-6," Modern Language Notes 69 (1954), 310-13; Kelly, "Canon Law and Chaucer," p. 222.

⁶ Peter Brown, Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 247-49.

⁷ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," Speculum 65 (1990), 59-86.

⁸ Brown, Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space, p. 249.

⁹ Hilary M. Carey, "Judicial Astrology in Theory and Practice in Later Medieval Europe," Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences, 41 (2010), 90-98.

¹⁰ A thirteen-book treatise on the motions and movements of the stars within the heavenly spheres, the Almagest (ca. 150) proved highly influential in both the Islamic and western Latinate worlds, becoming the cornerstone text on mathematical astronomy until the seventeenth-century.

¹¹ See e.g. J. A. W. Bennett, Chaucer at Oxford and Cambridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

¹² Augustine, De civitate Dei, V.1-2, 9, in Opera Omnia vol. 7, PL 41, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1864), cols. 141-43, 150; Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Libri Philosophorum and Augustine's Conversions," in The Relationship Between Neoplatonism and Christianity, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Dublin: Four Courts, 1992), 101-25.

¹³ Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, ed. and trans. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford, Clarendon, 1995), II.82 (at p. 94).

¹⁴ Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, II.87 (at p. 97).

¹⁵ See O'Loughlin, "The Libri Philosophorum," and also O'Loughlin's "The Development of Augustine the Bishop's Critique of Astrology," Augustinian Studies, 30 (1999), 83-103.

¹⁶ Isidore of Seville, Etymologies, ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), III. xxvii (at p. 99).

¹⁷ For Hugh's complete typology of magic, see The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 1961), pp. 154-56; see also Henry C. Buttimer, Hugonis de Sancto Victore. Didascalicon. De Studio Legendi (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. Press, 1939).

¹⁸ For further insight into the confusion of licit mathematics and dubious magic, albeit from an early modern context, see J. Peter Zetterberg, "The Mistaking of 'the Mathematicks' for Magic in Tudor and Stuart England," The Sixteenth Century Journal 11 (1980), 83-97.

¹⁹ John of Salisbury, Policraticus I-IV, CCCM 118, ed. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), book 2, chap. 19 (at pp. 111-17).

²⁰ Nicolas of Oresme, "An Attack upon Astrology," ann. and trans. G. W. Coopland, in A Source Book in Medieval Science, ed. Edward Grant (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 490. See also G. W. Coopland, "Nicholas Oresme's Livre De Divinacion," The Monist 37 (1927), 578-600.

²¹ Plato, Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus, trans. Harold North Fowler. Loeb Classical Library 36 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914), pp. 464-69.

²² Much has been written about the spiritual barrenness of alchemical labour. As can be seen in confessional section of the Canon Yeoman's Tale, the practitioners of alchemy displayed a frenzied and ultimately fruitless curiosity about their art, one that was not unlike the same

enthusiasm shown by astrologers. See in the first instance J. D. North, "Chaucer: The Canon's Yeoman's Tale," in Alchemy Revisited: Proceedings of the International Conference on the History of Alchemy at the University of Groningen 17-19 April 1989, ed. Z. R. W. M. von Martels (Leiden: Brill 1990), pp. 81-88; Lee Patterson, "Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 15 (1993), 25-57.

²³ Richard Newhauser and Michael Raby, "Curious Labor in the Miller's Tale," ELH 86 (2019), 1-25.

²⁴ Paola Zambelli, The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma: Astrology, Theology and Science in Albertus Magnus and his Contemporaries (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992), pp. 208-9.

²⁵ Zambelli, The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma, pp. 234-35. For a helpful overview of the topic of interrogations and elections, see Carey, "Judicial Astrology." On judicial astrology see Laurel Means. "Electionary, Lunary, Destinary, and Questionary: Toward Defining Categories of Middle English Prognostic Material," Studies in Philology 89 (1992), 367-403.

