Witchcraft in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Friar's Tale*

"ALAS!" SHE WAILED, "I HAVE DONE NO EVIL"
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1. Introduction

Ideas about witchcraft and sorcery have existed for a very long time, and are, for instance, already present in Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey*. It is not surprising that a lot has been written on this subject in literary works, as well as in scholarly essays. It was exactly through the written works of scholars and the clergy that witch hunts gained momentum in Europe during the fourteenth century (Ben-Yehuda 4). After the fourteenth century, ideas about the practice of witchcraft and witches were described much more vividly than before, which encouraged the witch-craze as well. However, the first witch trials in Europe took place in the years 1245 and 1275 (Ben-Yehuda 4). This means that witchcraft and ideas about this practice were already extant during Geoffrey Chaucer's life, since he lived from approximately 1343 to 1400. Therefore, it is not surprising that in some of Chaucer's work, such as the *Friar's Tale*, elements of sorcery can be found.

The present paper is a re-examination of Jennifer Culver's study of witchcraft in Chaucer's the *Friar's Tale*. Culver's study "Charity Refused and Curses Uttered in Chaucer's *Friar's Tale*" does not offer a sufficiently satisfactory evaluation of the important factors that contribute to the presence of witchcraft in this tale. The present research will analyse the presence of witchcraft in the *Friar's Tale* and will argue that the importance of witchcraft in the *Friar's Tale* is greater than was assumed in former studies, such as Culver's.

Jennifer Culver's analysis of witchcraft in the *Friar's Tale* argues that the old woman in this tale is merely a predecessor of the stereotype of old women as witches that is prevalent during the Early Modern Period. In her research she focuses on England, since, she argues, that notions of witchcraft in England differed from those on the Continent. However, due to Chaucer's profession and his travels it cannot be assumed that Chaucer had no knowledge of the political, social and religious issues that concerned the Continent or the literature that was produced there, as will be seen. For this reason the historical background of witchcraft in both

England and the rest of Europe, and how it applies to the *Friar's Tale*, will be treated in this paper. Moreover, in her conclusion concerning the widow, Culver neglects some allusions to the widow's own involvement in witchcraft. The conclusion that Culver draws from her study regarding the summoner is that he is merely in a spiritually degenerate state (59-63). However, Culver fails to recognise the importance of the pact that the summoner makes with the devil. These issues will be addressed in this paper.

This paper is organised as follows. In chapter one, the historical, legal and social context of witchcraft in Europe and England will be examined. Issues regarding the history of witchcraft in Europe will be explored and whether and how these issues are relevant to the *Friar's Tale*. The second chapter will contain an inquiry into the role of the old woman and will revise Jennifer Culver's view on the involvement of old women or widows with witchcraft. Chapter three will investigate the role that the summoner has in the *Friar's Tale* and his involvement in witchcraft. In this chapter, the issue of whether the summoner knew he was making a pact with the devil and how the answer to that question influences his involvement in witchcraft will be examined. Furthermore, Chaucer's use of witchcraft in the quarrel between the friar and the summoner will be analysed.

2. Witchcraft in the Middle Ages

While maintaining a particular interest in England, this chapter will consider attitudes towards witchcraft in Europe as a whole during the Middle Ages, since Chaucer was an educated man who was far from isolated from the rest of Europe. This can be found in both his works and his travels. As Derek Brewer shows, Chaucer went to Italy in December 1372 and returned in May 1373 (99). Since England and France were at war during this period, Chaucer's journey brought him through the Low Countries, Germany and Switzerland, in order to avoid the dangerous French territory (99-101). According to Brewer, it was in Italy that Chaucer encountered Boccacio's poems for the first time, and "bought his own copy of [Dante's] *The Divine Comedy*." (102) For instance, Boccacio's *Il Filostrato* is the basis of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Brewer 103) and many other continental works inspired Chaucer's own work (Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel). This shows that Chaucer had knowledge of important European societal developments, problems or anxieties, not only because those were reflected in these authors' works, but because he had been to the continent as well. This is the reason that the witch trials preceding Chaucer's death and the conceptions of witchcraft that were extant throughout Europe during his lifetime should be examined to establish a proper idea of Chaucer's perspective on witchcraft in the *Friar's Tale*.

The aspect that Jennifer Culver mainly focuses on in her inquiry into the history of witchcraft is the difference between the continental chronology and the chronology of witchcraft in England at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern Period. She focuses on this to support her claim that the old woman of the Friar's Tale is merely a prototype of the stereotype of witches that is to come in the Early Modern Period. According to Culver, the ideas that prevailed on the continent were concerned with the disruption of society through witchcraft and the relationships that were formed between the Devil and witches (46). Culver states that the early ideas that existed about witchcraft in

England were mainly concerned with *maleficia* which consists of "bad actions against another person." (46) The crime of *maleficia* can be found in the first statute that made witchcraft a felony in England from 1542 (Culver 46). However, this law was repealed in 1547, only to be followed by a new statute in 1563, which was repealed in 1604. The 1604 law was, in turn, repealed in 1736 (Thomas 525 qtd. in Culver 46). The only statute that included a pact with the Devil was this final law. However, fear of magic was already extant throughout Europe and evidence of this fear can be found in laws dealing with magic. For instance, the Synod of Benevento prohibited magic in 1378 and the English "Parliament approved the statute *De haeretico comburendo* [in 1401], specifying the stake for all convicted heretics [, including witches] who would not recant, or having recanted, became recidivists." (Jeffrey Burton Russell 204).

