CHAPTER 3

ALCHEMICAL ALLEGORY AND TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION IN THE FRANKLIN’S TALE

During the 40 years since the publication of Joseph E. Grennen’s watershed essay on the unity of Fragment 8 (or Fragment G) of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer criticism has continued to acknowledge an allegorical treatment of alchemy beyond the limited confines of the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale. In the Second Nun’s Tale, Grennen points out, “there are so many details in the legend which parallel ideas, motifs, and catch-phrases (what may be referred to generally as the ‘topics’) of alchemy.”\(^1\) Critical assumptions regarding the poet’s treatment of motifs and themes relevant to medieval alchemy and its religious overtones are made possible by decades of Chaucer scholarship that have subsequently identified oppositions and similarities between the legend of Saint Cecilia and the Tale of the Canon’s Yeoman.\(^2\) The fact that Chaucer wrote a significant portion of the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale as a separate and earlier work—a claim that is supported by internal, textual, and historical evidence\(^3\)—suggests that alchemy provided Chaucer with poetic material at varying points throughout his artistic career. In fact, an explicit reference to alchemy appears in Book 4 of Troilus and Criseyde, and such alchemical imagery indeed extends throughout the narrative (see chapter 4 of this book). In other words, there is no evidence that Chaucer intended to confine the alchemical lexicon to Fragment 8.

Only a handful of scholars have recognized the possibility of alchemy in other tales. Ann W. Astell’s Chaucer and the Universe of Learning links Fragments 2 and 8, arguing that “the language of alchemy by extension also illumines the Man of Law’s tale of saintly Custance.”\(^4\) Eric Weil links the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale directly to the Manciple’s Tale in terms of
alchemy’s color changes on the crow’s body. Mark J. Bruhn, in discussing the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, believes that “Chaucer could hardly fail to recognize that the verbal discourse of alchemy mirrored in significant ways his own poetic discourse.” Finally, Paul B. Taylor finds an important alchemical metaphor in the opening of the *General Prologue*: in the context of Nature’s “increase of matter,” the terms *Zephirus* and *licour* (sometimes used to describe the “product of chemical distillation”) allow for the interpretation of the Canterbury pilgrimage as “a rehearsal—hic et ille—of the ultimate transformation of matter to spirit, which is the ultimate goal of alchemy as well,” and the subsequent tales certainly repeat these “themes of purifying transformations.” Indeed, alchemy is a major theme of Chaucer’s poetry and merits closer attention in tales outside Fragment 8, and, in particular, the *Franklin’s Tale*.

A significant portion of medieval texts in the alchemical *opus* treat the transmutation of base metals into gold or silver as merely metaphor—that is to say, the alchemical quest does not wholly concern actual gold in its material, mundane form. The alchemist Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, in his *Pretiosa Margarita Novella* (ca. 1330), believed many books which deal with transformation, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, incorporate the philosophers’ stone on the level of metaphor, and, like many books, Ovid’s myths prefigured the themes of alchemy. Monks and mendicant friars—largely responsible for the importation of Greek-Arabian alchemical texts from Moorish Spain into the Latin West—relate the metaphorical aspects of transmutation and the philosophers’ stone to biblical allegories on divine wisdom. A closer look at alchemy in the fourteenth century reveals the ways in which “the alchemical elements and processes afforded an allegory of salvation history.” The treatise *De secretis naturae* (On the Secrets of Nature) of Pseudo–Arnold of Villanova, an authoritative text that Chaucer quotes from in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, compares the philosophers’ stone to the passion and burial of Christ. As the fourteenth-century Franciscan John of Rupescissa (Jean de Roquetaillade) reiterates: “Et magister Arnoldus dixit, quod lapis est clausus in eo, ut Christus in sepulcro” (And Master Arnold said that the stone was enclosed in [it], as Christ was in the tomb). He adds, “Et secundum conceptionem et generationem et nativitatem et passionem Christi potest comprehensi elixir mercurium et predicta prophetarum potest Christi comparari” (Our elixir can be understood according to the conception, generation, nativity, and passion of Christ, and can be compared to Christ in regard to the sayings of the prophets.).

In the context of the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*’s enigmatic ending and references to Christ and the Christian God, Jacqueline Tasioulas puts forth, “the [tale’s] prohibition serves to glorify it [alchemy] as God