²⁶ "Rursum pars electionum docet eligere horam laudabilem incipiendi aliquod opus ei cuius nativitas nota fuerit...": in Zambelli, The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma, pp. 238-39.

²⁷ Laura Ackerman Smoller, History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1420 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994); Graziella Federici Vescovini, "The Theological Debate," in A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance, ed. Brendan Dooley (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 101-40 (at p. 100).

²⁸ Zambelli, The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma, pp. 240-41.

²⁹ Dorothy Brown, Pastor and the Laity in the Theology of Jean Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

³⁰ Jean Gerson, De erroribus circa artem magicam et articulis reprobatis, Opera Omnia, 5 vols. (Antwerp, 1706), I, cols. 210-19 (at col. 213). See also Benedek Láng, "Experience in

the Anti-Astrological Arguments of Jean Gerson,” in Expertus sum: l'expérience par les sens dans la philosophie naturelle médiévale: actes du Colloque international de Pont-à-Mousson (5-7 févr. 2009), ed. Thomas Bénatouïl and Isabelle Draelants (Florence: SISMEL, 2011), pp. 299-309.

³¹ Smoller, History, Prophecy, and the Stars, p. 35.

³² Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Princeton, N.J: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 132-64; Chauncey Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 245-71.

³³ Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars, p. 266. The Toledan Tables, so-called because they were translated compiled in Toledo by Gerard of Cremona (ca. 1175), were used to chart celestial movements. They were superseded by the more accurate Alfonsine Tables (after Alfonso X of Castile) in the thirteenth century.

³⁴ For further essays on magic in the Franklin's Tale see Anthony E. Luengo, “Magic and Illusion in ‘The Franklin's Tale,’” The Journal of English and Germanic Philology 77 (1978), 1-16; Carolyn Collette, “Seeing and Believing in the ‘Franklin's Tale,’” The Chaucer Review 26 (1992), 395-410.

³⁵ Indeed, the chronicler Hélinand of Froidmont (d. 1230) wrote that just as Bologna was the perfect place to study law and Salerno to study medicine, Toledo was the ideal destination for those seeking knowledge about demons: see Owen Davies, Grimoires: A History of Magic Books (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), p. 27.

³⁶ For a succinct overview of Scot's contemporary magical reputation see Stephen Gordon, “Necromancy and the Magical Reputation of Michael Scot: John Rylands Library, Latin MS 105,” Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 92 (2016), 73-103.

³⁷ Translated in Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1923-1958), II: 309.

³⁸ Gordon, "Necromancy and the Magical Reputation of Michael Scot."

³⁹ Vescovini, "The Theological Debate," p. 121.

⁴⁰ Thorndike, "Cecco d'Ascoli," in A History of Magic and Experimental Science, II:948-68 (at p. 959).

⁴¹ See Robert Ralley, "Stars, Demons and the Body in Fifteenth-Century England," Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences 41 (2010), 109-16; Ralph Griffiths, "The Trial of Eleanor Cobham: An Episode in the Fall of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 51 (1969), 381-99. For a contemporary account of the events of the Bolingbroke affair, see An English chronicle of the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI written before the year 1471, ed. John Silvester Davies (London: Camden Society, 1856), pp. 57-59.

⁴² Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science, III:334.

⁴³ "Statim **enim** vocantur magici, cum tamen sint sapientissimi qui haec sciunt" : Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science, II:676.

⁴⁴ Cornelius O'Boyle, "Astrology and Medicine in Later Medieval England: The Calendars of John Somer and Nicholas of Lynn," Sudhoffs Archiv 89 (2005), 1-22 (at p. 1 n.3).

⁴⁵ Sophie Page, "Richard Trewythian and the Uses of Astrology in Late Medieval England," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 64 (2001), 193-228 (at p. 193).

⁴⁶ Page, "Richard Trewythian," pp. 200, 211.

⁴⁷ Richard Kieckhefer, Magic in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 153-56.

