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The Alchemy of Sexuality in Early Modern English Lyric Poetry

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THE ALCHEMY OF SEXUALITY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LYRIC POETRY

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For my father, Dalrick Jennings, who never saw the end, but who always believed in my beginning. Death is just “a pageant to keep us in false gaze.”
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In Matthew 17 of the Gospels Jesus performs a miracle where he casts out a demon from a little boy. His disciples inspired and a little envious of this show of power demanded why they were not able to cast out the demon. Jesus responds, “Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” This dissertation came about much in the same manner. It did not materialize out of a moment of envy or frenzied inspiration but by an excruciating amount of sweat, tears, hard work, and some amount of dare I say, blood. And like the disciples, I had the best of guides to lead, nurture, support, inspire and educate me. First, I would like to thank Professor Daniel Vitkus who served as my dissertation supervisor until his recent appointment at the University of California-San Diego. Professor Vitkus has worked tirelessly to help make this dissertation a reality. He read and commented on various drafts of the chapters, and he was always available to meet to discuss and encourage my progress. Additionally, Professor Vitkus encouraged me to explore all of my ideas. But, like any good dissertation director he taught me how to parse and identify the best of those ideas. He also inculcated a sense of academic rigor in me and greatly fostered my love of scholarship.

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When I was a little girl growing up in Jamaica my father sometimes took me on his postal rounds. He would introduce me to everyone and proudly declare, “A mi dawta dis yu no.” This dissertation is for my father who always believed. And this dissertation, this “kind” goeth out because of every person mentioned here. I stand here because of everyone who helped me to distill the very best of myself.
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, *The Alchemy of Sexuality in Early Modern English Lyric Poetry* examines the complex relationship of poetry, sexuality and religion to alchemy in early modern England. I analyze poetic representations of transgressive sexuality by William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Carew. What emerges from my study is the profound link between alchemical metaphors and poetic expressions of sexuality. These poetic expressions of sexuality develop the poets’ interrogation of gender hierarchy in early modern England. This dissertation has theoretical implications for how we read early modern English poetry, but there are also physiological dimensions. I examine representations of sex and the disciplined Foucauldian early modern body. Notwithstanding, my primary focus of this disciplined body are the humoral processes that were thought to govern early modern physiology and their Galenic ties to alchemy. As my study makes clear, alchemy represents an interventionist conjunction within the Galenic-Humoral economy that predominated in early modern England. In each chapter I illuminate the means by which the poets utilize alchemical iconography to codify a transgressive body and therefore illuminate an illicit sexuality.

In the introductory chapter, I outline the history of alchemy and its relationship to sexuality and religion, and by extension to the early modern body. I end the introduction by asserting that the poets’ use of alchemy is not only a symbol of the creative imagination, but also an attempt to map the contours of desire and the poetic mind.

Chapter two focuses on books 2 and 3 of Spenser’s epic, *The Faerie Queene*. In this chapter I seek to develop a theory which will account for the excessive erotica found in these books. At first glance the anachronistic term of pornography would seem to account for the
sexual activity found in these books. Nonetheless, pornography’s contextual later development, and the slipperiness of the term fail to accommodate early modern theories of erotic reading and the disruptive emotions engendered by such readings. Therefore, I suggest the term of *passionate discourse* which more fully explains the voyeuristic nature of Spenser’s epic and his ability to suspend the assault on the body which erotica could potentially provoke.

In chapter three I continue my examination of alchemy and its ties to sexuality by a detailed analysis of Shakespeare’s “procreative sonnets.” I discuss Shakespeare’s use of alchemy which enables his creation of a sexually appropriate hermaphrodite thus challenging regimes against the practice of sodomy.

While chapter three focuses on Shakespeare’s hermaphroditic creation, chapter four considers Donne’s appropriation of alchemy in order to substantiate what I term an alchemic transcendental sexuality. Donne’s alchemic sexuality is constituted by the metaphors of alchemy as well as the religious discourse of Familism. As with Spenser and Shakespeare, Donne ultimately challenges sexual understandings of the body and the systems that sought to impose artificial and sexual boundaries on the early modern body.

Similarly, chapter five contemplates sexual challenges to religious understanding of the body. My focus is Thomas Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines” and Thomas Carew’s “A Rapture.” Both Nashe and Carew use their speakers to trope sexual performance as alchemical labor and to interrogate women’s reproductive potential.

Lastly, I conclude this study by commenting on the aesthetic success of the poems. I believe that those poems which have found a prominent place in the English literary canon owe their prominence to how well they have integrated the discourses of alchemy, sex, and religion in their more overtly sexual poetry. Yet ultimately, this dissertation is about the process of
embodiment, and therefore I assert that each poet in this dissertation anchor themselves in the slippery terrain of alchemy in a concerted effort to find meaning among the chaos of the body.
CHAPTER ONE

A TRUE SEXUAL ALCHEMY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LYRIC POETRY

... her honour is an essence that’s not seen
Othello

With Oh, and Oh, she itching moves hir hipps,
    And to and fro, full lightlie starts and skips.
She jerks hir leggs, and sprauleth with hir heeles,
No tongue maie tell the solace that she feeles.
Thomas Nashe, “The Choise of Valetines”

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the ways in which William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Thomas Nashe and Thomas Carew appropriate alchemical metaphors in order to interrogate early modern concepts of gender and sexuality. I am particularly interested in the poets’ emendation of alchemical symbolism and the resultant subversive expressions of sexuality and desire. In each chapter I illuminate the means by which the poets utilize alchemical iconography to codify an illicit sexuality. What emerges through an examination of the poets’ work is the figure of a transgressive body that articulates the illegibility of desire and elucidates gender inversions. And certain particularities about early modern alchemy and sexuality reveal themselves upon close reading of my primary texts. Death in early modern England was commensurate with a transcendental sexuality and thus a type of immortality. Additionally, early modern alchemy helped to situate early modern forms of pornography; in fact, the obfuscation surrounding alchemy facilitated the voyeuristic attributes of early modern pornography. And finally, alchemy’s multilayered and erotic emblems aid in
reconciling the disconnect between desire and societal constructs of gender; consequently, the implementation of alchemic metaphors signal a meta-discourse of self-representation, transgression and creation. These facets of alchemy suggest new ways to account for descriptions of sexuality in early modern English lyric poetry. Ultimately, the poets utilize alchemical conceits to privilege alchemy as a mode of poetic production through its mediation with religion, science and sexuality. Alchemy appropriated many of the discourses associated with the disciplines of religion, science and sexuality.

In order to contextualize my concerns for this dissertation, I use two epigrams from different genres, and I cite Othello alongside Nashe.¹ Iago’s utterance provides the starting point to talk about alchemy, desire, sex and sexuality and their unrelenting unknowability. Additionally, I cite Othello to outline what is potentially at stake when desire remains hidden. Othello spends most of the play trying to locate or verify Desdemona’s unseen honor or evidence of her chastity within marriage. When he believes that Desdemona is lost he exclaims, “O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!”(3.2.265-72). In exasperation he turns to the play’s villain, Iago, for verification of Desdemona’s deceit and also for “ocular proof.” In response to Othello’s questions of whether Desdemona “. . . is protectress of her honour” and if “she may give that,” Iago replies that her “her honour is an essence that’s not seen” (4.1.14-16). Iago’s reply situates one of the key dilemmas of the play. The loss of Desdemona’s honor would require the “ocular proof” that Othello seeks, but if it is an essence that’s not seen, how can he see it? Indeed, at the heart of Othello’s anxieties concerning his wife’s sexuality is the implication that every time Desdemona “lies” with him, it is a performance. And worse, she can extend this performance to other men. What the play

ultimately reveals, ironically, through Desdemona’s innocence, is that sexuality and desire can never truly be seen. For in Othello, desire and especially feminine desire is inscribed as writing on the body that is never legible, always subject to erasure and multiple misreadings.²

Subsequently, it is my contention that the process of alchemy and its concomitant metaphors provide the poets with the apparatus to delve into the abstract nature of desire and sexuality. In defining desire I borrow from Valerie Traub. She defines desire, “specifically erotic desire” as the “intense emotional investment and compelling erotic attraction---that which the early moderns referred to as love, passion, appetite and lust” (Renaissance of Lesbianism 13).³ To see how alchemy can provide the framework for understanding sexuality and lyric poetry let us turn to a historical summary by John Read:

In a narrow sense, alchemy may be interpreted as the pretended art of transmuting the baser metals into silver and gold. In a wider sense, it was the chemistry of the Middle Ages: according to Liebig, indeed, alchemy was never anything but chemistry. In its broadest aspect, alchemy appears as a system of philosophy which claimed to penetrate the mystery of life as well as the formation of inanimate substances. Alchemy was thus a complex and indefinite mixture of chemistry, astrology, philosophy, occultism and other ingredients. (“Alchemy and Alchemists” 251)

² Valerie Wayne asserts, “Othello’s lines are uncomfortably close to Le Jaloux’s charge that ‘all you women are, will be, and have been whores, in fact or in desire, for whoever could eliminate the deed, no man can constrain desire.’ The ideology of marriage permitted husbands to call their wives ‘ours’ and to write upon their bodies, but it could not control women’s desire. Since men’s appropriation of women was never entire, jealousy arose from the contradictory claims of possession and desire” (173).