Richard Kieckhefer examines witchcraft between 1300 and 1500 in Europe more closely than Jennifer Culver, in addition to some cases in England, and provides a useful chronology. Kieckhefer states that between 1300 and 1500 witchcraft was (allegedly) practised "predominantly in England, the Low Countries, France, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany." (*European* 8-9) Furthermore, he indicates that witchcraft was extant before 1300 as well, and that both sorcery and diabolism were involved, but that the numbers are too insignificant to be used in establishing a pattern of accusations (*European* 8). This shows that, even though the pact with the Devil was only included in the law in 1604, ideas about diabolism, including the pact, already existed well before that. In his chronology of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Kieckhefer has examined the intensity of witchcraft and the form that it took. Taking that into account, he divides these centuries into four phases "extending roughly from 1300 to 1330, from 1330 to 1375, from 1375 to 1435, and from

1435 to 1500."[1] (Kieckhefer *European* 10) In order to keep the discussion limited to

Chaucer's time, only the first three phases will be discussed.

The first period (1300 to 1330) is characterised by a low number of persecutions

throughout Europe (Kieckhefer *European* 10). Even though the majority of accusations

appeared in France, Germany's and England's contribution to the total number of

persecutions is significant as well (Kieckhefer *European* 10). Another characterisation of this

phase is that the trials often had a political nature (Kieckhefer *European* 10; Russell 193-4).

The belief that opponents of countries' leaders used sorcery in order to dispose of that leader

and to obtain the throne for themselves was one of the predominant anxieties that became

apparent in these early trials (Kieckhefer *European* 10). An example of the political use of

witchcraft is England's and France's prosecution of the Templars between 1306 and 1314

(Russell 194-7; Kieckhefer *European* 14). The Templars were accused of witchcraft because

it was a very effective method in disposing of "an organisation whose great political power

threatened" England's king, Edward II, France's king, Philip IV and Pope Clement V (Russell

195). The crimes of which the Templars were accused included idolatry, paganism, invocation

of the devil and, once, even a pact with the devil (Russell 194-197). Another example from

England is a man who was hanged during Edward II's reign after being accused of attempting

to obtain the crown through diabolical aid in either 1314 or 1315 (Kittredge 242; Kieckhefer

European 13; 109). Moreover, this man had (allegedly) served the devil for over three years

(Kittredge 242; Kieckhefer *European* 109). Even though witchcraft and sorcery were

predominantly used for political purposes, accusations of diabolism were extremely rare

during this period and whenever they occurred, they are "not described in great detail" nor

were they of great importance (Kieckhefer *European* 14-5).

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[1] Jeffrey Burton Russell maintains a different categorisation of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. The relevant periods in his work are from 1300 to 1360, which is characterised by politically motivated witch trials, and from 1360 to 1427 (167-225). The latter stage, according to Russell, is the start of the witch craze in which witchcraft was increasingly viewed as a form of heresy (167-225).

This insignificance of the vaguely defined diabolism in witch trials is still noticeable from 1330 to 1375 (Kieckhefer *European* 16). However, this period differs from the first in the number of persecutions and their character (Kieckhefer *European* 16). Kieckhefer states that due to Edward III's and Philip VI's policies, the political situations in both England and France had stabilised which meant that these leaders were less inclined to use accusations of witchcraft as a political weapon than former kings (*European* 15-6). Even though this led to a decline in politically motivated witch trials, the number of trials decreased only slightly (Kieckhefer *European* 16). Moreover, most trials still occurred in France and Germany, with a few exceptions in Italy and England (Kieckhefer *European* 16).

The final stage from 1375 to 1435 is characterised by "a steady increase in the number of trials for witchcraft in general, and ... an intensification of concern for diabolism." (Kieckhefer *European* 18) However, Kieckhefer indicates that the increase in the number of trials should be treated with caution as they may be due to the fact that more judicial records from this period survived in comparison to the preceding periods (Kieckhefer *European* 18). The increase in witch trials may be due to the papal inquisitors who, when "faced with a shortage of legitimate subjects, ... frequently tended to focus their attentions on religious eccentrics, marginally heretic communities, political subjects, and alleged witches" (Kieckhefer *European* 19), targeting "women, Jews and heretics" in general (Russell 199). Moreover, the threat of heresy decreased which gave the ecclesiastical judges an opportunity to persecute witches (Kieckhefer *European* 20). However, the time that elapsed between this decrease in the threat of heresy and the augmentation of witch trials is too great to indicate a clear connection between heresy and witchcraft (Kieckhefer *European* 20). This means that the increase in witch trials and the involvement of diabolism in these trials must have different origins. Even though Kieckhefer indicates that the causal relationship between heresy and witchcraft is vague, witchcraft was increasingly viewed as a form of heresy through the works