⁴⁸ Zambelli, The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma, pp. 240-41

⁴⁹ Katelyn Mesler, “The Liber iuratus Honorii and the Christian Reception of Angel Magic,” in Invoking Angels; Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries, ed.

Claire Fanger (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press 2012), pp. 113-50.

⁵⁰ Richard Kieckhefer, Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1997), p. 180.

⁵¹ Here we find an important instance of “quiting” with regards to the previous Knight’s Tale. Whereas Theseus’s public speech elucidates how one’s destiny is decreed in the stars (i.e., everyone is subject to fate [I, ll. 2987-3066]), Nicholas intends to use such theories to his and Alisoun’s advantage—that is, mankind is able to create its own fate.

⁵² For a fascinating study of the architectural layout of John’s house and the satirical possibilities thereof, see Michael W. Twomey and Scott D. Stull, “Architectural Satire in the Tales of the Miller and Reeve,” The Chaucer Review 51 (2016), 310-37.

⁵³ For similar arguments see Dawn Simmons Walts, “Tricks of Time in the Miller’s Tale,” The Chaucer Review 43 (2009), 400-13 (at p. 407).

⁵⁴ Means, “Electionary, Lunary, Destinary, and Questionary,” p. 379.

⁵⁵ In medieval medical terms, “woodnesse” generally referred to the type of frenetic madness caused by an overabundance of hot/dry choleric humors, as opposed to the melancholic form of madness, “mania,” that resulted from an overabundance of cold/dry humors. For example, John Trevisa (d. 1402) pointedly uses “woodnesse” as a synonym for frenzy (“here he calleth woodnesse frenesy”) in his vernacular translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s De proprietatibus rerum (ca. 1240): see John Trevisa, Bartholomeus, De Proprietatibus Rerum (Westminster, 1497), book 7, ch. 5 [no pagination in edition]. For an overview of the topic, see Claire Trenery and Peregrine Horden, “Madness in the Middle Ages,” in The Routledge History of Madness and Mental Health, ed. Greg Eghigian (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 62-80 (at p. 67).

⁵⁶ As discussed in Newhauser and Raby, “Curious Labor in the Miller's Tale,” p. 13.

⁵⁷ Gerald Morgan, “Obscenity and Fastidiousness in The Miller's Tale,” p. 510. For further information on Frideswide, see Anne B. Thompson, “Shaping a Saint's Life: Frideswide of Oxford,” Medium Ævum 63 (1994), 34-52; John Blair, “Saint Frideswide Reconsidered,” Oxoniensia 52 (1987), 71-127.

⁵⁸ For the Latin vitae see Blair, “Saint Frideswide Reconsidered.” The Middle English Lives of St. Frideswide can be found in various versions of the South English Legendary, with the shorter recension found in three manuscripts and the longer recension in four. See Middle English Legends of Women Saints, ed. Sherry L. Reames (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003): <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/reames-middle-english-legends-of-women-saints> [accessed 20 April 2022].

⁵⁹ See especially Nancy Caciola, Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 285-98.

⁶⁰ Kelly, “Canon Law and Chaucer,” p. 224.

⁶¹ Kelly, “Canon Law and Chaucer,” pp. 220, 222; Donaldson, “Chaucer's Miller's Tale,” p. 311.

⁶² The rumination on Christ's death as a remedy for despair was famously codified in fifteenth century Ars Moriendi (“Art of Dying”) handbooks, wherein the dying (moriens) was instructed to think about the Passion should they ever feel a sense of hopelessness on the deathbed, lest their soul be dragged to hell by demons. For an early but still pertinent overview of the Ars Moriendi tradition, see Mary Catherine O'Conner, The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1942). See also the explanatory notes for l. 3478 in The Riverside Chaucer, p. 846.

⁶³ Much work has been conducted on the science of sleep paralysis and the culturally contingent factors involved in the interpretation of nightmares: see J. Allan Cheyne, Steve D.