³ I also incorporate Traub’s earlier statements regarding desire: “. . . sexuality has no inherent meaning. We have no unmediated access to our bodies; our bodies subjectivities, our desire and anxieties, are constituted in relation to social processes. There is no ‘Ur-desire’ that we can apprehend; sexuality comes to mean, to signify. And yet, sexuality is not a mere effect of cultural determinations. Each infant is born with polymorphous ‘desires’ — how those desires are organized, regulated, incited, and disciplined is the province of culture” (Desire and Anxiety 7).
Alchemy was indeed successful in coopting several realms of science, medicine, metallurgy, arts, and as we will momentarily see, religion. Alchemy’s history is dauntingly multifarious and as varied as its practice. Therefore, as we proceed we should heed Stanton J. Linden’s admonition regarding the study of alchemy’s history. Linden cautions us that, “The task of defining alchemy, of indicating its major types and varied interests is formidable, sufficient, certainly, to challenge not only modern scholars of the subject but the early alchemists themselves” (Darke *Hierogliphicks* 6). Nevertheless, we can outline with certainty some of alchemy’s history and its basic tenets.

**History and Practice of Alchemy**

In its most basic form alchemy is the science of transforming base metals into gold. Alchemists also believed that alchemy helped to accelerate various operations that took place in Nature. They also posited that gold was a symbol of earthly and human perfection, and that through their various operations they could accelerate the process by which the baser metals were transformed into gold. Therefore alchemists sought to manufacture an agent that could accomplish this transformation. This agent was known invariably as the Philosopher’s Stone, Elixir Vitae, Elixir, the Grand Magisterium, Magistery, or the Red Tincture (Read, “Alchemy and Alchemists” 256). This agent was thought to be a powerful medicine capable of curing all diseases, prolonging life, raising the dead and giving immortality. Furthermore, treatises on

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4 Jonathan Hughes also sums up this part of the alchemic enterprise rather nicely: “The term occult, derived from the Latin occultus (hidden), refers to the secret supernatural or divine forces to be found in the terrestrial sphere beneath the moon. The belief in such powers was based on the notion that everything within the earth emanated from the same divine force that governed the heaven and that nothing corporeal could ever be lost but remained in a constant state of flux and would ultimately be restored to its original divine purity. The scientific understanding of the workings of nature was the key to the occult wisdom imparted to the late medieval art of alchemy, which attempted to understand the growth of metals in the earth and to transmute them to the primal state of perfection found in gold” (3). Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England: Plantagenet Kings and the Search for the Philosopher’s Stone*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007.
Alchemy suggest that alchemy was the science of helping and perfecting nature. This perfection was exemplified by the change of base metals into gold. Gareth Roberts agrees that:

The alchemical art was minister to and follower of nature, indeed Albertus Magnus (in a genuine work) said that it was the art that most closely imitated nature; . . . But whereas nature took thousands of years gradually to generate gold and silver from mercury and sulphur, God could bring about this in a day, and so, said later authorities, could the alchemical art in which the operators were nature’s helpers or ministers (54).

This spiritual facet of alchemy is also expounded upon by Linden. Linden affirms the existence of the “traditional idea of Christ as the philosopher’s stone: the agent of healing, the deliverer from sin and baseness, the reworder of merit, the author of grace and salvation, and the creator of new heavens and a new earth” (“Mystical Alchemy” 80). And Arthur Edward Waite maintains: “by the transmutation of metals, they signify the conversion of man from a lower to a higher form of existence, from life natural to life spiritual” (13). Mary Anne Atwood lends credence to Waite’s assertion. She reasons that the true purpose of alchemy was to transform man. He “was the true laboratory of the hermetic art; his life the subject, the grand distillatory, the thing distilling, and the thing distilled” (162). The object where this distillation took place was referred to as the limbeck, alembic or alchemical still. It was “the symbol for a regenerating purgation” (Josphe Mazzeo 111). Nonetheless, Mazzeo cautiously points out, “The same alchemical allusion, the limbeck [alembic], may refer to material or spiritual alchemy alone or to both at the

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5 The purpose of this dissertation is to articulate the positive understanding of alchemy appropriated by Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Nashe and Carew. However, as Eugene Webb points out, “the concept of alchemy was an inherently ambiguous one. . . Depending upon the intention of the practitoner, it was seen either as a cooperation with God or as a form of opposition to Him” (47). Space does not allow me to elucidate on this point any further. Nonetheless, for more on the potential hazards of being associated with alchemy see Webb’s “The Alchemy of Man and the Alchemy of God: The Alchemist as Cultural Symbol in Modern Thought,” and Philip Ball’s, “Alchemical Culture and Poetry in Early Modern England.”
same time. The reader must be aware of this fact if a correct interpretation of the image is to be made” (104). After this purgation or death, a resurrection would take place. More often than not this distillation or purgation required a special heat or special fire. And to make things more confusing sometimes the limbbeck itself is associated with fire (Mazzeo 111). Not surprisingly, each poet under study in this dissertation combines these basic aspects of alchemy for their purposes.

Let us return to the matter at hand. Scholars believe that the practice of alchemy began in ancient Egypt and then spread to the west. Read posits:

There is ample evidence that the Egyptians were remarkably skilled in various arts based upon empirical chemical knowledge, such as metallurgy, enamelling, glass-tinting, and dyeing. For such reasons, Egypt, or Khem, [. . . ] has often been pictured as the motherland of chemistry; so later this art [. . .] became known to Islam as al Khem, and through Islam to the Western world as alchemy.

(“Alchemy and Alchemists” 252)

Read goes on to state, “The reputed Egyptian origin of alchemy is encouraged throughout the vast body of medieval alchemical literature by constant references to Hermes Trismegistos, the alleged father of the ‘Hermetic Art’ and the patron of its practioners, the self-styled ‘sons of Hermes’” (“Alchemy and Alchemists” 252). Roberts concurs: “Alchemical texts reached the Latin west through the medium of Arabic writers. The ‘Dark Ages’ in Europe were the Islamic golden ages of culture and learning which fostered alchemical writings” (26). In fact, “European scholars first became interested in the translation of alchemical texts early in the twelfth century; such translators as Gerard of Cremona, Michael Scot, Robert of Chester, Adelard of Bath, and Hermann of Carinthia were thus instrumental in making known to western Europe the
accumulated wisdom of the Muslim world” (Read “Alchemy and Alchemists” 266). Alchemy also had roots in Greek philosophy and Judaism. Mark S. Morrisson provides a deft summation of the history of alchemy: “alchemy was a scientifically and spiritually serious pursuit from antiquity through the Middle Ages, with roots in Egyptian metallurgy, Aristotelian philosophy of matter and form, and Jewish, Arabic, early Christian and Hermetic sources” (3).

As will be made clear throughout this dissertation, alchemy “was not a monolithic practise” (Morrisson 3). The followers of alchemy often had different ideas about achieving their goals. And their speculations were often abstruse and difficult to penetrate. Read reminds us that “alchemy, like modern science, had its theories, although these were often vague, ill-defined, and subject to interpretations suiting the whims of the interpreter” (254-55). In fact, “Despite the repeated claim of alchemical treatises that really all the philosophers and authorities spoke with one voice, there was no unanimity about the successive alchemical processes that eventually produced this elixir or medicine, merely a tradition of how one might tell if the process was going well” (Roberts 55). To wit, there is no clear agreement on the number of steps needed to attain the Philosopher’s Stone. Nonetheless, most alchemical texts concur that the process consists of four steps, or at times seven and even more rarely, twelve. The seven or twelve step plan is merely an expansion of the basic four step method that the majority of alchemical works allude to.

