

“Scientia vera”? Holcot and Chaucer on Astrological Determinism, Magic, Talismans and Omens*

In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer invites his readers to think of him as the sort of person who is uninterested in the acquirement of scientific knowledge. When the Eagle of Jupiter asks the poem's narrator if he would like to “lere of sterres aught” (in effect offering him a miraculous opportunity to learn about the heavens from a superlatively authoritative source) his brusquely unenthusiastic reply is “Nay, certeynly... ryght naught” (994).¹ His unconvincing explanation for this strangely incurious response is that he is now too old for such things; and he remains entirely unapologetic even when the Eagle points out that it is rather inconsistent of him to spend his time reading about all the various stellifications described in poetry, without being in any way interested in the actual placement of the stars in the sky: “For though thou have hem ofte on honde,/ Yet nostow not wher that they stonde” (1009-1010). The posture adopted by the Chaucerian narrator here is perhaps most readily explained as a more or less ironic disavowal or subversion of the claims to scientific authority found implicitly in the long tradition of literary texts depicting privileged journeys into the heavenly realms, such as the two works that Chaucer himself refers to immediately before this passage: *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* by Martianus Capella and the *Anticlaudianus* by Alan of Lille.² However, there is a biblical model that Chaucer might also have had in mind at this point: the account of the privileged understanding of the universe that is granted to the

narrator of the deuterо-canonical Book of Wisdom (who was conventionally supposed to be King Solomon himself).

In Wisdom 7, “Solomon” states that God:

...is the guide of wisdom, and the director of the wise [...and] he hath given me the true knowledge of the things that are [“horum quae sunt scientiam veram”]: to know the disposition of the whole world, and the virtues of the elements,/ The beginning, and ending, and midst of the times, the alterations of their courses, and the changes of seasons,/ The revolutions of the year, and the dispositions of the stars [“stellarum dispositiones”]. (Wisdom 7:15, 17-19)³

Here the richness of “Solomon’s” insight into the structure of the universe is presented as a measure of the extent to which human beings might aspire to a share in God’s omniscience. It is implicit that God’s perfect knowledge of the structure of the universe reflects the completeness of his power over the universe, so that to be able to partake in divine wisdom even to the extent of having some “true knowledge of the things that are” might be seen as a means of accessing, or vicariously exercising, divine power. This means that in rejecting the Eagle’s promise to describe “the dispositions of the stars” and spurning the opportunity to become, in effect, as wise as Solomon, the Chaucerian narrator denies any interest, not just in a “true knowledge” of the stars, but also the participation in God’s omnipotence that such a privileged degree of “true knowledge” might be taken to indicate or convey.

There is at least one particular reason for thinking that this passage in *The House of Fame* might have been conditioned by Chaucer’s awareness of this Solomonic

ideal of human wisdom: and this is that the Book of Wisdom was the subject of an extensive and widely circulated commentary by the Dominican friar Robert Holcot (d. 1349), and this is a book to which Chaucer is very likely to have had access.⁴ It was (in Jenny Swanson's words) "one of the most popular commentaries of the late middle ages"; indeed, "it made [Holcot's] name famous throughout medieval Europe, and surviving catalogues show that every well-stocked library came to have a copy."⁵ The likelihood that Chaucer knew the Wisdom-commentary was demonstrated long ago by Karen Petersen and Robert Pratt, who showed that it was probably a key source for the Nun's Priest's Tale.⁶ As Pratt puts it, "most of the comments on dreams made by Pertelote and Chauntecleer are based on two particular lectures in the commentary on the Book of Wisdom".⁷ So, for example, Pertelote's emphasis on the role of humours in the shaping of dreams (VII 2923-25) strongly resembles Holcot's argument in Lektion 103 that apparently meaningful dreams ("sompnia signatiua") are sometimes caused by an excess of one of particular humour;⁸ her reference to "fume" (smoke) in VII 2924 seems to be a direct reflection of Holcot's reference to "fumus melancolicus" in the same Lektion;⁹ while her belief that a superfluity of choler causes people to dream of fire (VII 2927-30) echoes Holcot's argument to the same effect in Lektion 202.¹⁰ Both of the stories that are told in this Tale in order to illustrate the way in which dreams sometimes convey "true knowledge" of a particularly privileged kind (VII 2985-3062, VII 3067-114) can be found in Holcot's commentary (in Lectons 103 and 202 respectively), and it is at least possible that Chaucer was familiar with them from Holcot's commentary, rather than (or in addition to) Holcot's own source for them, Valerius Maximus's *Facta et dicta memorabilia*. As Pratt explains, although

there were many medieval treatises on dreams that the English poet might have known, “the treatise which, in the Nonnes Preestes Tale, Chaucer follows closely in theory after theory, detail after detail, and illustration after illustration, is Robert Holcot’s commentary on the Book of Wisdom”.¹¹