Rueffer, and Ian R. Newby-Clark, "Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic Hallucinations during Sleep Paralysis: Neurological and Cultural Construction of the Nightmare," Consciousness and Cognition 8 (1999), 319-37. For two formative sociological works on the topic see David J. Hufford, The Terror that Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); Shelley R. Adler, Sleep Paralysis: Night-mares, Nocebos, and the Mind-body Connection (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2011).

⁶⁴ See especially Maaïke van der Lugt, "The Incubus in Scholastic Debate: Medicine, Theology and Popular Belief," in Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages, ed. Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001), pp. 175-200. For the different types of supernatural entity that could be ascribed to the nightmare experience, see Stephen Gordon, "Medical Condition, Demon or Undead Corpse? Sleep Paralysis and the Nightmare in Medieval Europe," Social History of Medicine 28 (2015), 425-44.

⁶⁵ Mirko D. Grmek, "The Concept of Disease," in Western Medical Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, ed. Mirko D. Grmek, trans. Antony Shugaar (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 241-59.

⁶⁶ For an overview of late medieval regimen literature, see Christopher Bonfield, "The First Instrument of Medicine: Diet and Regimens of Health in Late Medieval England," in A Verray Parfit Praktisour: Essays presented to Carole Rawcliffe, ed. Elizabeth Danbury and Linda Clark (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2017), pp. 99-120.

⁶⁷ For the cultural construction of suicide and its link to despair, see especially Alexander Murray, Suicide in the Middle Ages II: The Curse of Self-Murder (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000).

⁶⁸ Van der Lugt, "The Incubus in Scholastic Debate", p. 185.

⁶⁹ De somno et vigilia circulated as part of a series of Aristotelian texts known as the Parva Naturalia. See Aristotle, On Sleep and Dreams, ed. and trans. David Gallop (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1996).

⁷⁰ Albertus Magnus, Book of Minerals, ed. and trans. Dorothy Wyckoff (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p. 93.

⁷¹ Cited in Van der Lugt, “The Incubus in Scholastic Debate,” p. 176.

⁷² For the satire against the social pretensions of Symkyn and his wife, see Twomy and Stull, “Architectural Satire,” p. 329.

⁷³ Lk. 23:46 (Vulgate): “Et clamans voce magna Jesus ait: Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum. Et haec dicens, expiravit.”

⁷⁴ See Roger of Wendover, Flores Historiarum, ed. Henry G. Hewlett, Rolls Series 84, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1887), II:274-76. See also Robert A. Pratt, “Chaucer and the Holy Cross of Bromholm,” Modern Language Notes 70 (1955), 324-25; Francis Wormald, “The Rood of Bromholm,” Journal of the Warburg Institute 1 (1937), 31-45; Robert M. Correale, “Chaucer’s Parody of Compline in the ‘Reeve’s Tale,’” The Chaucer Review 1 (1967), 161-66.

⁷⁵ MED, ed. Frances McSparran et al. (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 2001): s.v. wight, n. 1(c): “an unnatural or monstrous being; a supernatural creature, demon; specif. the devil, Satan; foul (ivel, wikkede, etc.):” https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED52699/track?counter=2&search_id=15932080 [accessed 1 May 2022].

⁷⁶ See especially Richard Firth Green, Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 76-109.

⁷⁷ All texts collated in Oswald Cockayne, Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England, 3 Vols, Rolls Series 35 (London: Longman, 1864-66). For mare and nihtgengum

remedies see, for example, Leechdoms, vol. 2: Leechbook I. 64 (at p. 140) and Leechbook III.1 (at p. 306). For a discussion of the translation of nihtgengum as nightmare, see Anne van Arsdall, Medieval Herbal Remedies: The Old English Herbarium and Anglo-Saxon Medicine (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 139, n.71.

⁷⁸ Leechdoms, vol. 2, Leechbook III. 61 (at 344).