6 In their now rather important essay, “Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of A Historiographic Mistake,” William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe redefine the place of alchemy within the history of science. They succinctly demonstrate that during the early modern period there was no clear-cut distinction between alchemy and chemistry. Their scholarship thus challenges romanticized narratives of the Scientific Revolution as a linear move toward progress. Following their lead, early modern scholars have now begun to investigate the place of alchemy within the history of natural philosophy. In fact, in many circles, alchemy is now referred to by its early modern name, chymia or chymistry. Another recent development in thinking about science and the early modern period is exemplified by Elizabeth Spiller’s “Shakespeare and the Making of Early Modern Science: Resituating Prospero’s Art.” Spiller’s essay challenges our misconceptions about the supposed discontinuities between early modern art and science. Borrowing the term “maker’s knowledge tradition” from Antonio Perez-Ramos, Spiller illustrates that during the early modern period, these maker’s knowledge traditions would have included categories such as “metallurgy, architecture, alchemy, navigation, painting, engineering and surveying. . .”(27).
However, what is important for our study is the understanding that there was a general consensus on the process of attaining the Philosopher’s Stone and the basic knowledge needed to achieve this goal. This knowledge had its basis in Aristotelian philosophy. According to Mazzeo, “The theories of the four elements, the four humours, and of primary matter were part of the generally accepted cosmological and physiological theories derived from antiquity and along with other philosophical concepts were used by the alchemists as the basis of their art” (104). Early modern alchemists believed that nature was not a passive entity but was indeed alive and apperceptive. This belief in nature’s cognizance strengthened the already popular Aristotelian based macrocosm / microcosm theory of correspondences. The macrocosm was the world of the cosmos, and the microcosm was the world of humans and even the human body itself. Alchemists believed that there was a concordant relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm and that these two systems were “guided by the same power and principles” (Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphics* 13). Laurinda Dixon expounds on this Aristotelian belief system in more detail. She asserts that by the fifteenth century early modern science was based on Aristotle’s “theory of the four qualities (hot, wet, cold and dry), the four humors (choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine and melancholic) and the four elements (fire, air, water and earth)” (7). Everything on earth contained these components in some way or the other. Even the planets were thought to be personally involved in man’s destiny. Dixon affirms that the planets “controlled all life on earth through direct sympathies with the objects that they ruled. All that was required for health and happiness was a perfect balance of humors, qualities and elements. Sickness was caused by an imbalance of these. . .” (8). Health was restored when the humors, qualities and elements were once again in balance. Early modern alchemists understood these ideas to be central to their beliefs. In fact, without an understanding of these principles the student of
Alchemy would be lost. As Mazzeo makes clear, “A mastery of its philosophical basis was essential for a mastery of the Hermetic [alchemic] art” (104). Nonetheless, the most significant alchemical belief that we will take with us as we journey through this dissertation is that of transmutation or transformation. Linden clarifies by stating, “the very nature of metals could be altered, and [ ] these fundamental alterations were indicated by changes in the colors of metals during the [alchemical] process” (Darke Hieroglyphics 14). Furthermore:

This belief that substances could be changed [because of the alchemical process] in essence is the single most important principle of alchemy and figures prominently in a wide range of literary treatments. The idea that stages in the alchemical process were signaled by color changes constitutes a second important motif.” (Darke Hieroglyphics 14)

As we study the work of the poets, we will observe the veracity of Linden’s statement. The idea of transformation fully informs the poets’ work, whether it is transformation of sexual and societal norms as in Spenser and Shakespeare, or transformation of the body and soul as in Donne, or finally, transformation of sex, labor and value as in Nashe and Carew; transformation is the overarching telos of the poets’ work.

By the seventeenth century alchemy had evolved into two significant forms: practical or material alchemy and spiritual alchemy. Nonetheless, material alchemy forms the basis for more popular literature, and its material endeavors especially the pursuit of gold are frequently mocked. In Chaucer’s Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale, in Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist, and in Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, the practice of alchemy is satirized as either the provenance of the devil or the endeavor of “puffers,” mountebanks, cheats and con-men. But there were other associations with alchemy, and learned scientific men of the time practiced
alchemy. I point to two examples: the German educator Andreas Libavius as well as Francis Bacon. Bacon believed that alchemy provided the means to rehabilitating science, learning and medicine, and that its unrefined metaphors illustrated an efficient means of attaining such lofty goals. Interestingly, Bacon also aligned alchemy with salvation. In his *Opus Majus*, Bacon declares that alchemical “medicine” will not only help to attain gold, but will also help to “prolong life” (cited in Brehm 56). Similarly, Andreas Libavius, despite his distrust of Paracelisans and other practitioners of alchemy, viewed alchemy as an agent of potential change. And though he railed against other alchemists, he sought to integrate alchemy into the university subjects.

These two examples epitomize the dual and ambivalent attitude that many in the Renaissance had to alchemy. Additionally, the example of Libavius and Bacon elucidate the powerful allure that alchemy had for many people. And highlighting this allure, Linden outlines the shift from satire and ambivalence to spirituality:

. . . late in the sixteenth and early in the seventeenth centuries, alchemy’s literary functions and purposes undergo a marked and general change: there is a waning of the satirical tradition which reaches backward to Chaucer’s *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and extends through Jonson, but only occasionally beyond. In its stead we find the emergence of a new pattern of alchemical imagery which places primary emphasis on change, purification, moral transformation and spirituality. (*Mystical Alchemy* 79)

Eugene Webb also maintains that alchemy had two spiritual aspects: “Depending upon the intention of the practitioner, it was seen either as a cooperation with God or as a form of opposition to Him” (47). Indeed, many of the poets under study in this dissertation (Donne,
Spenser, Shakespeare) sought to drape themselves and their poetry with the spiritual countenance of alchemy. Webb states that, “numerous English poets of the sixteenth century, including Spenser, Shakespeare, Sidney, and Donne, saw a parallel between their art and alchemy and interpreted both as connected with the power of good human beings to call upon the divine through prayer” (48).

Yet, while there is a distinctly spiritual dimension to their poetry, I will argue that the spirituality offered to the reader or their audience, masks a more sexually explicit enterprise. Robert Ward picks up on this poetic sleight-of-hand when he analyses John Donne’s poetry. Of Donne he declares:

> While not accepting alchemy as literally true, he is prepared to accept its system of ideas as a hypothetical model when building metaphor. I am sure that he knew perfectly well what he was doing; his intense feeling was not only of the flesh but an intellectual one. He is at once vitally involved in love and death, and capable of a scientific detachment from them. (82)

Ward’s analyses of the alchemy in Donne’s poetry underscore the deliberate and self-reflexive nature of the poets’ work. For it is in the operation of the alchemical opus that we begin to understand something of poetry. I submit that alchemy expedited the poets’ various writing initiatives. Moreover, alchemy furnished the means by which the poets could safely ventriloquize their beliefs about desire, sexuality and gender. Ironically, alchemy with all of its esoteric and arcane symbolism provided the clearest way to delineate their challenges to the patriarchal order. In other words, alchemy aided in mapping the contours of their mind. Charles Nicholl also finds an analogous function for alchemy in the minds of the poet: “Alchemy was a way of perceiving how things happen. It offered—as well as an odd and colourful vocabulary---
a description of processes and relationships that was portable into various contexts. It also provided, one finds, a self-reflexive metaphor for things happening in the mind of the writer” (105).

I have examined archival evidence such as Thomas Norton’s *Ordinall of Alchemy* and Robert M. Schuler’s anthology of unpublished alchemical poems. I have also read secondary sources such as Titus Burckhardt’s *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, Frances A. Yates’ *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, and Stanton J. Linden’s *Darke Hieroglyphics: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*. Though each source offers slightly different yet complementary perspectives on the history of alchemy; as I stated earlier one constant remains: alchemy was a discourse of transformation and it offered its practitioners the technology of change and hope.

**Elements of an Alchemical Poem**

As our discussion centers on poetry we may inquire as to how does one recognize an alchemical poem? One can ascertain if a poem is alchemical in nature if the poem’s underlying metaphor is that of transformation or transmutation. Having said that, transformation is just one part of the poetic-alchemic equation. There must be other symbolic elements present in these poems such as references to gold, or transformation of other elements into gold. There may also be the mention of water or tears. Both symbolize the alchemical bath that the elements must endure as they are changed into gold. There is also the quest for the philosopher’s stone or the

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elixir vitae which can confer immortality, cure diseases, and depending upon the purpose of the practitioner turn all lower metals into gold. There are also references to a marriage of opposites (usually sulfur or mercury, or the sun and the moon), or, there may be a reference to sexual copulation or sexual conjunction. Finally, animal and plant imagery may dominate the poem. Alchemists employed the symbols of red, white, and purple flowers, and in conjunction with this faunic imagery; alchemists utilized animal motifs. The most common or popular of these animal motifs was the reference to the mythological Phoenix. There are also references to green and red lions. The references to red lion and green lions could be read as allegorical or literal. Nonetheless, for the most part, the animal imagery of lions was thought to meant changes in color in the alchemical process. Though by no means exhaustive, this list is sufficient to illustrate the multiplicity of alchemical motifs or a dominant motif that may present itself in an alchemical poem.