and statements of jurists and theologians during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Kieckhefer *European* 22). Moreover, he states that diabolism was involved in trials of heretics "as early as the eleventh century." (Kieckhefer *European* 22) In 1398, theologians at the University of Paris decided that "idolatry and apostasy [that were] accomplished through a tacit or express pact with the devil" was both witchcraft and heresy, and thus inquisitors were permitted to persecute witches (Kieckhefer *European* 22; Russell 202; 204). In addition to this, the stereotypes that were predominantly used to find and identify heretics formerly, were transposed onto witches (Kieckhefer *European* 22). However, Russell shows the inquisitors alone were not responsible for enhancing the number of witch trials and the connection between heresy and witchcraft (211-19). Russell indicates that many cases of witchcraft were judged by secular courts, which often made the connection between heresy and witchcraft after the initial indictment of witchcraft had taken place (211-19). Another development that contributed to the presence of diabolism in witch trials is the fact that during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, theologians started to describe diabolism "in great, pornographic detail" in their works (Kieckhefer *European* 22). This literature not only heightened the sense of fear for witchcraft, but is simultaneously a reflection of the fear of witchcraft that was extant in society, especially amongst the educated elite (Kieckhefer *European* 23). Kieckhefer remarks that it is not surprising that most trials for witchcraft which included diabolism were found in Italy, since "legal scholarship was most developed" there (*European* 23). However, according to Russell, there were theoreticians who chose not to believe in magic or witchcraft and attempted to cease the craze that had been triggered by other writers (204). One of the arguments of these theoreticians was that diabolism was deception, because demons only existed through the power of God (Russell 207). Moreover, demons did not have the power to "transform reality", although they "could cause illusions by changing appearances." (Russell 207) Thus, all actions of alleged witches were not actually

performed by witches, or women, but by demons who had taken on the shape of women (Russell 207). However, Russell shows that the writings of these sceptics were not sufficient "to provide much resistance to harsh judicial procedures or to discourage the development of credulity on the part of later theoreticians." (208) Furthermore, the plague may have incited the augmentation of witch trials from 1375 onwards as well. William Bowsky suggests that the "long-term social effects of the plague, particularly in those areas where it brought migration from the countryside into the cities, may have stimulated social friction that could have aggravated the preoccupation with witchcraft." (qtd. in Kieckhefer *European* 19) While the developments mentioned above increased the amount of witch trials and the amount of cases in which diabolism was one of the accusations, the importance of diabolism to history is such that it was predominantly used to embellish accusations against individuals (Kieckhefer *European* 93). Kieckhefer indicates that the significance of diabolism can be found in "intellectual history" (*European* 93). The principal concern that caused fear in medieval society remained sorcery (Kieckhefer *European* 93).

The social circumstances of witchcraft and the accused witches are not always clear. For instance, records rarely show the age and social class of the accused (Kieckhefer *European* 95-6). The marital status of suspects is more often provided by the records and shows that suspects were "more frequently married than unmarried or widowed." (Kieckhefer *European* 96) Furthermore, it is difficult to determine whether witchcraft was predominantly a concern of townsmen or countrymen (Kieckhefer *European* 95). However, Kieckhefer indicates that it is feasible "that witchcraft before 1500 was primarily a preoccupation of townsmen." (*European* 94) Kieckhefer suggests that the people who left the countryside for the towns due to the plague, may have felt alienated in the towns and "must have suffered profound disorientation" (*European* 95). Due to this social disorientation, migrants may have been more inclined to blame witches for incomprehensible or inexplicable events, thus

causing the amount of accusations of witchcraft to increase (Kieckhefer *European* 95). In addition, Kieckhefer states that the growing social mobility in towns led to a change in family structure, which "provoked the first surge of witch accusations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries." (*European* 102) This change in family structure caused women to lose their traditional role (Kieckhefer *European* 95). Moreover, the breakdown of family structures caused "greater insecurity for females, [and] rivalry between ... women" (Kieckhefer *European* 95). Russell indicates that women had a difficult position in society as well, which he attributes to the effects of the plague and the fact that "women tend to outlive men" and were thus left alone (202). Moreover, alleged witches were sometimes accused of inferior morality or of "violation of moral norms" (Kieckhefer *European* 96). This can be found in a treatise of Cologne as well, in which "illusions" of witchcraft and diabolism were not merely a result of devils, but of "disturbed minds" (Russell 207). This mental deterioration was particularly applied to women "whose flighty minds are more susceptible to delusion than those of men." (Russell 207) It is, therefore, not surprising that the majority of accused witches were female (Kieckhefer *European* 96).