Despite the clear lead set by Petersen and Pratt, there has been relatively little scholarly exploration of the ways in which Holcot’s Wisdom-commentary might have influenced Chaucer’s writing in other ways (beyond the Nun’s Priest’s Tale), or of the potential significance of this relationship for our understanding of how Chaucer used his sources.¹² After all, Holcot is by no means a minor or uninteresting figure in the history of English literature or in the history of ideas. Beryl Smalley described him as the most “diversely gifted” of all the writers who formed the movement that she labelled as “the classicizing friars”.¹³ She characterises him as “artistic, cultured, smiling, perhaps rather flippant and inconsequent too”,¹⁴ but, as Hester Goodenough Gelber emphasises, Holcot was a serious theologian too, “one of the major participants in the flowering of scholastic thought” in the fourteenth century and an “independent thinker who dared to challenge the opinions of the greatest scholastics”.¹⁵ Indeed, in a theological context, Holcot is often identified as one of the principal antagonists of the English theologian whom Chaucer himself identified as a great authority on the vexed question of the relationship between human free-will and God’s foreknowledge, “Bisshop Bradwardyn” (NPT, VII 3242): i.e. Thomas Bradwardine (d. 1349). It could be argued that the philosophical differences between Bradwardine and Holcot actually hinge on a disagreement about the relationship between God’s “true knowledge of the things that are” and the extent to which human beings can aspire

to partake in such true knowledge. This is an issue to which I will return: but, for now, it perhaps enough to observe that the question of how closely Chaucer was influenced by Holcot is an important one, with substantial consequences for any assessment of the nature of the English poet's engagement with fourteenth-century intellectual culture.

Part of the reason why the relationship between Holcot and Chaucer has not been explored more fully is that much of what Chaucer is likely to have taken from Holcot can also be found in other sources: and this has perhaps encouraged the assumption that the correspondences between these two writers are essentially only coincidental, simply a consequence of the fact that they inhabited much the same cultural world. I would argue, by contrast, that Chaucer is in fact indebted to Holcot's Wisdom-commentary at so many levels (for so many specific details and motifs, but also for whole complexes of ideas and distinct sequences of argument), that it actually makes much more sense to think of Holcot as playing a central role in the construction of Chaucer's cultural horizons.¹⁶ The case for Chaucer's knowledge of Holcot's work is cumulative: i.e., the more we find correspondences between the work of the two writers, the more the probability increases that each of these correspondences represents a conscious borrowing by Chaucer from Holcot.

In this essay, I suggest two more particular moments in Chaucer's work at which Holcot's influence is likely. These are 1.) the catalogue of those who try, or pretend, to acquire privileged "knowledge of the things that are" by employing magical techniques of some kind in *The House of Fame*, 1259-70; and 2.) the Parson's condemnation of similar practices and superstitions in the Parson's Tale, X 602-

607. I will argue that these two passages directly depend (in overlapping ways) on two particular passages in Holcot's Wisdom-commentary: specifically, in Lections 98 and 159. However, what is perhaps most distinctive about Holcot's approach to such issues as divination, omens and magic is the way that he chooses to involve them in a much a larger argument about the limits of human knowledge. Chaucer's indebtedness to Holcot is perhaps most significantly visible in the way that, for him too, the rejection of "superstitious" claims to any privileged insight into the working of the universe seems to be just part of a much deeper, and much more deeply philosophical, scepticism about the very possibility of human beings ever acquiring any "true knowledge of the things that are" solely by their own efforts. What human beings can achieve is so completely contingent on God (and God himself is so completely unlimited by any of the laws that operate within the universe) that it is simply not possible for human beings to earn such "true knowledge" for themselves, and their attempts to do so – whether through learning about the stars, magical rituals, the interpretation of dreams, or the observation of divinatory signs – are, according to both authors, illustrations ultimately of the same kind of human folly. From this perspective, it is necessary to consider, not just the particular passages in the Wisdom-commentary that seem to have given shape to what Chaucer says about astrological, magical and divinatory practices in *The House of Fame* and the Parson's Tale, but also the part these passages play in the arguments of the Wisdom-commentary more generally. Matters are complicated further by the fact that in Lektion 159, Holcot is himself dependent on St Augustine, developing the account of superstitious practices provided in *On Christian Doctrine* in such a way as to make it possible to think that Chaucer's only immediate source was St

Augustine. This is an example of the way in which the extent of Holcot's influence on Chaucer is often obscured by the fact that Holcot himself is reliant on other sources. However, Holcot's own distinctive spin on St Augustine's thinking seems to have left its traces on Chaucer's discussion of such practices in the Parson's Tale, in such a way as to make clear that it is Holcot, rather than St Augustine, who must have been Chaucer's immediate source.

So – to return to the passage from Wisdom 7 with which I began – what exactly does Holcot have to say in response to “Solomon's” claim to have been granted “true knowledge of the things that are”, including an understanding of “the dispositions of the stars”? The answer is that, like the Chaucerian narrator in *The House of Fame*, he is pointedly dismissive of the possibility of acquiring a complete understanding of the physics of the universe. Unlike the Chaucerian narrator, his justification is not that he himself is too superannuated to have any interest in such things, but that “true knowledge” of this kind is simply not humanly possible:

It is asked whether there can be any knowledge of the movement of the stars.