As an example I would like to cite from George Ripley’s *Compound of Alchymy* (1591). In the commendatory section right before the Prologue we find a poem encapsulating the entire process of achieving the Philosopher’s stone.¹⁸ The poem is titled, “The Vision of Sir George Ripley, Chanon of Bridlington.” I cite the poem in its entirety:

When busie at my booke I was upon a certaine night,

This Vision here exprest appear’d unto my dimmed sight,

A toade full of rudde I saw did drinke the juice of grapes

fast,

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¹⁸ Rober M. Schuler has suggested that there is a central link between the alchemy of the middle ages and the Renaissance. This link he believes lies in the scientific facet of the poetry. He declares, “Original scientific poems in the vernacular began to be written in the Middle Ages throughout Europe, and in England at least this native tradition was highly influential on Renaissance scientific poetry...”(2-3). He goes on to assert that “alchemy in general also remained the most popular subject of vernacular scientific poets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (3). Robert M. Schuler, “Three Renaissance Scientific Poems,” Studies in Philology: Texts and Studies, 75.5 (1978): i-152.
Till overcharged with the broath, his bowels all to brast,
And after that from poisoned bulke, he cast his venome fell,
For griefe and paine whereof his members all began to swell;
With drops of poysoned sweate approaching thus his secret den,
His cave with blasts of fumous ayre, he all bewhited then:
And from the which in space a golden humor did ensue.
Whose falling drops from high did staine the soile with ruddy hew,
And when his corps, the force of vitall breath began to lacke,
This dying toade became forthwith like coale for colour black:
Thus drowned in his proper Veynes of poysioned flood,
For tearme of eightie dayes and foure he rotting stood:
By tryall then this venome to expel I did desire,
For which I did commit his carkase to a gentle fire:
Which done, a wonder to the sight, but more to be rehearst,
The toade with colours rare through every side was pearst:
And white appear’d when all the sundry hewes were past:
Which after being tincted, rudde for evermore did last:
Then of the venome handled thus a medicine I did make,
Which venom kills, and saveth such as venome chaunce to take,
Glory be to him the graunter of such secret ways,
Dominion, and Honour, both with worship and with prayse. (1-25)
Several striking points materialize from a reading of Ripley’s poem. First, the speaker presents himself as a scholar who is granted a vision from God. He informs us that he is “busie” with his “booke” (1), and he ultimately praises God for deigning to give him the vision of the dying toad, or more accurately, how to achieve the Philosopher’s Stone. It is clear then that the poem does not construct artificial divisions between the poet / alchemist and God. What we should also note are the color changes throughout the poem. Red, white, gold, black, purple (tinted) appear throughout the poem. These color changes are analogous to the changes in the alchemical process. These shifts in color would have been familiar to an early modern audience, and the poets in this dissertation exploit this knowledge. We will see how each poet utilizes this communal knowledge of color change to signal changes in their speakers and addressees. As a matter of fact, the poets use these color changes to signify profound transformations in the subjects of their poems.

Another matter of note is that the toad suffers terribly for the scholar’s art. We encounter this same suffering when we arrive at Busyrane’s lair. Amoret suffers terribly under the auspices of Busyrane. But her suffering does indeed produce the philosopher’s stone. While I do not see a one-to-one ratio between Ripley’s vision and the poetry in this dissertation, I cite Ripley’s poem to highlight how various manifestations or understanding of the alchemical process would have been or could have been appropriated by the poets.

**Disciplining an Early Modern Body**

As my dissertation centers on matters of the body, desire, gender and sexuality, I turn now to an examination of the numerous discourses that governed an early modern body, especially those of women. The anxieties an unknowable female desire may produce are evident
not only in the drama of the period where according to Traub, “To be a woman in Shakespearean
drama means to embody a sexuality that often finds its ultimate expression in death” (*Desire and
Anxiety* 25), but also in the period’s erotic poetry.⁹ According to Elaine Hobby, “male
fearfulness about women’s sexual capacity often lurks in the corners— or perhaps— at the heart—
of poems urging a reluctant mistress to agree to consummation” (37). Moreover, the poems
“barely mask [the] suspicion that once aroused, women might be difficult for men to satisfy”
(38). But why this early modern concern about female sexuality? As Elizabeth Harvey rightly
states, “Sexuality figured prominently in the cultural imagination of early modern England
because the survival of the family and patriarchal society itself depended in its regulation” (102).
Furthermore, “In a patriarchal society in which familial lineage— which sometimes included not
only a family name, but, also land and property— depended upon ensuring that the child was
descended from the father, it was crucial to regulate a female sexuality upon which genealogical
purity depended” (Harvey 103). But were there cultural forces at work that challenged these
social norms? I believe that the poetry of the period, although overwhelmingly misogynistic at
times, did offer a counter-discourse to prevailing beliefs about female sexuality and desire.

In this dissertation I am chiefly concerned with depictions of desire and sexuality
encoded on a transgressive feminine or hermaphroditic body. By transgressive I mean a body
that appears to lack physical, (especially sexual) and / or societal boundaries. The notion of the
body has become vexed in terms of early modern discourse. Therefore, in order to parse the
multiple routes open to discussions of the body I chose those disciplinary discourses of religion
and science which are bound up in discussions of alchemy. All these discourses work together to
help regulate and differentiate gender, desire and sexuality. Moreover, I believe that these

⁹ In defining erotic literature of the period I borrow from Ian Frederick Moulton. He defines erotic writing as “any
text, regardless of genre or literary quality that deals in a fundamental way with human physical sexual activity” (5).
disciplinary forms were some of the more systematic and far-reaching ways of structuring and regulating early modern forms of desire. Additionally, because I wish to place the poems in their specific erotic context and because I am always cognizant of the ways in which the early modern body was codified, I rely on historical evidence and feminist theory while incorporating a methodology of close textual analysis and new historicist theory. I believe the work of these poets demonstrate how the alchemic representation of sexuality and desire is used to challenge hegemonic authority, to construct varying subjectivities, and to provide a space to stage illicit fantasies.

The One-Sex Model

Historian Thomas Laqueur advocates a medical reading of Renaissance physiology called the “one-sex model.” According to Laqueur, masculinity and femininity were not rigid opposites but rather existed on a sliding scale. The differences in the bodies of men and women were a result of a combination of humors or bodily fluids: “In the blood, semen, milk, and other fluids of the one-sex body, there is no female and no sharp boundary between the sexes. Instead, a physiology of fungible fluids and corporeal flux represents in a different register the absence of specifically genital sex (Laqueur 35). (I shall return to the notion of humors in a later section of my discussion). The variation of these fluids would determine whether one was born with genitalia on the outside or inside of the body. Men’s penises were outside because they had a warmer constitution while women’s genitalia or “penises” were inside because they were colder and lacked the amount of warmth necessary to thrust the genitalia outward. Using this model Laqueur contends that the perceived somatic distinctions of male and female sex did not occur until the eighteenth century; and only became institutionalized by the nineteenth. Laqueur’s
model has been used by early modern scholars of the theater such as Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones to highlight the “instability inherent in Renaissance gender” (Belinda Johnston 129). While Laqueur’s model is useful in unearthing several areas of gender subversion in early modern society, it has achieved what Johnston calls a “critical orthodoxy [. . .] where it has been referred to as more or less a ‘fact’ of Renaissance gender perception” (129). Nonetheless, the work of scholars such as Gail Kern Paster, Trish Thomas Henley and Patricia Parker have questioned the hegemony of Laqueur’s model.10 Parker advocates a flexible and nuanced technique of reading that is “less inclined to put forward certain anecdotes and not others as representative and one that rather than privileging the medical literature, or a selection from it, also tests it against other texts and contexts, including literary ones in which the teleology appears” (340-41). Therefore, although my work is inherently reliant on Laquer’s theory of the one-sex model, I proceed heeding Parker’s caution. I rely on Laquer’s understanding of the one-sex model and medical texts as part of my archival evidence to show how the various structures of desire were produced by social practice. Nonetheless, I make no claims that gender in the early modern period was a fluidic form of play that effaced patriarchy. As Laura Gowing makes clear,

. . . early modern people also lived with gender roles that were persistently hierarchical and apparently rigid, and those roles were founded on an understanding of sexual difference that came from many other sources than medical discourse. Everything from the width of women’s hips to the pain they suffered in childbirth was divinely ordained. The subordination of women to men

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10 See especially Janet Adelman, “Making Defect Perfection: Shakespeare and the One-Sex Model,” and Winfried Schleiner, “Early Modern Controversies about the One-Sex Model.” Both scholars offer compelling medical evidence illustrating that the model did not hold scientific sway as some have heretofore believed. Both Adelman and Schleiner indicate that Helkiah Crooke objected to the theory.
was fundamental to social, spiritual and familial structures. The idea that sexual
difference functioned on a scale destabilized none of this. (5)

Religious Control of Sexuality

Although the stakes were high in the race to control the libidinal economy of women,
men were also disciplined by various discourses that could mark them as either lustful or
effeminate. Ian Frederick Moulton points out that “sexual relations between men and women
were conceived of as a “natural” site for the demonstration of masculine mastery, and the
assumption that a man should naturally take the active role in sexual encounters was fundamental
to early modern constructions of masculinity” (Before Pornography 28). However,
contradictions arose. The vigilant governance deemed necessary to curb women’s sexual
appetites also had the effect of producing anxiety concerning male sexual virility. As Moulton
explains, “. . . to take erotic possession of a woman was to weaken oneself as a man, spiritually,
through a moral surrender to effeminate pleasure, and physically, through the spending of
valuable seed” (Before Pornography 28-29).

Furthermore, it was possible for men to demonstrate an excessive sexuality even in
marriage and possibly bear the taint of adultery. Stephen Greenblatt points out that according to
Calvin, the “man who shows no modesty or comeliness in conjugal intercourse,” is “committing
adultery with his wife,” and the King’s Book, attributed to Henry VIII, informs its readers that in
lawful matrimony a man may break the Seventh Commandment “and live unchaste with his own
wife, if he do unmeasurably or inordinately serve his or her fleshly appetite or lust” (Renaissance
Self-Fashioning 248). And to ensure that the message was heard, “An Homelie of Whoredome
and Unclennesse” warns against the many divine punishments and social consequences for
“whoredome, fornicacion and adultery.” It declares “Great is the dampnacion that hangeth over the heads of fornicatours and adulterers. Is not that treasure which before all other is most regarded of honest persons, the good fame and name of man and woman, loste through whoredome?” (quoted in Bond, 180).

