CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: CHAUCER AND THE REALITY OF CHANGE

The source of Chaucer’s narrative action lies in the energy of shifting element-forms, the constant flux of chemical combinations that arise from the four elements and their contrarious qualities. Within the sublunar region of mutability, transmutations of material substance—the successive replacement of one form with another—drive the narrative to a point of irresolvable conflict. Beneath the inner sphere of the moon, Chaucer’s fictional characters are both comically and tragically subsumed within this Aristotelian model for natural change. Indeed, the human body is a composite of four elements, a corporeal mixtum, “That ther nys erthe, water, fir, ne eir, / Ne creature that of hem maked is” (KT, i.1246–7). Natural law not only guarantees the putrefaction of the body but also drives the vacillations of human emotion. To put it another way, the exterior world of matter is inextricably tied to inner experience.

As we have seen in previous chapters, characters struggle to maintain fixed ideals in a physical world of corruption and decay. Arveragus of the Franklin’s Tale finds it difficult to uphold his privileged ideals of “trouthe” in a world of constant change where elemental earth (the black rocks) is transmuted into some other thing that is both unseen and unknown. As I have shown, Chaucer uses imagery from alchemical treatises, such as the Sun’s Letter to the Crescent Moon, to relate the Breton stone to the Philosophers’ Stone, but its exact symbol and meaning in the Franklin’s Tale is obfuscated by Chaucer’s enigmatic ending. The dreamer in the House of Fame also experiences firsthand the physics of change: Geffrey, himself, is subject to the intension and remission of forms in the closed system of a rotating earth, despite his resolve to see from his own center. Both interior and exterior perceptions of the wicker-globe’s rotation on its axis exemplify how the poem’s relativity of motion thwarts the narrator’s search for a self-moving mover (autokinetos). Poignantly, Troilus falls
victim to the alchemy of love, which, too, is inexorably subject to the natural laws of change. Alchemical allusions in the *Troilus* (for example, Criseyde’s dream of the mercurial white eagle, the alchemical event of the new moon, the conjunction of Saturn and Jove, and so forth) promise readers a new, higher form of matter. However, the chemical combination of Troilus and Criseyde in Book 3 (by way of Pandarus, the aspiring alchemist of romantic love) also has deeply tragic consequences: natural law guarantees that original reactants of this chemical union are inevitably and irreversibly changed or destroyed. These and other transmutations of physical substance go beyond the realm of the material world to corrupt the invisible and elusive interiors of Chaucer’s characters. *Gentilesse*, *courtoisie*, *trouthe*, *temperaunce*, and other related noble virtues appear to be just as volatile as the elements in Aristotle’s chemical world. In short, the metaphysical reality of change is of primary concern to a philosophical poet faced with the age-old problem of mutable forms. This is complicated by the existence of possible, unrealized forms, which, as I argue in chapter 5, have an independent ontological status in their own right.

One other mode of change, however, has eluded us in previous chapters. It is appropriate to pause here to consider the early attempts at defining “change” as it relates to the Neoplatonic tradition of finding truth and meaning in number. Specifically, change can be defined according to medieval arithmology and the inter-relationship between the Monad and the Dyad.¹ The Monad—the Neoplatonic One—supposedly derives from what the Pythagoreans call *menein* (to remain) and embodies the eternal and unchangeable. In his commentary on the *Somnium scipionis*, Macrobius identifies the quiescent Monad as “the point because, like the point, which is not a body but which produces bodies from itself, the monad is said to be not a number but the source of numbers.”² The Monad’s extension in any direction forms an invisible line, represented by the Dyad. In other words, the Dyad is a “line protracted from the point [the Monad] by giving it two termini.”³ Martianus Capella, who writes on the marriage between Mercury and Philology, claims that “number takes its beginning from the Dyad; and it is conceptual embodiment and the evidence of first motion. It is also the mother of the elements.”⁴ In other words, the geometric line (the Dyad) is by definition the concept of change, corruption, and “motion” itself. To clarify, Macrobius declares that the Dyad

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¹ See chapter 1, section 2.
² Macrobius, *Somnium scipionis*, 1.6.2.
³ Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae*, 1.3.
⁴ Ibid., 1.3.11.
⁵ Ibid., 1.3.11.