3. The Portrayal of the Widow as a Witch

The depiction of the widow in the *Friar's Tale* is seemingly in accordance with the stereotypical contemporary association of widows with witchcraft. However, Culver states that the widow "foreshadows the stereotype perfectly in her appearance and by her predicament, but not in her ability" and that while "she may resemble the popular hag/witch image that is to come, Chaucer does not reduce her to that." (70) First of all, Culver describes the portrait of the old woman as presented in the tale. According to Culver, the widow can be seen as a social outcast since she was *somewhat out of towne*[2] "short way out of town"[3] (l.1571) and the summoner suggests she is uncharitable when he states that she *hadde almost as life to lese hir nekke/ As for to yeve a peny of hir good* "[would] rather lose her neck than give a little,/ A single penny, of her goods" (ll.1574-5) (49). This is not an unfamiliar status for widows in Chaucer's time, since Culver shows that widows either had to provide for themselves or were dependent on their neighbours (49). However, due to the absence of a male figure in the widow's life, she was often seen as straying from the path of morality and social norms and was, as a result, seen as a threat to society (Levack 143-4; Culver 49). Moreover, widows were characterized as having a "vicious tongue" and tended to curse or insult frequently (Culver 49). These negative contemporary notions of widows are reflected through the summoner who never calls the old woman a widow or simply a woman, but refers to her with various denigrating terms, such as *virytrate* "old hag" (l. 1582), *rebekke* "fiddle" (l.1573), and *stot* "old cow" (l.1630). However, the widow's initial actions show her to be more virtuous than the summoner depicts her (Culver 50). For instance, after the summoner's verbal abuse (l. 1582) and accusation of her having *som frere or preest* "Some friar or priest" (l. 1583) with her, she admits him to her house and kindly calls him *sire* "sir" (l. 1585).

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[2] Quotations in Middle English all come from: Chaucer, G. "The Canterbury Tales" *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 23-328. Print.
[3] Quotations in Modern English all come from: Chaucer, G. *The Canterbury Tales*. Trans. Ronald L. Ecker. Palatka: Hodge and Braddock Publishers, 1993. Web.

However, the fiend does not denigrate the old woman in depicting her by using such hostile terms the summoner uses (Godfrey 308). This means that the audience initially receives an ambiguous image. On the one hand they are shown a widow that is to be feared as a neighbour. On the other hand, the widow's actions and the fact that the devil addresses her in a politer manner than the summoner does, and thus does not show a negative stereotypical attitude towards the widow, contribute to a much gentler image of this woman that the audience receives.

The audience's perception of the widow changes towards the negative stereotypical image of widows when the old woman utters her curse. To understand why the widow's curses would change the audience's perception of her, contemporary notions on curses should be examined. First of all, the separation between magic and religion that is prevalent today, was not evidently present during the Middle Ages (Culver 50). For instance, the Church viewed certain rituals or "the repetition of certain 'holy' words" as actions with the aim of remaining virtuous (Thomas 47, qtd in Culver 50). As Kieckhefer shows, holy words, or charms, were considered to have power and were labelled magic by some people, while others distinguished between prayers and magic (*Magic* 75). Nonetheless, many people did believe in the power of words. These holy words can be categorised into prayers, blessings and adjurations or exorcisms (Kieckhefer *Magic* 69). Prayers were aimed at either "God, Christ, Mary or a saint." (Kieckhefer *Magic* 69) Blessings were seen as wishes, while adjurations were seen as commands aimed at worms, demons, elves or other agents (Kieckhefer *Magic* 69). Curses were seen as charms that were used in order to harm something or someone (Kieckhefer *Magic* 82). However, the Church allowed curses in some instances, for example "as retribution against immoral behaviour", but Culver clearly indicates that not everyone in England approved of these curses since it was seen as an attempt to command God (51). The belief in the power of words is shown through the popular conception that curses were seen as

highly effective, especially if they were uttered in "justified anger" (Culver 52). Through this, the poor were excusably able to curse "those who refused alms." (Thomas 62-4 qtd. Culver 52) Moreover, the general public viewed their curses as justified "divine moral retribution" for the injustice done to them (Culver 52). The old woman appears to curse out of justified anger in the *Friar's Tale* as well, which indicates that the audience may have perceived the widow's curses as justified. However, it is important to note that older women were often accused of cursing (Culver 50). These accusations were often made by people living in the woman's immediate surroundings (Culver 53; Kieckhefer *European* 193). Furthermore, there are known cases of witches who uttered curses after being refused alms (Kieckhefer *European* 100-1). Even though the old woman "appears to be speaking out of frustration originating from a false accusation with no hope for recourse" (Culver 58), the audience may not have felt sympathy for her due to their familiarity with the extant stereotype and the inherent anxieties of this stereotype. Moreover, the fact that the widow is a fictional character who cannot harm the audience if they have negative views on her, which was a very real anxiety in society (Culver 56), may have obliterated the audience's sympathy.

The issues of intent and competence concerning curses are important in creating an image of the old woman, because they show that she may have been involved in witchcraft. Culver shows that the fact that the widow is on her knees (l.1625) indicates that she was preparing to curse the summoner since this was part of "making a formal curse" (Thomas 605, qtd. in Culver 66) which means that it truly was her aim to damn the summoner. Her intentions become evident when her curses are compared to the carter's curses. While the carter curses his horse and cart out of frustration similar to the way in which the old woman utters her curses, the devil gives the carter the opportunity to calm himself and to recall his curse, because he did not sincerely wish his belongings to be damned (Culver 66). As Mary Godfrey shows, this is absent from the scene with the old woman, since the fiend immediately

asks her *Is this youre wyl in ernest that ye seye?* "Is this your real desire, what you have

said?" (l.1627) (314-5) Even though the woman adapts her curse so that it appears gentler, she