I think not, since if this were the case, then it is most likely that such knowledge would be possible in the case of the movements of the sun and the moon. But since no knowledge of *their* movements can be acquired, therefore no knowledge of other bodies can be acquired either. This assumption I can justify, since if it were possible to have any knowledge of movements of the sun and moon, then this would be something on which all the prophets would agree – i.e. that the sun moves continuously¹⁷ in a circular motion around the earth, that the sun is moved by a rotation of the firmament from east to west, and that the sun is never eclipsed whenever

the moon is opposed to it – but all of this seems to be false according to holy scripture. (Lecture 98: **V**, p. 86vb; **O**, fol. 151ra)

He goes on to explain that even the apparently regular movements of the sun and moon can be disrupted in unpredictable ways, if God so chooses. Specifically, he points out: a.) that the sun's movement in the sky is not inevitably continuous, because Joshua 10: 13 proves that it can be stopped ("the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hastened not to go down the space of one day"); b.) that the sun is not always moved by a rotation of the firmament from east to west, because 4 Kings 20: 11 states that the prophet Isaiah made the sun go ten degrees backwards; and c.) that it is possible for the sun to be eclipsed even when the moon is opposed to it, because both Matthew and Luke say that there was an eclipse at the ninth hour of Good Friday, even though the sun and the moon were then opposed (Matthew 27: 45; Luke 23: 45). If the rules that govern the movements even of the sun and the moon can be disrupted so fundamentally (as and when God chooses), then how can human beings hope to have any confident understanding of the rules that govern the whole universe? What these anomalies demonstrate, according to Holcot, is that a comprehensive knowledge of "the dispositions of the stars" (of the kind claimed by Solomon and promised by Chaucer's Eagle) is simply not attainable by any mortal human being.¹⁸

Holcot boldly acknowledges that this conclusion is contrary both to the letter of the text that he is explicating (i.e. Wisdom 7) and to the opinions of "all astronomers" ("omnes astronomi"); but he goes on to suggest a solution to this difficulty – in effect, a *tertium quid* – by proposing that scientific knowledge of the motions of the stars is possible, but only to the extent that God chooses not to alter these motions

by means of a miracle (“miraculose”), and this is something which, implicitly, he can do at any time:

In relation to this question it should be said that there *can* be some knowledge of the movements of the stars – not indeed proof of how they will be moved at every given moment, but proof of how they are moved at every given movement according to nature,¹⁹ unless and until God disposes otherwise by means of a miracle, just as the blessed Augustine teaches.²⁰ In this way God establishes the movements and²¹ operations of all created things, in such a way that they might nevertheless function or not function in whatever way he wishes. (Lecture 98: **V**, p. 86vb; **O**, fol. 151rb)

This passage could reasonably be seen as an illustration of Holcot’s characteristic scepticism, his questioning of any (human) claims to certainty of knowledge, and his dislike of anything resembling a deterministic view of the universe, according to which the structure of things is so fixed and inevitable as to present people, implicitly, with an excuse for moral passivity. This point of view he clearly expresses in Lecture 147:

Many confess their wickedness, but in a way that is contrary to God. For when they are discovered in their sins, they say²² “It wasn’t me who did this”, or else “this isn’t a sin”, but rather “God wished it”. Others say, “It was done to me by Fate, it was done to me by the stars”, and thus by a roundabout route they seek to find a way of accusing God – for he created the stars, and set them on their courses; and in this way, by means of the stars, they try to show that it was God who made them sin. But anyone who

is truly penitent says, “It was me who sinned: it was not Fate or Fortune or the Devil who drove me to it, but rather I consented to temptation.” (V, p. 128rb; O, fol. 222vb)

It is scepticism of this kind that seems to have made Holcot into an intellectual opponent of Thomas Bradwardine, whose monumental theological treatise, *De causa Dei*, explicitly contests the views of those thinkers whom Bradwardine regarded as “Pelagians” (i.e. believers in the principle that human will is capable of good even without the assistance of divine grace) and among whom he seems to have counted Holcot.²³ Holcot’s position was however, one with which Chaucer seems to have had considerable sympathy, as is suggested by the notably critical stance towards belief in determinism that he seems to adopt in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale and *Troilus and Criseyde*.²⁴ At the very least, this passage from the Wisdom-commentary reveals how philosophical sensitivities could be attached to the question of whether anyone could accurately know how the stars “are set in hevene” (*House of Fame*, line 1008). The comparison could be taken to suggest that Chaucer’s invention of a pretext for rejecting the Eagle’s invitation is not merely playful, but also philosophically aware. In effect, he brings his readers to the point at which Holcot makes scientific knowledge of the stars seem as if it might become a theologically controversial issue, and then beats a tactful, but witty, retreat.

If Chaucer knew Holcot’s discussion of knowledge of the movements of the stars (“de motibus stellarum... scientia”) in Lektion 98 of the Wisdom-commentary, then it is likely that he was also aware of Holcot’s attempt, earlier in this same Lektion, at distinguishing between the true knowledge (“scientia vera”) represented by Solomon’s wisdom and the false knowledge (“scientia falsa”) characteristic of

those various kinds of charlatan who lay claim to be able to use astrology or magic as a means of accessing a superhuman understanding of the workings of the universe:

“For [Solomon says that] he” – i.e. God – has generously “given me true knowledge of the things that are” – i.e., complete knowledge of all created things,²⁵ which is a true knowledge, and not a false²⁶ or apparent knowledge, of the kind that false experimenters, necromancers and alchemists boast about possessing, and also those who glory in being instructed in the teaching of demons by means of infamous art, and those who claim to know what they do not know, among whom are prestidigitators, diviners, dreamers,²⁷ physiognomists, palm-readers, geomancers,²⁸ enchanters and magicians, whose knowledge is not true knowledge, but false – indeed, no knowledge at all. (Lecture 98; **V**, fol. 86va; **O**, fol. 150va)

This list clearly invites comparison with a passage that occurs in the *House of Fame* not long after the Chaucerian narrator’s first encounter with the Eagle, where we are told that Fame’s court also included:

...jugelours,
Magiciens, and tregetours,
And Phitonesses, charmeresses,
Olde wicches, sorceresses
That use exorsisacions
And eke these fomygacions –
And clerkes eke, which konne wel
Al this magik naturel,

That craftely doon her ententes
To make, in certeyn ascendentis,
Ymages, lo, through which magik,
To make a man ben hool or syk.” (*The House of Fame*, lines 1259-
70)

Like Holcot, Chaucer’s list includes not just prestidigitators (“jugelours” and “tregetours”) and magicians (“magiciens”), but also those who summon demons (“sorceresses/ That use exorsicacions”). Although Chaucer does not explicitly state that all of these miscreants are representative of “false knowledge”, it is perhaps this line of thought that explains why these people are to be found at the court of Fame at all, since the particular function of this court, as Chaucer imagines it, seems to be to disseminate knowledge of all kinds, including knowledge that is false, or indeed “no knowledge at all”, as Holcot puts it (“falsa, imo nulla”).

Where Chaucer departs most substantially from the model provided by Holcot in Lection 98 is in his invocation of those clerks whose “natural magic”²⁹ is expressed particularly by their use of astrological “ymages” which, he says, could restore health, or remove it (“To make a man ben hool or syk”). Such magical talismans derive their power from the fact that they give a physical embodiment to their creators’ supposedly privileged knowledge of the stars. They could be manufactured only at moments when the stars were aligned in what were deemed to be particularly propitious ways. Images of this kind are mentioned by Chaucer in the General Prologue, where the Physician is said to be well able to “fortunen the ascendent/ Of his ymages for his pacient” (I 417-18). They are also implicitly appear in the Squire’s Tale, where the manufacturer of the brass steed is said to

have “wayted many a constellacion/ Er he had doon this operacion,/ And knew ful many a seel and many a bond” (V 129-31). Discussion of “ymages” of this kind can be found in a large number of fourteenth-century texts, so it is by no means necessarily the case that Chaucer’s knowledge of them could only have been supplied by Holcot.³⁰ For example, Chaucer makes clear in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* that he was familiar with Nicholas of Lynn’s *Kalendarium*,³¹ a text that specifically explains how “images and sculptures are made in stones so that they may receive the worth of precious stones from the influence of heaven”.³² In Nick Havely’s edition of the *House of Fame*, the images made “in certeyn ascendentis” are explained by a reference to Richard Kieckhefer’s book on magic, where it is noted that the Parisian theologian, Jean Gerson, wrote a whole treatise against a physician who had tried to heal a kidney disease by using a talisman inscribed with the image of a lion and certain special characters.³³ As it happens, the attempt to explain *The House of Fame* by reference to Gerson is probably something of an unnecessary detour, since – as I shall explain in a moment – it is likely that Gerson’s understanding of such talismans was, just like Chaucer’s, directly conditioned by his familiarity with Holcot’s Wisdom-commentary.

Chaucer’s reference to astrological images in *The House of Fame* cannot have been inspired by Holcot’s Lektion 98 (because there is no mention of such images in that particular Lektion), but they are nevertheless quite prominent elsewhere in the Wisdom-commentary; and so much so that I suggest that Chaucer was at this point in *The House of Fame* consciously moving from one distinctively Holcottian theme to another. The most extended discussion of astrological images in the Wisdom-commentary can be found in Lektion 159,³⁴ where it forms part of a

discussion of idolatry. Holcot begins his discussion of Wisdom 13: 17-19 here with a condemnation of the “manifold foolishness of superstitiously worshipping idols”, but much of his subsequent discussion is based on the views of St Augustine. As he explains, “those who observe future events by means of signs that in no way ordained to them³⁵ are condemned at length by St Augustine in Book II of St Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*, who says that such observations are superstitious”.³⁶ St Augustine does indeed discuss such superstitions in some detail, and he specifically considers the “amulets and remedies which the medical profession also condemns, whether these consist of incantations, or certain marks which their exponents call ‘characters’ or in putting certain objects into necklaces and ties”.³⁷ Here St Augustine is concerned with omens of all kinds, not just medical “amulets and remedies”, and he goes on to provide an amusing list of examples:

Besides these are thousands of utterly futile practices [e.g. ...] treading on the threshold when you pass in front of your own house; going back to bed if you sneeze while putting on your shoes; returning inside your house if you trip up while leaving it; or, when your clothing is eaten by mice, worrying more about the premonition of future disaster than about the present damage. Cato had a witty saying about this: when approached by someone who said that mice had been nibbling his slippers he replied that this was not an omen, but would certainly have been if the slippers had been nibbling the mice.³⁸

Holcot offers quite a full summary of all of St Augustine’s views on this topic, including even the story that the saint told about Cato. He cites:

those who are afraid, when they see that their slippers³⁹ have been nibbled by mice, that some unfortunate event is about to occur. In relation to this we read how Cato⁴⁰ mocked someone who told him that his slippers being nibbled by mice was a marvellous⁴¹ omen of misfortune.⁴² “Certainly, that’s no marvel”, said Cato: “but it would have been a marvel if the slippers had been nibbling the mice.” A similar case is the man who when getting up in the morning goes back to bed because he sneezed before he could put his shoes on. (Lecture 159: V, pp. 136rb-va; O, fol. 236vb)

