CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: CHAUCER’S SUBLUNAR REGION OF MUTABLE FORMS

The detailed richness of Chaucer’s storytelling and the subtle mechanics of movement in his narrative process can be seen as reflections of the poet’s deep and long-standing fascination with the concept of motion itself—a subcategory of “change” in the medieval world. Within Chaucer’s plotted structures, narrative climax tends to coincide with a pivotal moment of material transformation taking place in the sublunar region of mutability (literally, “below the sphere of the moon”). Underlying structural patterns of interconnected action, interspersed with commentary and dialogue, will culminate in a single, phenomenal incident of physical change. The *Canterbury Tales* illustrates this narrative technique quite patently. Consider the rapid corruption of Arcite’s body in the *Knight’s Tale*, the swift transformation of the loathly lady in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the instantaneous disappearance of the black rocks in the *Franklin’s Tale*, the transformation of the child in the *Prioress’s Tale*, the alteration of human blindness into the sight of angels in the *Second Nun’s Tale*, and the white crow’s sudden metamorphosis in the *Manciple’s Tale*. Indeed, change in Chaucer’s world is ubiquitous, ongoing, and inexorable. Barry A. Windeatt rightfully remarks on how Chaucer’s inventive literary structures “contain the narrative within a commentary that has transformed meaning by the time the poem reaches its resolution in the structures Chaucer has devised (‘That thow be understonde, God I biseche!’ *Troilus* v, 1798).”1 Climactic transformations of physical matter function, we shall find, as visible signposts for the unfolding literary transformations that underlie these highly schematic narrative structures. Moreover, this narrative strategy creates a personal frame of reference that allows each of Chaucer’s characters to engage in his or her own
unique mode of interpretation as it relates to a story’s moment and locus of change.

Indeed, it is not surprising that Chaucer incorporates significant events of transformation into his poetry. After all, Chaucer was deeply influenced by the anonymous author of the Franciscan *Ovide Moralisé*, the first full-length French translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Ovid declares—explicitly—the theme of change in his opening line: “In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora” (I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities). As we see in the *Troilus*, Venus makes Jove amorous of mortal women “And in a thousand formes down hym sente” (iii.20, emphasis mine). But interestingly, Chaucer frequently avoids using Ovidian metamorphoses, despite his borrowings of Ovidian material. This obvious omission is deliberate, rather than negligent, and serves to heighten our awareness of Chaucer’s profound interest in a subject matter that he is reluctant to casually reference in a perfunctory manner. Yet, like Ovid, Chaucer is attracted to the phenomenal event of transformation itself and carefully renders it into poetic language that is uniquely his own. That said, the idea of transformation is clearly inseparable from the very art of storytelling itself. As Robert M. Longsworth opines, “Transformation, after all, is the central business of literature.”

While the metaphorical scope of transformation is potentially limitless, it is possible to objectively examine the various literal (rather than literary) transformations in Chaucer’s poetry. To this I would add that Chaucer’s literal transformations are far more intractable than the common stock of magical devices found in conventional plots of romance, or the straightforward miracles recorded in a medieval vita. Rather, Chaucer carefully frames the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* by articulating natural processes of material change for the terrestrial—or sublunar—region. According to the medieval cosmological picture, the concave inner surface of the moon separates the earthly mutable region from the eternally unchanging heavenly realm, which borders the convex sphere of fire and comprises both the rotating planets and the fixed stars. Hugh of St. Victor asserts this medieval cosmological perspective in his *Didascalicon*:

Astronomers (*mathematici*) have divided the world into two parts: into that, namely, which stretches above the sphere of the moon and that which lies below it. The superlunary world, because in it all things stand fixed by primordial law, they called “nature,” while the sublunary world they called “the work of nature,” that is, the work of the superior world, because the varieties of all animate beings which live below by the infusion of life-giving spirit, take their infused nutriment through invisible emanations from above, not only that by being born they may grow but also that by being nourished they may continue in existence.