The homily charges everyone to guard against the temptations of the flesh. However, it was women who were “disproportionately associated with the erotic” (Harvey 102). This displacement allowed for a constant regulation or surveillance of women through various discourses including religion (as seen above) and medicine. Moreover, in order to protect women from themselves and to maintain order in society it was required to channel female sexuality according to various patriarchal imperatives. Hobby affirms that a woman of the period “would have been taught from childhood that hers was the gender with the more libidinal nature; that her sexual appetite was enormous, and must be kept under careful restraint” (37). However, it is my contention that the poems under discussion challenge these discourses through the poets’ specific articulation of desire via the technology of alchemy.

**Gender, Patriarchy and the Family**

Women’s status in the early modern period was hierarchically inferior to that of men. In fact, religious discourse deemed women’s inferior status as quite natural and ordained by God.\(^\text{11}\) Russ McDonald puts it this way: “the cooperation of biology and philosophy” accounted for the “traditional roles for men and women” (254). Moreover, “Authority in the early modern family

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\(^{11}\) Nigel Wheale also finds in the early modern period a situation where “Women were economically, legally and educationally subordinated by the conventions of early modern society, and everyone was routinely reminded of female inferiority. Christianity in all its forms, Catholic, established and dissenting, stressed with only slightly, varying emphases the subordination of woman to man as a consequence of original sin. And beyond the church door the core values of popular culture were profoundly misogynistic” (114).
rested finally with the father. Wives had authority over children and servants, but the principle that the woman was “the weaker vessel” and consequently dependent on the superior judgment and ability of her husband—a doctrine derived from St. Paul and his interpreters—gave the father uncontested rule over his wife and all members of the household” (McDonald 259-60).

**Foucauldian and Butlerean Considerations: Matters of the Body**

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault equates discipline with power. He states that the “specific technology of power [is] discipline” (194). He also holds that “discipline is a type of power; or an anatomy of power” (215). Following Foucault’s definition I use discipline in the Foucauldian sense to mean “. . . a type of power; or an anatomy of power” (Foucault 215), whose “chief function [ ] is to ‘train,’ rather than to select and to levy; or, no doubt, to train in order to levy and select all the more. It does not link forces together in order to reduce them; it seeks to bind them together in such a way as to multiply and use them” (Foucault 170). Foucault also contends, “disciplinary power appears to have the function not so much of deduction as of synthesis, not so much of exploitation of the product as of coercive link with the apparatus of production” (219). It is my contention that the “apparatus of production” that functioned in early modern England was patriarchy and that the discourses of religion and medicine invested desire and thus the body with the social and economic value necessary to provoke the state’s control. Foucault has always been concerned with the production of different forms of knowledge and how they were divided and proliferated in order to create identities and thus maintain social control. I suggest that in the early modern period these forms of “knowledge,” that is discourses about the body, provided a comforting knowability, thus making it easier to induce a form of self-regulatory logic and control on early modern bodies.
My work also implicitly incorporates Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. In reference to her earlier work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler was criticized for her apparent failure to acknowledge the physicality of the body and sex. However, it is not that Butler does not accept the material conditions of the body, rather she asserts that the body and sex become real or materialize through various forms of discourse and language. For Butler, “bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas” (*Bodies That Matter*, xi). Therefore, “Sex is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (*Bodies That Matter* 1-2). Butler’s construction of how the body becomes real through language is fundamental to my articulation of how alchemy helps in illustrating the fluidity of gender constructs as well as the impermeability of desire and sexuality. Because we have no foundation to base subjectivity on, bodies or desire do not emanate from “gender” a priori. Rather, they are a construct of language. Again, I use Butler not to suggest that gender in the early modern period was simply a form of free play but rather to point out how gender comes to be in this time. Butler states, “Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (*Gender Trouble* 140). In other words, the essence that gender claims is not an inherent, essential self, on the contrary it is a performance that is constituted and

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12 Although Butler’s theories in *Gender Trouble* center on aspects of performativity I believe they are germane and appropriate for a discussion of lyric poetry.
preserved through discourse. Bruce R. Smith also perceives a tension between a text and true or ultimate representations of sexuality: “Writing about sexuality since the nineteenth century is only the latest instance in a 2,500 year series of attempts to put eros into discourse (319). It is my belief that the discourses of alchemy helped to provide a stable language that could contain the slipperiness of sexuality.

**Medicine and The Humoral Body**

Undergirding my discussion of the transgressive feminine or hermaphroditic body is the understanding that the early modern body was considered primarily humoral. “Good health” according to Nancy Sellick, “depends on the body’s proper humoral balance” (151). And as Nancy Siraisi explains, the body’s humoral balance does not occur naturally; rather it demands “constant monitoring and regulation in health as well as in sickness” (117). In what follows I quote Siraisi at some length to emphasize the importance humors played in early modern medicine and more importantly, concepts of the self.

The humours filled two important functions in the body’s economy. In the first place, they were essential to nutrition. Indeed, in Galenic physiology the blood, incorporating with it the other humors, is the body’s nutrition. Secondly, the humors were in a special way the vehicle of complexion. Like all bodily parts, they were themselves complexionate. But in addition, the four humors collectively were the means whereby an individual’s overall complexional balance was maintained or altered. Hence, the balance of humors was held to be responsible for psychological as well as physical disposition, a belief enshrined in the survival of the English adjectives sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and
melancholy to describe traits of character. Humoral theory is probably the single most striking example of the habitual preference in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance medicine of materialist explanations of mental and emotional states. (106)

Selleck affirms Sirasi’s findings:

The body is not a closed and self-regulating system; bloodletting, cautery, foods, and medicines are all part of an ongoing, normal regimen for correcting the quantity and quality of the humors, which are continually subject to change. Disease is understood as a humoral imbalance, and although this imbalance comes about through external influence, the disease is not seen as a foreign presence within the body, but as a condition of what has become the body itself. (151)

But if the humoral body offered a paradigm necessitating constant regulation, then women’s bodies because of their “leaky” and overtly sexual nature were even more in need of governing. Gowing asserts, “The project of enclosing and controlling the female body was central to gender ideologies from at least the Middle Ages. Medieval and early modern humour dwells insistentely on the natural grotesqueness of the female body and its resistance to control; the inculcation of female modesty was presented as a battle against the innate unruliness of women’s bodies” (7).

My reliance on humoral theory as part of my discussion is not an indication that I am foreclosing the alchemic tropes in the poetry. Rather, I want to underscore how much the humoral paradigm is at work in early modern theories of the body and that body’s relationship to the environment, and subsequently the period’s poetry. As we have witnessed heretofore, humoral theory and the theory of correspondences were a central facet of early modern alchemy.

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13 I refer implicitly of course to Paster’s description of the uncontrollable female body.
Nashe and his Dildo

In order to illustrate the kind of cultural work that the poems perform and the unknowability of female desire; I offer a short reading of Thomas Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines.” My reading of Nashe is informed by Laqueur, Foucault and Butler and the types of questions that I will explore in the body of the dissertation. Why is pleasure, especially feminine pleasure, so destabilizing to discourses of power, specifically the early modern discourses of religion and science? Or, to put it another way, does desire have a destabilizing effect on the early modern disciplines of religion and science? If so, what is that effect and can it be mapped? Finally, can desire be articulated only through the discourses of the body, or does alchemy offer an alternate language with which to contain the ephemeral qualities of longing? In a speculative attempt to answer these questions and others that are tied to desire and alchemy, I trace sexual desires that destabilize or challenge notions of gender, feminine sexuality and generic conventions. I also trace the poems’ alchemic attempts to open up the female body or in other words to construct a knowability about feminine desire or to spatialize the female body in such a way as to unlock its secrets.