It was probably St Augustine’s reference to “amulets” and “characters” that provided Holcot with the inspiration for offering his own discussion of the making of astrological images, a discussion which culminates with a reference to the story of the Golden Lion. This is the same story that was later discussed by Jean Gerson:

But as to those astrological images that are made at certain times when the planets are determined to be in particular positions, it is doubtful whether it is licit to make images, or, having made them, to use them, just as a certain person in London in my lifetime was said to have been healed of quintain fever⁴³ by means of the image of a golden lion manufactured in accordance with a certain constellation.⁴⁴ (Lecture 159: V, 136va; O, fol. 237rb)

It is surely no coincidence that Gerson’s treatise *Contra superstitionem sculpturae Leonis* deploys exactly the same Augustinian arguments as Holcot does. Gerson certainly knew Holcot’s work, since he cites him elsewhere, on one occasion describing him (rather uncharitably) as the “imitator of Ockham”.⁴⁵ It is therefore

very likely that Gerson owed his knowledge of the story of the Golden Lion directly to Holcot.

In Holcot's analysis of astrological talismans, the precise issue is not whether or not they can be efficacious: but rather, whether it is permissible for Christians to make use of them at all. In this respect, he is actually rather less sceptical about such things than St Augustine, although it certainly remains significant that he locates the whole discussion in relation to the Book of Wisdom's attack on idolatry:

Indeed it is true that things in nature derive their forms and powers from celestial bodies, but artificial images can derive no power from celestial bodies,⁴⁶ nor indeed do they command any other⁴⁷ power, except what it is inherent in the nature of their material. The image depicted is not in itself a principle capable of causing change, and therefore the gold of this particular image [i.e. the lion] has no more power than the gold of any other image. However, if it does have any other effect, this is because of the involvement of demons who delude human beings, as St Augustine says. And to this extent such astrological images allot their power with the help of demons. This is indicated by the fact that it is necessary for such images to be imprinted with certain characters, which do not have any effect naturally. Whence it should be understood that⁴⁸ astrological images differ from necromantic ones in this: that in the making of necromantic images, certain invocations to demons are expressly employed. Thus such images⁴⁹ pertain to contracts expressly entered into with demons. Whereas in the making of astronomical images the contracts with demons are tacit, brought about by certain characters and figures devised by these same demons – who, to

enable the making such characters, give aid to their makers. (Lecton 159;
V, fol. 136vb; O, fols 237rb-237va)

Just as Holcot suggests, St Augustine does indeed have a considerable amount to say about demons in this context. He even states that observing “signs” in this way (i.e. omens and portents) amounts to a contract with demons, “a disastrous alliance of men and devils”. Holcot finesses this a little by arguing that the proof of the diabolical nature of astrological images can be found in the very use of “characters” (written or inscribed signs). He suggests that the difference between astrologers and necromancers is that, whereas a necromancer expressly invokes a pact with demons by using particular incantations, an astrologer also makes such a pact, but only tacitly, by means of these characters. From this perspective, it is perhaps easy to see why Chaucer includes users of astrological images among the list of magical charlatans in the *House of Fame*; and why he then immediately goes on to talk about sorcerers like Medea and Simon Magus (lines 1271-74). It could also be argued that Chaucer’s general attitude to such things resembles Holcot’s precisely in its ambivalence. Both men are very interested in the idea of celestial influence, and much more reluctant than St Augustine, say, to deny outright the effectiveness of talismans like the Golden Lion, or to dismiss belief in the power of such objects as mere superstition. At the same time both express horror at the very idea of magical practices of this kind. Thus it is that in the Franklin’s Tale, for example, Chaucer can present the clerk of Orléans as a man whose knowledge of the stars clearly endows him with at least some magical power – because he succeeds in removing the rocks of Brittany – while at the same time condemning him for “his wrecchednesse/ Of swich a superstitious cursedness” (FrankT, V. 1270-72).

However there is a further twist to Holcot's argument – and it is a very distinctive one. This comes when he asks about the little letters and packages containing words from the gospels or the psalms that sick people wear around their necks:

But furthermore, concerning the little letters and packages containing the words of the gospels or the psalter placed around the necks of sick people, can⁵⁰ there be any doubt about whether these are superstitious? It should be said that there is no harm to it, as long as such words are copied precisely from the gospel, in order that God might more promptly bring aid to the patient wearing them on account of their devotion. But if you believe⁵¹ that such words cure fevers and mitigate the falling sickness because of their intrinsic power, or similarly if these words are mixed with mysterious characters⁵² and strange names, or if⁵³ the person wearing them is not allowed to know what is written, then there is no doubt: here indeed is superstition. Whence St John Chrysostom says in his commentary on St Matthew's Gospel: "There are some who wear a copy of a particular extract from the Gospel around their necks. Is the Gospel not constantly⁵⁴ read⁵⁵ in church, and heard by all? If the words of the Gospel achieve nothing when they are in the ears⁵⁶ of such people,⁵⁷ how can they help them when they are around their necks?"⁵⁸ (Lecture 159; **V**, fol. 136vb; **O**, fol. 237va)

It is not just that Holcot is reluctant to condemn practices that are clearly pious at least in their intent (despite what could be construed as an attempt to use the words of the bible as if they were magical "characters"). What also lies behind this, it seems, is his awareness of the charge to which his sceptical tendencies seemingly laid him open: the charge that, in emphasising human autonomy and freewill to the

extent that he does, he leaves little or no room for God's grace. Holcot's treatment of this particular question – the question of the value of biblical talismans – is notably careful. He says that such practices are certainly superstitious if they involve the mixing of the words of the bible with nonsensical or extraneous "characters", but he is careful not to say that they cannot be efficacious at all. Instead he cites St John Chrysostom (probably via Aquinas),⁵⁹ and builds on Chrysostom's arguments in order to ask:

In what, then, does the power of the words of the gospel reside? In the shapes of the letters or in the understanding of their senses? If in the shapes, then it is good for them to be hung around people's necks. If in the understanding, then it is better that they be placed in people's hearts than hung around their necks. (Lecture 159; V, fol. 136vb; O, fol. 237va)

Lecture 159's departures from its Augustinian model are significant to studies of Chaucer because it is apparently Holcot's development of the saint's scepticism about the "thousands of utterly futile practices" related to omens that underlies Chaucer's discussion of magical practices in the Parson's Tale:

But lat us go now to thilke horrible sweryng of adjuracioun and conjuracioun, as doon thise false enchauntours or nigromanciens in bacyns ful of water, or in a bright swerd, in a cercle, or in a fir, or in a shulder-boon of a sheep. I kan nat seye but that they doon cursedly and dampnably agayns Crist and al the feith of hooly chirche. What seye we of hem that bileeven on divynailes, as by flight or by noyse of briddes, or of beestes, or by sort, by nigromancie, by dremes, by chirkyng of dores or crakkyng of houses,

by gnawynge of rattes, and swich manere wrecchednesse? Certes, al this thyng is deffended by God and by hooly chirche. For which they been acursed, til they come to amendement, that on swich filthe setten hire bileeve. Charmes for woundes or maladie of men or of beestes, if they taken any effect, it may be peraventure that God suffreth it, for folk sholden yeve the moore feith and reverence to his name. (*ParsT*, X 602-607)⁶⁰

Here we see what is an effect a reworking of St Augustine's condemnation of superstitious "signs" – including a reference to the gnawing of rats, which in this context can be taken to correspond with the mice who eat slippers. However, it is a reworking that clearly reflects the influence of Holcot's mediation of St Augustine. It is only in Holcot's Lektion 159, and in Chaucer's Parson's Tale – but not in St Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* – that the line of thought moves directly from omens like nibbling mice to "charmcs for woundes or maladie". It is again only in this Lektion and in the Tale – but not in *On Christian Doctrine* – that any thought is given to the possibility that such charms might actually be efficacious. The Parson's sudden shift from the effect of charms to their exemplary potential, as a means of instilling "faith and reverence" – for which there is again no clear parallel in St Augustine – appears to reflect Holcot's deployment of Chrysostom's suggestion that the apparent power of the words of the gospel properly lies in people's hearts. On the other hand, there is nothing that Chaucer could have taken from St Augustine in this passage that is not also in Holcot: which means that Chaucer need not have been reading St Augustine directly at all. The most parsimonious explanation for this accumulation of parallels, both large and small,

is that Chaucer knew Lectio 159 of Holcot's *Wisdom*-commentary, and knew it well.

What I have argued in this essay is that the reluctance of the Chaucerian narrator in *The House of Fame* to take advantage of the eagle's offer of a privileged insight into the workings of the stars (lines 991-1017) possibly reflects Holcot's sceptical emphasis on the limits of scientific knowledge about the universe in Lectio 98 of the *Wisdom*-commentary; that this same Lectio could well have provided Chaucer with a model for the list of magical/astrological charlatans in *The House of Fame* (lines 1259-70); and that the one element of Chaucer's description of such charlatans that is conspicuously absent from Lectio 98 – i.e., the emphasis on the “ymages” or talismans – can actually be paralleled elsewhere in the *Wisdom*-commentary, in Lectio 159. Although Lectio 159 relies heavily on St Augustine's analysis of superstitious practices, including the observation of omens and portents, the conjuring of demons and the use of amulets and talismans, it departs from the Augustinian model in moving towards a consideration of the ways in which the use of “ymages” might not be wholly ineffective or wicked. Holcot also adds to St Augustine's views by arguing that even when the intent is good – even when the use of such “ymages” is expressive of piety, rather than idolatry – such practices are less significant than the attitudes of mind they express. This distinctively Holcottian revision of the Augustinian analysis of superstition in Lectio 159 seems to have left its mark on Chaucer's discussion of magical practices in the Parson's Tale (X 602-607), and it is likely to have provided the immediate source for it. In particular, Holcot's reshaping of St Augustine's argument towards an emphasis on the effect of such charms on the hearts of believers is reflected by Chaucer's

speculative suggestion that God tolerates the use of “charmes” only so that “folk sholden yeve the moore feith and reverence to his name”.

* A version of this paper was presented at the New Chaucer Society Conference in Portland, Oregon, in July 2012.

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, ed. John M. Fyler, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), 347-73. See also Nick Havely, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer: The House of Fame*, 2nd edition, Durham Medieval and Renaissance Texts (Toronto, 2013).

² *The House of Fame*, lines 985-98: “And than thoughte y on Marcian,/ And eke on Antec Claudian,/ That sooth was her description/ Of alle the hevenes region”. For translations of these texts, see *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, trans. William H. Stahl (New York, 1977; repr. 1992) and *Anticlaudianus; or The Good and Perfect Man*, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto, 1973). On the *Anticlaudianus*, see further James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s ‘Anticlaudianus’ and John Gower’s ‘Confessio Amantis’* (Cambridge, U.K., 1995).