consistently shows true intent in cursing the summoner unless he repents (l. 1629). This true

intent then shows that she curses with the aim of harming someone, which was seen as a form

of magic, and thus witchcraft. Even though Culver alludes to the ignorance of the old woman

concerning the presence of the devil (59), the fact that the repetition of her curse is provoked

by the devil's question instead of by mere persistent anger, as in the case of the carter, seems

to indicate that she is aware of the devil's presence. According to Culver, the presence of the

fiend and his request to clarify the intent behind her curse show that Chaucer was "hinting to

later and popular demonological ideas about curses, as some believed that successful curses

reflected a witch in league with the Devil." (Thomas 611, qtd. in Culver 59) Moreover, Culver

suggests that the widow's plead for the divine assistance of Saint Mary (l. 1604) shows that

the widow believes herself to be capable of requesting divine judgement instead of her belief

in her own competence to alter her predicament (58). This would indicate that the widow did

not believe herself capable of damning the summoner as well (Culver 58). However, the first

curse she utters indicates that she initially considers herself capable of damning the summoner

since she explicitly says that she will give the summoner's body and her pan to the devil

(l.1623). In the second curse she reduces her power by stating that the devil *so fecche hym er*

he deye "fetch him ere he's dead" (l.1628). This is an example of the notion that became

increasingly predominant from 1350 onwards that women were capable of committing

necromancy (Bailey 986-7), defined as the invocation of demons or the Devil (Kieckhefer

Magic 152-3). This necromancy was incorporated in the notion of witchcraft (Bailey 988).

However, witches were believed to have greater power over demons than necromancers

(Bailey 988). Bailey shows that women's power was gained through pact by stating that

women gained their power through "submission and subservience to Satan—characteristically

female qualities." (988) Moreover, Bailey denotes that the stereotype of the poor woman as a witch was already present in Chaucer's time by stating that "the common sorcerer, typically poor, uneducated, and often a woman, became the humble yet terrible witch. She, too, was seen mainly as a tool of demons and of the devil" (989). Furthermore, the fact that a fiend was willing to execute any command by a human already indicates a previous form of worship of the demon "even when no obvious rituals of invocation or worship were present" (Bailey 984). The fact that the widow in the tale invokes the devil to help her out of her difficult situation shows that she believes in the power of the devil and that there may have been a previous relation between the woman and the devil, even though there is no clear textual evidence for this.

The only hint that Chaucer gives to previous contact between the devil and the old woman can be found in the devil's utterance *Mabely, myn owene mooder deere* "Mabel, my own mother dear" (l.1626). While it remains remarkable that the devil knows the widow's name, Jacqueline de Weever shows that the devil may have called her *Mabely* "Mabel" (l. 1626) because it "was probably one popular form of address to an old woman." (227) Even more peculiar is the fact that the demon calls her his own mother. One explanation for this can be found when the analogues for the *Friar's Tale* are taken into consideration. As shown by Archer Taylor, one of the principal differences between Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* and other analogues is the fact that the analogues have a tripartite structure while Chaucer's tale has a bipartite structure (qtd. in Jacobs and Jungman 257). The analogues contain a man cursing an animal, followed by a woman cursing her child, and finally a woman cursing a greedy man (Jacobs and Jungman 257). Chaucer's tale only consist of the first and the final elements, but Jacobs and Jungman show that while "Chaucer deliberately omits the second curse—the angry mother cursing her crying child— ... he has not forgotten it." (257) According to Jacobs and Jungman, the element of a mother cursing her child is incorporated in the woman cursing

a greedy man through the fact that the devil addresses the old woman as his own mother (257-8). Through this expression, the summoner becomes the widow's son, because brotherhood between the summoner and the devil has already been established (Jacobs and Jungman 256-8). According to Jacobs and Jungman, the brotherhood of the summoner and the devil is established through spiritual bonds (258). However, "professional fraternity" inspires Chaucer's use of the words brother and brotherhood and "from the summoner's viewpoint, this is the ideal bond of financial remuneration and profit." (Godfrey 315) The devil's profession is made explicit in the tale when he tells the summoner about his trade (ll.1475-1522) which includes actions that are associated with witchcraft, such as the use of dead bodies, for instance the use of Samuel's body when he was summoned by the Witch of Endor (ll.1507-10). The fact that he draws the widow into the familial relationship alludes to the possibility that she belongs to the professional fraternity of witchcraft as well, even though she is called mother instead of brother or sister. Furthermore, brother and sister are terms that can be used for denoting equals, but mothers always have some manner of authority over their children. This indicates both the fact that the widow is able to curse the summoner and the fact that she is capable of making the devil take the summoner to hell, by which she has authority over both of them.

Another allusion to the widow's involvement in witchcraft can be found through examination of differences between Chaucer's tale and the analogues. One important difference concerns the companion of the devil who, in the analogues, either demands his last victim's cow[4], or demands nothing and is damned by the townspeople[5] (Nicholson 87-99). In Chaucer's tale, however, the summoner demands the widow's *newe panne* "brand-new pan" (l.1614). It has been suggested that *panne* is a misreading or a local variant of the word penny

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[4] This occurs both in Der Stricker's poem as well as in Robert Rypon's sermon A Greedy Bailiff (Nicholson 87-99).
[5] This happens in a Latin exemplum by Caesarius of Heisterbach called *Libri VIII Miraculorum*, the anonymous *De Injustitia* and the anonymous *Narracio de qudoam senescallo sceleroso* (Nicholson 91-7).