Nashe’s male persona, unlike Othello, revels in the unknowability of female desire. In fact the thought of what Francis’ desire might entail, pardon the pun, unmans our speaker. But it is an unmanning that is playfully celebrated in the poem. Tomalin’s “limn’s” (or his penis) are “unwealdie for the fight,” because they “spend their strength in thought of hir delight” (125-26). It is his imaginative trip into the female psyche that helps to temporarily undo Tomalin. So when his manhood proves lax, Francis substitutes a dildo for his penis. Francis taunts Tomalin with the assurance that the personified dildo is ever ready, and “stands as stiff, as he were made of steele” (242) and he is proud to be between her legs (243). But perhaps most importantly, he
will “never make [her] tender bellie swell” (246). The dildo is the ideal lover complete with the attributes of honor. He “bendeth not, nor fouleth anie deale” (241). So ideally, the dildo should work like a magical key that unlocks the secrets of female desire. Yet as impressive as the dildo is, it too fails to open up all of Francis’ secrets. We never get to see the dildo pleasuring Francis. We are told of its exploits but the most we get in terms of its direct relation to Francis is that after having finished with the dildo, “She lyeth breathless,” and our narrator is “taken doune” (312). When Tomalin is inside of Francis we get a sense of the near orgasmic bliss that Francis feels as a result of Tomalin’s prowess: “With Oh, and Oh, she itching moves hir hipps, / And to and fro, full lightlie starts and skips. / She jerks hir legs, and sprauleth with hir heeles, / No tongue maie tell the solace that she feeles (199-202). But it is not just Tomalin that gives Francis pleasure. She is careful to instruct the pace they should follow. With her “prescriptions” they keep “crochet-time, / And everie stroake in ordre lyke a chyme” (187-88). Traub points out that “crochet-time” is the ideal pace to ensure conception (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 95). Nonetheless, it is not clear whether Francis desires to be impregnated or if this is just Tomalin’s fantasy. What is clear is that Tomalin’s penis fails him and he is replaced by the dildo. The poem moves from conception as the justification for pleasure to pleasure for pleasure’s sake. And what is troubling is that this pleasure, including the sexual satisfaction she receives from Tomalin and the dildo, is controlled by Francis. Elizabeth A. Foyster explains, “... in the seventeenth century the key to male power in the household was thought to be sexual control of women as well as the self” (4). The male pressure to perform sexually was also tied to the social imperatives of reproduction: “For conception to occur, one male medical theory held that both men and women had to produce ‘seed’. According to this theory, unless a husband could help his wife to orgasm and so release her seed, she would not become pregnant” (Foyster 70).
Clearly, manhood was inextricably linked to sexual performance. Notwithstanding, although early modern society regarded male potency and sterility as mutually exclusive, there still must have been “anxieties” regarding sexual performance. This anxiety is glossed in the poem but never given complete legitimatization. Francis is in charge of the pleasure that she gives and receives. Therefore, the poem challenges reproductive and theological imperatives that seek to inscribe the pleasure and conception paradigm on women. Thus, the poem defies discourses that assimilate women to their prescribed sexual and procreative functions.

By replacing Tomalin’s penis for the dildo the poem also challenges misogynist ideals of beauty and concepts of male emasculation. In doing so, the poem genders stereotypically feminine characteristics onto the male penis. Francis declares: “Adiew faint-hearted instrument of lust, / That falselie hast betrayde our equale trust. / Hence-forth no more will I implore thine aide, / Or thee, or men of cowardize upbrayde” (235-238). She describes the penis as false, faint-hearted, cowardly, traitorous, and rather unhelpful or useless. These are qualities traditionally associated with early modern women. But the penis is synecdoche for men, as opposed to the dildo who is described as steadfast, immovable and ever-ready to come to her rescue. In fact, the dildo is unmoved by the threat of emasculation. She informs us that it: “. . . doeth my tickling swage with manie a sighe” (244). Francis has transformed the dildo into a living, breathing Petrarchan lover replete with Ovidian lovemaking skills. In fact, Tomalin, although ecstatic in his disrobing of Francis, describes the entrance to her vagina as a “mouth besett with uglie bryers / Resembling much a duskie nett of wyres” (113-114). By contrast, the dildo has no such reservation. Francis tell us it “. . . playes at peacock twixt [her] leggs right blythe” (243).
Yet, as heroic as the dildo is, it too fails to map Francis’ body. Both the male penis and in Tomalin’s grudging words, the “senceless, counterfet dilldo” should ideally unlock women’s desire and make it available for viewing. But both fall short. We are always told what Francis feels. So what we view is ultimately a performance of her pleasure. This is not to suggest that her pleasure is false. Rather, that we can never fully ascertain the extent and magnitude of her desire. Nevertheless, Tomalin’s and the dildo’s failures is equally instructive. They highlight the religious and medical discourses that surround both the female and male body, and the poem’s attempt to challenge those discourses.

Lifting The “Veyle of Nature”

The work of medical anatomists was accompanied by much anxiety. Charges of obscenity could lead to a trial as Ambroise Paré found out (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 109-10). Indeed, “Vernacular medical writers were keenly aware of the censorship of sexually explicit materials” (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 104). Consequently, describing the genitalia of women was a particularly tricky proposition. To do so meant “negotiating the peril of revealing nature’s or women’s secrets” (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 108). Thomas Norton in his *Ordinall of Alchemy* combats a complementary predicament. How does one divulge confidential alchemic information while maintaining the secrecy that is meant for only a select few? Sensing the impossibility of his options, he determines that he may have gone too far:

This secrete was never before to this daye
So trewly discovered, take it for your praye
I pray God that this turne not me to Charge,
For I dread sore my penn doeth too large:
For though much people perceive not this Sentence,
Yet Subtill Clerks have too much Evidence;
For many clerks be so cleere of witt,
If thei had this ground, thei were sure of it.

(86, cited in John Read Prelude to Chemistry)

The sense of alchemy’s tie to the feminine or to women’s bodies engenders a coterie of secrecy. Yet this code of secrecy is merely a front for popularizing those same alchemical secrets. Thus, alchemy and many medical discourses shared a similar ethos of ascribing confidentiality to their work but making those confidences available solely to the elect. In medical terminology, the revelation of the inner-workings of women’s bodies and their genitalia was called “lifting the veyle of nature.” I submit that the alchemists perform a similar function when they endeavor to challenge patriarchal imperatives which govern the body, sexuality, gender and desire. I return again to medical discourses in order to illustrate my point.

Struggling with the dilemma of how much of women’s anatomy to reveal, Helkiah Crooke proclaims:

there was onely one obstacle; to reveyle the veyle of Nature, to prophane her mysteries for a little skil-pride, to ensnare mens mindes by sensuall demonstrations, seemeth a thing liable to hevy construction. But what is this I pray you else but to arraigne vertue at the barre of vice? Hath the holy Scriptue it selfe ( the wisdome of God) as well as in the old Law particularly, as also in many passges of the new, balked this argument? God that created them, did he not intend their preservation, or can they bee preserved and not known? Or knowne and not discovered? Indeed it were to be wished that all men would come to the
knowledge of these secrets with pure eyes and eares, such as they were matched with in their creation: but shall we therefore forfet our knowledge because some men cannot conteine their lewd and inordinate affections? (Microcosmographia 197)\textsuperscript{14}

Crooke manages to assuage his anxieties about revealing women’s secrets by displacing any potential charge of obscenity onto men who cannot control their lust (Renaissance of Lesbianism 111). His rhetorical strategy of displacement avoids maligning the bodies of women as other anatomists were wont to do.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, I cite Crooke to synthesize what I see as the overarching telos of the poetry. By extension, I see the poets’ identification with alchemy as allegorically performing the work of the anatomists (that is, lifting the veil of nature) and the poems as a synecdochic representation of women.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, alchemy with its abstruse and impenetrable metonymies aid in rendering the secrets of women visible. In fact, medicine had a particularly strong link to alchemy and William Eamon corroborates this theory: “With the advent of printing, however, the picture becomes somewhat more complex. It is well known that certain aspects of the art of alchemy—distillation, for example—became highly fashionable in medical circles” (196). Moreover, several famous physicians, advocated alchemy in their practice and in their treatises. The most famous of these is Paracelsus. Although he was a

\textsuperscript{14} (Cited in Traub, Renaissance of Lesbianism 111).

\textsuperscript{15} According to Traub, many anatomists “protect themselves from the vulnerability of exposure by projecting the potential charge of obscenity onto the body of the woman” (Renaissance of Lesbianism 108).

\textsuperscript{16} For more on texts that draw on metaphors of sexuality in order to license publication see Wendy Wall’s “Disclosures in Print: The ‘Violent Enlargement’ of the Renaissance Voyueristic Text” Studies in English Literature. 29.1 35-59. Wall delineates texts where “writers frequently impressed upon their readers the intense privacy of their texts by figuring them as female bodies; in this way, publication is a striptease for the public” (40).
divisive figure, he helped to disseminate alchemical knowledge in early modern England. Spenser performs a similar feint to the medical anatomists when he ties alchemy to pornography.

**Dissertation Chapters**

My contemplation of Donne’s poems in chapter two, “A quintessence even from nothingnesse”: The Alchemy of Sexuality and Decay in the Poetry of John Donne,” evaluates Donne’s poetics on sexuality and death. Death and putrescence occupy the majority of his poetic landscape. Indeed, many scholars have concluded that decay in Donne is an inevitable part of his world. John Carey claims that change for Donne is irrevocably tied to a movement toward deterioration. And Achsah Guibbory agrees that Donne’s “map of time” is characterized by decline. Nevertheless, I will demonstrate that the images of corrosion in Donne’s oeuvre are not as some have assumed an inescapable move toward destruction. Rather, Donne marshals the emblems of decay for his poetic service, and he creates what I term an alchemic transcendental sexuality. This alchemic sexuality is constituted by the metaphors of alchemy, as well as the religious discourse of Familism. Donne’s alchemic sexuality also subverts early modern notions of gender, sexual transgression and desire.