³ Quotations of the bible are taken from the Douai-Rheims/Vulgate text at www.drbo.org.

⁴ There is no complete modern edition of the Wisdom-commentary. When I cite it in this essay, I do so from my own translation. This is based on the Hagenau 1494 print (*Super libros sapientiae*, repr. in facsimile (Frankfurt-a-M, 1974) [henceforth **H**]. However, for the the readings in question, I have checked **H** against the manuscript copy of the Wisdom-commentary in Oxford, Balliol College, MS 27 [O] (using the photographs available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/balliolarchivist/albums/72157641118102464>) and also the Venice 1509 print (available online via an online facsimile hosted by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek: <https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/resolve/display/bsb10148926.html>) [V]. I occasionally emend my readings accordingly. **H** has no page-numbers, but I provide folio/page references to the equivalent passages in **O** and **V**.

⁵ Jenny Swanson, “Holcot, Robert (c.1290–1349)” in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford UP, 2006), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13485>, accessed: 6 May 2010.

⁶ Kate Oelzner Petersen, *On the sources of the Nonne prestes tale* (Boston, 1898), 103-108; Robert A. Pratt, “Some Latin Sources of the Nonnes Preest on Dreams”, *Speculum* 52 (1977): 538-70.

⁷ Pratt, “Some Latin Sources”, 539. The Lections are in question are nos. 103 and 202 in the manuscript used by Pratt, i.e. **O**. In **H** and **V**, these Lections are nos. 102 and 201.

⁸ **V**, p. 90rb; **O**, fol. 157rb.

⁹ **V**, p. 90va; **O**, fol. 157vb.

¹⁰ **V**, p. 171ra; **O**, fol. 299rb.

¹¹ Pratt, “Some Latin Sources”, 538.

¹² A. J. Minnis presents Chaucer’s knowledge of the Wisdom-commentary as a certainty: see *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge, U.K., (1982), 3; cf. *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd edn (Aldershot, 1984), 165. By contrast, William H. Watts argues that “the case for Holcot’s influence on Chaucer is less clear-cut than the near-universal acceptance of the *Wisdom Commentary* as a source for *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* would seem to suggest”; he thinks it unlikely that Chaucer is unlikely to have made use of the works of clerks like Holcot because “we find in Chaucer’s poetry, a kind of anti-clericalism, focused not on the worldly abuses of the religious orders but on the hubris and misdirected studies of clerks” (“Chaucer’s Clerks and the Value of Philosophy”, in *Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives*, ed. Hugo Keiper, Christoph Bode and Richard J. Utz (Amsterdam, 1997), 145-55, at 152-53).

¹³ Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the early Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960), 73.

¹⁴ Smalley, *English Friars*, 202. Holcot certainly had a fine sense of humour: see K.H. Tachau, “Looking Gravely at Dominican Puns: The “Sermons” of Robert Holcot and Ralph Friseby”, *Traditio* 46 (1991): 337-45.

¹⁵ Hester Goodenough Gelber, *Exploring the Boundaries of Reason: Three Questions on the Nature of God by Robert Holcot*, *OP* (Toronto, 1983), at 1, 28. See also the recent biography of

Holcot by John T. Slotemaker and Jeffrey C. Witt, *Robert Holcot* (New York, 2016). Richard Sharpe provides a list of Holcot's works in *A Handlist of the Latin writers of Great Britain and Ireland before 1540* (Turnhout, 1997; repr. 2001, with corrections), 553-58.

¹⁶ See Neil Cartlidge, "Wayward Sons and Failing Fathers: Chaucer's Moralistic Paternalism – and a Possible Source for the Cook's Tale", *Chaucer Review* 47 (2012): 134-60, and "Ripples on the Water? The Acoustics of Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the Influence of Robert Holcot", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 39 (2017): 57-98.

¹⁷ continuo] **V**; conuiuio **H**; conditio **O**

¹⁸ Holcot makes similar points elsewhere, see e.g. Lektion 123: "Even when, by however much labour and effort, the true dimensions of the earth are discovered, and afterwards the true dimensions of the sun and the whole firmament, this cannot easily be comprehended by us. When therefore we are incapable of understanding even these things, it is clear that without a gift or revelation from we can hardly attain to those things that no sense and no experiment might bring forth" (my translation). See also Holcot's *Sentences-Commentary*, *In Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Quaestiones* (Lyons, 1518; repr. Frankfurt, 1967), Book 1, Questio 5, f. 2ra: "It is not unfitting that natural logic falls short in those matters that belong to faith. And therefore, just as faith is above the physics of nature, determining those things that are produced by creation, and to which natural philosophy does not attain, so the moral doctrine of faith determines those principles that moral knowledge does not concede" (again, my translation).

¹⁹ naturaliter] nate **VO**; nati **H**

²⁰ Cf. *City of God*, XXI. 7: "For God is certainly called 'Almighty' for one reason only; that he has the power to do whatever he wills, and he has the power to create so many things which would be reckoned obviously impossible, if they were not displayed to our senses or else reported by witnesses who have always proved reliable" (trans. Henry Bettenson, *St Augustine: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (Harmondsworth, 1984), 977).

²¹ et] **O**; **HV** om.