⁷⁹ For the Anglo-Saxon elf, see H. Stuart, “The Anglo-Saxon Elf,” Studia Neophilologica 48 (1976), 313-20; Karen Louise Jolly, Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996); Alaric Hall, “The Evidence for Maran, the Anglo-Saxon ‘Nightmares,’” Neophilologus 91 (2009), 299–317. For the sexual pressing demon, see Charles Stewart, “Erotic Dreams and Nightmares from Antiquity to the Present,” Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, n.s. 8 (2002), 279-309.

⁸⁰ Leechdoms vol. 2, Leechbook II. 65.5 (at p. 296); Gordon, “Medical Condition, Demon or Undead Corpse,” p. 435.

⁸¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain: An edition and translation of the De gestis Britonum (Historia Regum Britanniae), ed. and trans. Michael D. Reeve (Woodbridge: Boydell), bk. 6, p. 139: “inter lunam et terram habitant spiritus quos incubos daemones appellamus, et cum mulieribus coeunt” (between the moon and earth reside spirits which we call incubus demons, who have sex with women).

⁸² Wace’s Roman de Brut: A History of the British: Text and Translation, ed. and trans. Judith Weiss (Exeter: Exeter Univ. Press, 2002), p. 188.

⁸³ As discussed in Green, Elf Queens and Holy Friars, p. 89.

⁸⁴ Green, Elf Queens and Holy Friars, p. 91.

⁸⁵ For an analysis of the demonological knowledge displayed in this scene, see chapter 5, “‘But whan us liketh we kan take us oon’: Vain Surfaces and Walking Corpses in Chaucer’s

Friar's Tale", in Stephen Gordon, Supernatural Encounters: Demons and the Restless Dead in Medieval England, c.1050-1450 (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 161-86.

⁸⁶ Dorothy Yamamoto, "Noon Oother Incubus but He: Lines 878-81 in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'" The Chaucer Review 28 (1994), 275-78; Nicolas K. Kiessling, "The 'Wife of Bath's Tale': D 878-881," The Chaucer Review 7 (1972), 113-17.

⁸⁷ Suzanne Edwards, "The Rhetoric of Rape and the Politics of Gender in the Wife of Bath's Tale and the 1382 Statute of Rapes," Exemplaria 23 (2011), 3-26 (at p. 14).

⁸⁸ Much scholarship has been conducted on Chaucer's night spell and the White Paternoster in general: see especially William J. Thoms, "Chaucer's Night-Spell," The Folk-Lore Record 1 (1878) 145-54; Donaldson, "Chaucer's Miller's Tale"; Kelly, "Canon Law and Chaucer," pp. 222-24; Douglas Gifford, "An Early White Paternoster in Basque?" Bulletin of Hispanic Studies 41 (1964), 209-22; The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, eds. Iona and Peter Opie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 303-5.

⁸⁹ Kelly, "Canon Law and Chaucer," p. 222. The Latin quote is transcribed in Siegfried Wenzel, "Two Notes on Chaucer and Grosseteste," Notes and Queries 17 (1970), 449-51.

⁹⁰ "Petite patenôte blanche, que Dieu fit, que Dieu dit, que Dieu mit en paradis. Au soir, m'allant coucher, je trouvis trois anges à mon lit couchés, un aux pieds, deux au chevet, la bonne Vierge Marie au milieu. . ." ["Little White Paternoster, that God made, that God said, that God set in paradise. In the evening, when I went to bed, I found three angels at my bed, one at the foot, two at the head, the good Virgin Mary in the middle. . ."]: Enchiridion Leonis Papae (Rome, 1660), p. 151.

⁹¹ Thomas Ady, A Candle in the Dark: Or, A Treatise Concerning the Nature of Witches & Witchcraft (1656), p. 58; The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 303.

⁹² Reginald Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft (London: 1584), 12.18.

⁹³ Zambelli, The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma, p. 266.