Chapter three is titled, “That Wanton Lady with Her Lover Lose,” Reading The Aesthetics of Alchemy and Passionate Discourse in Books 2 and 3 of *The Faerie Queene*, and treats the issues of early modern erotica and alchemy. Jonathan Goldberg’s *Endlesse Worke*: 

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17 Phillip Ball also attributes the spread of many alchemical ideas to Paracelsus: Paracelsus wrote many books, but very few of them were published in his lifetime—he died in 1541--- and although his name was known throughout Europe by the mid sixteenth century, that was not always in a favorable context. It was not until the 1560s, when several publishers began to edit and print his surviving manuscripts that Paracelsus’s chemical philosophy found a wide audience. His chemical medicine spread from Germany to France and England (83), “Alchemical Culture and Poetry in Early Modern England,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*. (2006): 31.1. (77-92). Likewise, William Eamon states that the advent of printing helped to promulgate alchemy: “Moreover, through the printing of cheap craft manuals, alchemical knowledge was widely disseminated to middle class audiences” (197). “Alchemy in Popular Culture: Leonardo Fiorvanti and the Search for the Philosopher’s Stone.” *Early Science and Medicine*. (2000): 5.2. (196-213).
Goldberg asserts that *The Faerie Queene* “generates itself precisely out of its own instability,” (xiv). Thus, in our efforts to make meaning of the text, we must be careful how we impose principles of narration, and “thematic unity”(xi). I suggest then, that the sexual episodes in books 2 and 3, which have been read by scholars as examples of Spenser’s indebtedness to Chaucerian and Ovidian poetics as well as Renaissance art, be identified as examples of early modern erotic poetry. Indeed, the voyeuristic elements and the fantasies that gesture toward an illicit sexuality lend these books and the other books their erotic aesthetic. The metaphors Spenser utilizes and the noumenal sense of a continued robing, disrobing, probing, and watching imbue the poem with its erotic subtexts and lend it its *passionate discourse*. I coined the term passionate discourse to emphasize the readerly / writerly and voyeuristic nature of the sexual episodes in *The Faerie Queene*. In the early modern period, erotic reading was thought to produce physical effects on the body. These physical effects potentially included temporary paralysis, loss of reasoning, and a dangerous imbalance of one’s humoral disposition.

Even the reason and the higher faculties were vulnerable to the physiological effects caused by erotic reading. Thus, erotic reading had to be patrolled very carefully. However, Spenser manages to bypass the dangers of early modern erotic reading. He accomplishes this feat through the voyeuristic nature of the sexual episodes. Spenser’s voyeurism is enabled through his allegorical characters and his narrators. Readers enter his sexual landscapes vicariously through these personages and are able to consume his text without any potential hazards. The term passionate discourse describes Spenser’s suspension of the deleterious effects of reading. My understanding of how passionate discourse operates is similar to the definition that early modern historians and scholars have offered for their contextual understanding of early modern
pornography. Although I am not equating my term passionate discourse with pornography, I submit the following definitions of early modern pornography from Katharine Craik. I am appropriating her understanding of the “effects” that pornography was thought to produce on the body.

Craik suggests that “Pornography is not accurately described as a scandalous new category of literature whose emergence in the seventeenth century was sudden or unexpected. Rather it is best understood as a passionate transaction between books, writers and readers made possible by earlier discussions of the stimulating effects of literature on the body” (116). Craik goes on to observe that, “if pornography is conceived as a way of writing and reading, then pornographic affect resides not only in erotic feeling but in other kinds of deracinated sensation as well” (117-18). Books 2 and 3 of The Faerie Queene are obviously grounded in “erotic feeling.” But Spenser’s epic also provides us with the opportunity to witness these “other kinds of deracinated sensation[s].” Acrasisa, Amoret, Britomart, and even Guyon and Busyrane all experience the deracinated sensations associated with Katherine Craik’s understanding of early modern pornography. Yet more importantly, all transmit these feelings of erotic alienation to the reader as well.18 The erotic alienation of The Faerie Queene is such that it has caused both Camille Paglia and Sheila T. Cavanagh to describe the poem as pornographic.19 Taking into account Craik’s definition, it is clear that The Faerie Queene is significantly erotic.20

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18 Craik’s summation of deracinated sensation in the early modern period is similar to my definition of passionate discourse. Both terms emphasize the distance the writer creates between themselves and the reader, thereby licensing the erotica.


20 Our critical reluctance to describe it as pornography stems I believe from the politics of canonicity. The Faerie Queene is considered one of the highest examples of poetic expression from the early modern period. And therefore
In chapter four, “One Thing to My Purpose Nothing” Alchemy’s Procreative Imperatives in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” I rely on Laqueur’s construction of the early modern one-sex model of human physiology, and I discuss Shakespeare’s use of alchemy to fashion the young man into an alchemic hermaphroditic figure who licenses the homoeroticism and the homosexuality in the poems. This hermaphrodite destabilizes the construction of gender and the notion that desire is stable, fixed and gender dependent. Ilona Bell maintains, “Poetry and poetics are not merely a reflection of social norms and generic codes; they are also symbolic acts that are continually reconfiguring sex and gender” (8). It is my contention that the speaker in the sonnets uses the generic expectations of poetry and the conceits of alchemy to reconfigure sex and gender.

Chapter five, “Thus Hath My Penne Presum’d To Please My Friend”: Alchemy and the Sensuous Production of Labor in Thomas Carew’s “A Rapture” and Thomas Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines,” is titled thusly because I want to emphasize the communal elements of poetry which are facilitated by the poets’ use of alchemy. The poems under discussion will be Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines,” and Carew’s “A Rapture.” In these poems I focus on the pressures of male sexual performance and the way that sexual performance is troped as labor. In Nashe, the desire for female sexual autonomy is symbolized by the spectacle of Francis’ orgasm and her use of a dildo. The dildo comes to represent a counterfeit laborer, but it reveals women’s secret nonetheless. By way of contrast, I look at Carew’s more cautious description of erotic activity, and his failure to please both Celia, and his audience. Working from the assumption that the male reader is their major audience, I focus on each poet’s endeavor to fulfill the unspoken

categorizing it as partly or wholly pornographic has implications for the literary canon and for critics as well. What does it say about our practice of reading and our practice of literary consumption if one of our most revered texts is a pornographic opus? Even so, my efforts to point out the poem’s erotic content is not a critique of the English literary canon. Rather, my efforts are in the hopes of providing us with a new vocabulary with which to describe The Faerie Queene and its poetic effects.
bond between poet and audience. It is my contention that Nashe and Carew rewrite the traditional love and seduction poem in order to inscribe sex and seduction as profitless labor.

Finally, I end my dissertation by commenting on the marginal versus canonical status of the poets’ output. Carew and Nashe’s use of unequivocal sexual language and imagery have limited their place in the English Literary canon. But why? Why is it that Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* which is so outrightly erotic is hailed as a masterpiece of literature, while Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines” only receives passing mention in certain anthologies? The answer to this question is mapped out fully in the conclusion where I demonstrate that the poets’ utilization of alchemy and religion may provide an answer.

By using alchemy to trace the limits of desire, gender and sexuality, the poets, in essence, “revyle nature’s secrets.”21 And in so doing allow for the possibility of charting the outer boundaries of the body. What follows then is that sexuality and desire is an attempt at knowing.

21 Nature was sometimes used a synonym for the vagina.
CHAPTER TWO

“A QUINTESSENCE EVEN FROM NOTHINGNESSE”: THE ALCHEMY OF 
SEXUALITY AND DECAY IN THE POETRY OF JOHN DONNE

Readers of John Donne have surely become accustomed to the numerous references to death and decay in his poetry. In fact, his preoccupation with death and deterioration underpin the majority of his work. From the lovers parting in “The Expiration” and “A Feaver,” to his misogynistic blazon in poems such as “The Anagram” and “Love’s Progress” to his railings against death in his various verse epistles, decay is the dominant image in Donne’s poems, so much so that C.A. Patrides concludes, “... Donne is in fact the foremost English poet— as well as [the] greatest English prose-writer— of death. Death was for Donne an obsession” (30-31). What then are we to make of his absorption with death and decay? Ramie Targoff suggests Donne’s repeated turn to issues of death and the flesh is Donne’s attempts to reconcile contradictory Christian doctrines concerning death and the resurrection (18-19). Moreover, “Donne worries about how he will remain in his afterlife the person that he currently is. He worries that his soul will not locate all the parts of his flesh at the last day, and that he will end up incomplete. He worries that his “I” will no longer be his “I” unless he keeps his spiritual and material parts together” (Targoff 22). Recognizing a similar pattern in Donne’s writing David Hirsch asserts, “Donne’s concern elsewhere with the scattered remains of the body is a