²² dicunt] **HV**; non dicunt **O**

²³ On the identification of Holcot as one of Bradwardine's "Pelagians", see Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of his 'De Causa Dei' and its Opponents* (Cambridge,

U.K., 1957), 221; William J. Courtenay, *Schools & Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton NJ, 1987), 294-303; Calvin Normore, “Future contingents”, in Norman Kretzmann, et al. (eds), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, U.K., 1982), 358-81, at 373-77; and Edit Anna Lukács, in *Thomas Bradwardine: De causa Dei contra Pelagium et de virtute causarum: Auszüge Lateinisch-Deutsch* (Göttingen, 2013), 33-36. It has been argued that it is anachronistic and “unhelpful” to describe Holcot as a sceptic (see e.g. Slotemaker and Witt, *Robert Holcot*, 65-66), but this argument seems to me to rely on a definition of scepticism that is so narrow as to be, in its own way, even more unhelpful. Holcot and Bradwardine probably knew each other personally: both men were associated with the circle of Richard Bury, Bishop of Durham, on which see Christopher R. Cheney, “Richard de Bury, Borrower of Books”, *Speculum* 48 (1973): 325-28; Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars*, 133-37; and Courtenay, “Bury, Richard (1287–1345)”, in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford UP, 2004), item 4153 (where this group is described as “the single most notable circle or sequence of scholars under the patronage of one person in fourteenth-century England”).

²⁴ David P. Baker argues that the Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale and *Troilus and Criseyde* particularly clearly reflect the different philosophical positions represented by Holcot and Bradwardine (“Literature, Logic and Mathematics in the Fourteenth Century”, unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Durham, 2013) [<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/7716/>], esp. 107-32 and 150-74.

²⁵ creaturarum] **OV**; creaturam **H**

²⁶ falsam] **HV**; fallacem **O**

²⁷ sompniatores] **O**; **HV** *om.*

²⁸ psalmistici geomantici] palmistrici geomantici **O**; psalmistici vel psalmistici geomantici

HV

²⁹ “Natural magic” is a term with a complex set of connotations, not all of which were negative, even in the early modern period, as Stuart Clark emphasises. Even in this period, it was “a subject which is now recognized to have had very considerable intellectual appeal across broad sections of the scholarly community” (*Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), 217).

³⁰ See Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols (New York, 1923–1958), 2:220-25, 2:855-59, 3:607-609; also Thorndike, “Traditional Medieval Tracts concerning engraved astrological Images”, in *Mélanges Auguste Pelzer: Études d'histoire littéraire et doctrinale de la Scholastique médiévale* (Louvain, 1947), 217-73; and more recently Don Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, 2006).

³¹ *The Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn*, ed./trans. Sigmund Eisner and Gary Mac Eoin (London, 1980); *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, ed. John Reidy, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 662-83, at 683.

³² *Kalendarium*, ed. Eisner and Mac Eoin, 210-11: “images and sculptures are made in stones so that they may receive the worth of precious stones from the influence of heaven.” Nicholas here cites the authority of “Thebith” (i.e. Thābit ibn Qurra, *De imaginibus*), on whose influence see Thorndike, *History*, 2:661-65.

³³ Jean Gerson, “Contra superstitionem sculpturae leonis” (1428), ed. Palémon Glorieux, in *Jean Gerson: Œuvres complètes*, 10 vols (Paris, 1960–74), 10:131-34, noted by Richard Kieckhefer, in *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, U.K., 1989), at 132, who is cited in turn by Havely, at 200. Similar images are discussed by Arnald of Villanova (Thorndike, *History*, 4: 857), who mentions lead rather than gold, and for whom the effect is an anaesthetic, and by Peter of Padua (aka Peter of Abano: see Thorndike, *History*, 4:899).

³⁴ See also Lecture 189.

³⁵ eos] **HV**; eo **O**

³⁶ **V**, p. 136b; **O**, fol. 236vb.

³⁷ St Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, II 76, ed. G. M. Green, CSEL 80 (Vienna, 1963), trans. R. P. H. Green, *Saint Augustine: On Christian Teaching* (Oxford, 1997), 48.

³⁸ Green, 48-49.

³⁹ caligas] **HV**; vestes **O**

⁴⁰ Cathonem] **HV**; Catho bene **O**

⁴¹ mirabile] **HV**; mirabili **O**

⁴² infortunii] **HV**; & infortunato **O**

⁴³ Quintain fever is the bacterial disease that we would nowadays call trench fever.

44 certam constellationem] **HV**; certas constellaciones **O**

45 See Glorieux 3: 6 and 5: 293, 297 and 300; “Ockham et ejus imitator Holcot” (5: 297).

46 a corporibus celestibus] **O**; **HV** *om.*

47 aliam] **HV**; aliquam **O**.

48 sciendum est quod] **HV**; **O** *om.*

49 tales imagines] **HV**; **O** *om.*

50 possit] **HV**; posset **O**

51 putas] **HV**; putatur **O**

52 caracteres] **VO**; caractes **H**

53 si] **HV**; similiter **O**

54 continue] **HV**; cotidie **O**

55 legitur] **HV**; *om.* **O**

56 auribus] **O** aure **HV**.

57 Cui] *Aquinas* Cur **HV**

58 colla] **HV**; collum suspensa **O**

59 St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II 96, Art. 4. Cf. also PL 95: 1246, where similar sentiments are expressed in a sermon ascribed to Heiric of Auxerre (841–76).

60 Wenzel (in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 961) says that “Chaucer’s subsuming *sortilegium* under swearing, a branch of wrath, is peculiar.”