(Horobin 430). Even though both the summoner and the widow use the variant *pens* "pence" (l.1599; l.1604; l.1607), S.C.P. Horobin argues that the variant of *panne* is chosen by Chaucer in order to rhyme with *Seinte Anne* "Saint Anne" (l.1613). However, the variant *panne* is used in following lines as well (l.1623; l.1629; l.1635), even though it is not used in those lines to create rhyme. Furthermore, the summoner previously used the singular variant *peny* "penny" (l.1575) instead of *panne*. This indicates that both the summoner and the widow could have reverted to using a variant of penny with the initial vowel /e/ instead of /a/. Moreover, the summoner, in referring to the widow's *newe panne* "brand-new pan" (l.1614), could not have known that she had a new penny unless she told him, which she does not, while a new pan would be more easily perceived. Furthermore, the summoner states that he will *bere awey*, which means bear or carry[6], her *newe panne* (l.1614). This indicates that the word *panne* should not be defined as penny, but should be seen as the definition provided by the *Middle English Dictionary* as "[a] metal or earthenware vessel, usually used for heating; a caldron, pot, or pan" (H. Kurath and S. Kuhn et al. qtd. in Horobin 426). This means that by using the word *panne* for pan, Chaucer may have alluded to the cauldron as well. This is significant, because as Margaret Alice Murray shows, "the cauldron is one of the most important accessories of a witch in popular estimation" (71). This allusion shows that Chaucer hints at a deeper involvement of the widow in witchcraft than she appears to have had.

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[6] This definition can be found in the glossary of *The Riverside Chaucer* (1220).

4. The Summoner's Spirituality

The summoner's character and his associations with the devil are of great importance in discovering his involvement in witchcraft in the *Friar's Tale*. Culver suggests that the summoner is merely in a state of "spiritual degeneration." (59) One of the reasons for this view is that the summoner fails to recognise that the yeoman is in fact the devil, even though Chaucer provides several clues for discovering the yeoman's true identity (Culver 60). The first of these clues is the green jacket that the yeoman wears. According to Dale Randall, green was both "the color of fairies" (480) and "the color that was associated with the dead" (479). John MacCulloch shows that there are "a good many stories [that] depict Satan or one of his crew dresses in green." (29-30 qtd. in Randall 481) Furthermore, green was believed to be associated with the "Celtic underworld." (Robertson 470-1) However, Robertson suggests that Chaucer, or his friar, may not have known this (471). Thus Robertson concludes that the reason that the fiend wears green is due to the analogy with the green garments of a hunter (471-2). While it is indeed true that green was the traditional colour for hunters, the devil is often portrayed as a "hunter and a knight in a green mantle" as well (August Wünsche 10 qtd. in Randall 481; Earle Birney 89). Moreover, Maximilian Rudwin shows that both the Spaniards and the French have a saying that associates the devil with green clothing (46), "the Devil often wears a suit of green cloth" which indicates that the association between the devil and the colour green exists in other cultures as well (49).

Another sign of the yeoman's diabolic character is in accordance with the image of the devil as a hunter, namely the hunter's weapon, the bow and arrows, that he carries (l. 1381). According to several scholars, the devil was often depicted as carrying a bow and arrows (Birney 90; Miller 211). Another allusion to the yeoman being a devil is the black colour of his fringes (l. 1383). Further on in the tale, black is associated with the devil again when the widows says *Unto the devel blak and rough of hewe/ Yeve I thy body and my panne also!*

"Now may the devil, black, rough-hided too, /Take both your body and that pan from me!" (ll. 1623-3). Apart from green, black was often associated with the devil as well, since "devils frequently wore black mantles in Germanic legends" (Birney 105; Miller 213).

Another important clue to the yeoman's identity is his place of origin. In the tale the yeoman says that he comes from *the north contree* "In the north country" (l.1413). This is significant because contemporary ecclesiastical and secular notions in "Christian Europe" concerning the devil's residence state that the North is the preferred dwelling of the devil (Rudwin 63-4). This idea can not only be found in the Bible, but appears to be "first of all ... traced to the ancient sun-cult." (Rudwin 63) This indicates that the idea that the devil resided in the north was very common and widely accepted in the Middle Ages. Culver, as well as others, states that "[despite] clues, the summoner cannot recognize his traveling companion." (60) However, there may be a slight indication that the summoner may have suspected the yeoman's true identity. When the devil reveals his identity, the summoner responds by exclaiming *Benedicte! what sey ye?/ I wende ye were a yeman trewely* "'Ah, benedicite! what's that you say?'/ The summoner said. 'I truly figured you/ a yeoman'" (ll. 1456-7). According to Birney, the summoner's relatively calm response to the discovery that he has made a pact with the devil indicates that the summoner was a great villain and therefore did not fear the devil (94). This is true, but his tranquil response may indicate that the summoner suspected the yeoman of being a devil as well. However, since this is only a slight indication of the summoner's suspicion, it is not enough evidence to assume that the summoner knew who the yeoman was. As Culver states, the summoner "[as] a member of the clergy, ... should have been able to recognize the fiend, but instead he tries to identify more with the demon by claiming he has the same occupation as the fiend (l. 1392)." (60) The fact that he appears not to have known or guessed the yeoman's identity confirms Culver's idea that the summoner was in a "spiritually poor state." (60)

What cannot be ascribed to a mere degenerate spiritual state is the fact that the summoner continues his pact with the fiend after the fiend has revealed himself (ll. 1523-29). As Daniel Kline shows, "an oath was a solemn undertaking with social and legal ramifications and carried supernatural weight" during Chaucer's time (qtd. in Culver 61). According to Culver, the summoner should not have taken this oath because he already owed loyalty to the archdeacon, but one of the contemporary social and economical changes that occurred during Chaucer's time was that "a person could enter into temporary contractual agreements with another for monetary gains between two parties that would, at times, supersede other obligations laid out in a feudal sense." (Kline qtd. in Culver 61) Due to this, Culver suggests that the summoner is not breaking his fealty to the archdeacon (61). Culver, again, ascribes the fact that he makes the pact with the devil to his aspirations for material gain, which both results in, and is a consequence of his spiritually poor state (60-1). However, this pact with the devil is to be taken more seriously. As indicated in the first chapter, making a pact with the devil included apostasy of the Christian faith, which was seen as both heresy and witchcraft (Kieckhefer *European* 22; Russell 202). Furthermore, John Fründ, a chronicler who was active in the early fifteenth century, states that the devil was known to make pacts with men "and [promised] to make them rich, powerful and successful, and to punish those who have done them harm." (qtd. in Kieckhefer *European* 20) Moreover, Fründ indicates that men were required to "deny their former faith" (qtd. in Kieckhefer *European* 21). This corresponds with the contemporary literary tradition whereby men hoped to gain "[position], power, protection, ... pleasure... [wealth] and learning" from a pact with the fiend. These are exactly the motivations for the summoner to continue his pact with the yeoman after he discovers that the yeoman is a fiend. His ambition for economical gain through this pact becomes evident immediately after pronouncing that he will not forsake his brother when the summoner states that *bothe we goon abouten oure purchas* "As we both go about our acquisition" (l. 1530) and

that *if that any of us have moore than oother/ Lat hym be trewe and parte it with his brother* "if one of us had more than the other, /Let him be true and share it with his brother" (ll. 1533-4). The summoner's wish for knowledge is not restricted to knowledge about the world or science, but extends to the devil and his practices which is shown in the passage where the summoner asks several questions about the devils occupation, his form, his employers and his powers (ll. 1459-1520). Here it becomes evident that the summoner is attempting to gain knowledge about the devil in order to become "a complete devil himself." (Birney 97) Moreover, when the devil concludes his sentence by stating *And God, that maked after his ymage/ Mankynde* "May God, who in his image made mankind" (ll. 1642-3) this clearly alludes to the summoner's apostasy from the Christian faith, since the summoner has forsaken the aim to reflect God, and has chosen to become similar to the devil (Birney 103). From this, it can be concluded that the summoner is not merely in a spiritually degenerate state when he attempts to gain wealth, power and knowledge through the devil's aid, but can clearly be considered to have committed both heresy and witchcraft. Furthermore, the tradition of repentance in tales in which a human makes a pact with the devil (Kieckhefer *Magic* 174) is used in Church commentaries. Culver ascribes the fact that the summoner is offered the opportunity to repent, but refuses this, to his failure to believe that the devil is capable of taking him to hell (63). However, there is no indication that the summoner does not believe the devil capable of taking him. It is more likely that the summoner felt protected from damnation due to his pact with the devil.

Another aspect of witchcraft that appears in the *Friar's Tale* is Chaucer's use of witchcraft to comment on the Church and the positions of both the friar and the summoner. Culver suggests that the summoner's character in this tale conforms to the image of the summoner pilgrim that Chaucer creates in the *General Prologue* by stating that he is a *gentil harlot* "gentle, kindly rascal" (l. 647) who swindled people (l. 652) and punished them by

taking money from them if their *soule were in his purs* "soul was in his purse" (ll.656-7) (62). It is not surprising that the summoner in the *Friar's Tale* shows such bad character as well. However, the previously established involvement in witchcraft of the summoner in this tale, suggests that the summoner not only resembles the summoner pilgrim, but the friar himself as well. Donald Baker discusses the importance of witchcraft in the dispute between the pilgrims the friar and the summoner, and shows that a (literary) "tradition associating friars in general with sorcery and witchcraft" was extent during Chaucer's time (33-4). Moreover, friars were believed to practice necromancy as well due to their knowledge of "the rites of exorcism, and perhaps an acquaintance with astrological images and other kinds of magic, [which] might well lead them to experiment with conjuration." (Kieckhefer *Magic* 155) An example of this comes from the court of antipope Benedict XIII who reigned from 1394 to 1423 (Kieckhefer *Magic* 155). The group of accused people, who faced charges of necromancy, was believed to have associations with "an entire group of Franciscan magicians in southern France." (Kieckhefer *Magic* 155) Another example is the "mysterious Dominican" who aided Alice Perrers in obtaining Edward III's love through the use of sorcery (Thompson 97-100; Kittredge 78; 105; Ewen; 34 qtd. in Kieckhefer *European* 115; Baker 34). The Wife of Bath refers to the negative reputation of friars when she indicates that they had driven the little people away, and have themselves replaced the demons under every tree (ll. 857-81). Moreover, the Summoner, not surprisingly, accuses friars of being devils as well, when he states that *[freres] and feendes been but lyte asonder* "As friars and fiends are seldom far apart" (l. 1674). The fact that the friar shows the summoner in his tale making a pact with the devil and thus associating him with witchcraft and heresy, suggests that the friar is projecting this contemporary negative image that people had of friars onto the summoner in order to damage his reputation. Through this reflection of the bad reputation of friars on the summoner, the friar actually comments on his own profession as well. The fact that the

summoner in the tale appears to fail to recognise the yeoman as the fiend that he is, and the following pact he makes with the devil, implies that the friar suggests not only the summoner's involvement in witchcraft, but the friar's involvement as well. This contributes to Chaucer's commentary on the Church through the use of the contemporary stereotype of friars and summoners. This tale thus shows both internal signs of witchcraft and allusions to witchcraft that exceed the boundaries of the tale.

5. Conclusion

The second chapter of this thesis examined the history of witchcraft throughout Europe, with a particular focus on the fourteenth century. It was established that three different stages in the development of the notions of witchcraft in the fourteenth century can be recognised. The first two stages showed great involvement of political motivations for accusations of witchcraft and the ensuing trials. The final phase proved to be the most significant for the purposes of the present paper, since it was shown that during this phase, the pact between the individual and the devil became increasingly important. Furthermore, during this final stage women were shown to be accused of witchcraft more frequently and easily than men due to social and economical factors and contemporary stereotypes regarding women in general. This indicates that while Culver takes the appearance of ideas about witchcraft and diabolism in laws in the Early Modern Period as proof that previous to that period these issues either did not exist or were not to be taken seriously, these issues actually already existed and were elaborately addressed by scholars who were active during Chaucer's lifetime. It was shown that Chaucer must have had at least some knowledge of the continental ideas about witchcraft, due to the fact that he knew works by continental writers that were concerned with issues involving witchcraft. It is not surprising that some of these contemporary ideas can be found in the *Friar's Tale*.

In chapter three, the old widow's involvement in witchcraft was examined. While Culver argues that this old woman is a prototype of the stereotypical witch appearing in the Early Modern Period, this paper has shown that the stereotype attributed to this widow was already extant during the fourteenth century. In addition, Culver overlooks certain aspects that puts the widow under immediate suspicion of witchcraft according to contemporary ideas concerning witchcraft. The first aspect consists of the curses the old widow utters, since cursing, if unjustified, was considered to be a crime characteristic of witchcraft. Furthermore,

Culver indicates that the widow did not perceive herself capable of damning the summoner, and thus was not guilty of witchcraft. However, the widow initially appears to consider herself capable of committing such a crime. Furthermore, the notion that the old woman was only able to damn the summoner through the aid of the devil, which was a prevalent contemporary idea as well, contributes to this suspicion. Moreover, Culver fails to address certain allusions to the widow's involvement in witchcraft that are found in the analogues that exist for the *Friar's Tale*. The issues of brotherhood and maternity in this tale suggest that the widow had the same professional occupation as the devil and the summoner, which, as shown, consisted of witchcraft. Finally, the addition of the widow's pan to Chaucer's version of this tale or exemplum carries another allusion to the widow's involvement in witchcraft, since it can refer to a cauldron, which was a witch's most important accessory. This shows that the old woman may have been more involved in witchcraft than previously believed.

In the fourth chapter, the involvement of the summoner in witchcraft was examined. Culver rightly suggests that the summoner's spirituality proved to be lacking, due to his failure to recognise the yeoman as the devil he is. The yeoman's green clothing, his black fringes, his bow and arrows, and his residence in the North are all clues to the yeoman's true identity which indicate that the summoner should have recognised the devil. While he initially makes the pact unconscious of the yeoman's true identity, he later re-establishes the pact when he is well aware that the yeoman is a fiend. According to Culver, the summoner makes the pact with the devil merely out of lack of spirituality, including greed. It was indeed a prevalent contemporary notion that pacts were made simply because the mortal wanted to obtain wealth, knowledge, power, protection or a higher social position. However, through this renewed pact, the summoner is seen to perpetrate both heresy and witchcraft, since he forsakes his former religion and allows the devil to help him obtain wealth. Furthermore, it was shown that Chaucer's use of witchcraft, and the contemporary association of friars with

witchcraft, proved especially useful to comment on the Church. Culver only reflects on the contemporary notions about summoners in her analysis of the summoner. She comes to the conclusion that summoners had a negative reputation, but were generally not involved in witchcraft. However, through the quarrel between the friar and the summoner and the pilgrim friar's projection of contemporary ideas about friars onto summoners, Chaucer is able to comment on both professions and thus associates both the professions with witchcraft.

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