profoundly serious effort to secure the permanence of an individual’s physical representation of self. Would it be possible to recollect all the scattered pieces of the body and reconstruct the form and meaning of the original, or might some of the ‘tissues’ be lost, incorporated into other ‘spines’? (70). Additionally, Hirsch affirms by “Donne’s time, the earth’s ultimate destruction was an entrenched idea in orthodox Christianity” (74). Nevertheless, the consensus on Donne and decay hasn’t centered solely on Donne’s theological associations. Many critics, regardless of religious leaning in Donne, have concluded that decay in Donne is an inevitable part of his world. John Carey claims that change for Donne is irrevocably tied to a movement toward decay (21). And Achsah Guibbory agrees that “Donne’s ‘map of time’ is characterized by a decline into decay (4). The case seems hopeless. Nonetheless, I will demonstrate that decay in Donne is not as some have assumed an inescapable move toward destruction. Rather, decay in Donne functions as part of what I have termed an alchemic, transcendental sexuality. In fact, Donne creates a new type of sexuality, one informed by images from alchemy and latent references to Familism. First, I will discuss the history of alchemy and its early modern context. Then, I will trace some of the alchemical figures Donne marshals for his poetic service. I do not propose to read the poems as sequential analogues to the alchemical experiment, but rather as snapshots (images) of Donne’s formulation of a transcendental sexuality. Additionally, I read his poems in the context of his Familist theology as postulated by William Empson and more recently updated by David Wooton so that we may fully appreciate the alchemic discourse in his poems. Most of Donne’s poems allude to Familism, and those Familist allusions strengthen the alchemic discourses in the poetry. Finally, I utilize when appropriate Christopher Rick’s assertion that “Donne’s poems, [. . .] record a dislike of having come. Postcoital sadness and revulsion are grimly seized, but what is more grim is that the poems are so often driven to bend this animus
upon their own previous creative act of love” (33). In fact, Ricks emphasizes that Donne’s poems “repudiate[ ]” their “own deepest apprehendings” and “a double shame moves them to suicide” (34, 51). Using Ricks’ literary lens allows me the freedom to travel between Donne’s “little world[s] made cunningly.” In other words, my reading of the poems is not bound by their ending or their final lines.

The Family of Love

In their books, The Boxmaker’s Revenge: Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London, (2001) and The Family of Love in English Society, 1550-1630, (1994) Peter Lake and Christopher Marsh respectively, provide ample historical evidence of a religious denomination called The Family of Love or Familists. Marsh’s book demonstrates that they were many Familists at Elizabeth’s court in the 1580s and Lake’s book traces the lives of well-known Familists up to the Jacobean period. Familism started in the Netherlands and was “disseminated in England by Hendrick Niclaes’s disciple, Christopher Vittels in the 1570s” (Wooton 34). Lake points out that they were “rival groups of familists, each with their defining doctrinal quirks and quiddities to be found in London and around the country” (180). He goes on to explain that “we might, therefore, entertain the possibility of different groups, sharing a common familist heritage or influence, existing on the fringes of London puritan society throughout the early Stuart period” (180).²³ Familists believed that “every Christian was a Mary Magdalen, a sinner rescued from sin; and that every Christian was reborn through faith as Jesus

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²³ I should point out that there is another link albeit negative between alchemy and Puritanism. Keith Thomas states that the “attitude of most orthodox Calvinist clergy to alchemy was distinctly hostile” (375). They were “suspicious” of alchemy as they saw it as a direct corollation to magic (375). Moreover, they saw it as “an arrogant attempt to transform nature which could only play into the Devil’s hands. Most seventeenth-century Puritans condemned alchemy as diabolical” (375). For an alternative reading of the place of alchemy in conservative religion see Robert M. Schuler’s, “Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England,” Journal of the History of Ideas 41.2 (1980): 293-318. Schuler finds that alchemy was capable of being incorporated into Calvinist theology.
Christ. Every Familist was a Jesus Christ [and] (everyone of them is capable of leaving a relic at [their] death” (Wooton 37). But how does Familism relate to John Donne? Wooton insists that “... Donne’s preoccupation with love and the religion of love (‘Thy law’s abridgement, and thy last command / Is all but love’: ‘Father, part of his double interest’) carried him so far that he became a member of the Family of Love, a religious sect which had numerous adherents in late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England” (31-32). Wooton supplements part of his proof with a reference to John Etherington, a well-known ex-Familist who made veiled hints regarding Donne’s standing as a Familist:

John Etherington, who in 1610 may well have been a Familist of the scattered flock, was by 1623 an ex-Familist prepared to assert that there were Familists who were clergymen in the Church of England, that some were even to be found in the king’s chapel (where Donne, of course, preached every yeard). Looking back in 1645 he repeated and extended this claim: ‘There have been and are great doctors of divinity, so called [Donne received a doctorate of divinity in 1615], yea and some great peers and persons of quality and estate in this land. . . and have taught and entertained the same [Familism] with great affection and high applause. He himself had spoken to such people ‘forty years ago and sundry times since.’ (Wooton 35)

Wooton’s evidence is persuasive and while we can never be absolutely certain whether Donne followed Familism, we know for sure that Donne was acquainted with Familists. Furthermore, alchemy shared many similarities with Familism which may have attracted Donne or at least explained the Familist / alchemic vein in his poetry. Like alchemy, Familism
concerned itself with spiritual perfection.\textsuperscript{24} In fact, Donne’s Familist theology had two major
correlations to his articulation of a spiritual alchemy. In popular Familist doctrine God was said
to reside in the body and the soul of every believer. This concept was known as
“begoddodness.” Consequently, this latent connection to the Divine, imbued every believer with
the potential to enact their own salvation or salvific change. In Familism, the human body was
where the fight for heaven or hell was resolved. Similarly, in Donne’s religious alchemy, the
alembic or alchemical still, which represented the subject’s soul or body, represented the
potential for the ultimate in Divine expression. In the alembic, the soul underwent the spiritual
refinement of holy fires, and the cataclysmic battle of heaven and hell, was resolved in the
chemical unions of the alchemic still. There was also an additional correlation between his poetic
articulation of alchemy and familism. The secrecy surrounding the rites of the alchemical
experiment and the adherents to the Family of Love was equal. Therefore, the tenets of
begoddodness, and the culture of secrecy in Familism, resonate in the alchemical poems of
Donne. Moreover, we know Donne used any available resource to his poetic advantage. And as
will be made clear in this chapter, reading Donne’s poems, sermons, letters etc. in a Familist
context offers a more compelling explication of his poetry.

Considering Donne’s vast reading knowledge and his extensive library—Donne’s reading
collection consisted of a “sizable collection of metaphysical and philosophical treatises” and a
“sheer variety of books. . . about the soul” (Targoff 7), it should come as no surprise that Donne
was extremely familiar with alchemy. In fact, Jocelyn Emerson contends that:

\textsuperscript{24} According to Keith Thomas, in alchemy, “the spiritual transformation of the adept” was the primary goal (269).
Similary, in Familist doctrine, spiritual transformation was paramount. And like alchemy, (as we have heretofore
seen), Familism was frowned upon by the church fathers. However, local congregants were not so quick to observe
the quick demarcation between Familism and alchemy (or black magic). They combined the two as they saw fit for
use in their daily lives.
Donne’s employment of alchemical discourses in the Songs and Sonnets would have been understood by his contemporary coterie readership; further because alchemical treatises were widely available to the members of those social and political circles in which he functioned and for which he wrote, Donne’s readers would have been able to apprehend the multiple rhetorical, political, literary and theological ends to which he used alchemical language in his love lyrics, sermons and letters” (212).  

Moreover, the basic tenets of alchemy would have been familiar to many people of the time. Joseph Mazzeo believes “they seem to have been the common property of many educated men of the period” (104), and Christopher Hill states that “. . . alchemy, astrology, and natural magic similarly take their place as reasonable subjects for rational men and women to be interested in, from Samuel Hartlib to Sir Isaac Newton (16).”

The question facing us now is what form of alchemy was Donne most familiar with? And yet a better question would be which alchemist was Donne most familiar with? The short answer is the Swiss physician Paracelsus (1493-1541). Nevertheless, because of the miscellaneous nature of early modern alchemy, Edgar Hill Duncan warns against blindly assigning sources to Donne’s writing: “. . . renaissance alchemy was such an inclusive and heterogeneous body of knowledge and psuedo-knowledge that one cannot be certain to have detected all of the figures discussed [t]herein” (Duncan 257). Duncan further clarifies, “This, together with the fact that, aside from frequent reference to Paracelsus in his prose, Donne gives

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25 William Eamon affirms Emerson’s conclusions regarding the dissemination of alchemical knowledge. He provides evidence that alchemy “became highly fashionable in medical circles” and that “through the printing of cheap craft manuals, alchemical knowledge was widely disseminated to middle class audiences” (196).
no hint as to where his knowledge of alchemy was derived, makes the ascription of particular sources for his alchemical ideas extremely hazardous” (257-58).

Yet Mazzeo is convinced that Donne’s source is Paracelsus: “Although Donne could have learned alchemy from any of the numerous treatises and handbooks of his time, and no doubt did, Paracelsus is the only great alchemist referred to in Donne’s works whose theories seem to have captivated his imagination. His treatment of alchemical images and ideas reveals a strong Paracelsian influence” (104). I am inclined to agree. The alchemical images Donne employs overwhelmingly exemplify a Paracelsian predilection. Thus what I propose to do for the second section of the chapter is to outline the stages in the alchemical process which share an affinity with Donne’s elucidation of his version of a new type of sexuality capable of transmuting the body and defying decay and mortality.

Foremost, Donne establishes a major premise in order to substantiate his assertion of a sexuality capable of withstanding decay. He associates himself with the alchemist as Poet/God/Creator. This association is paramount as it enables him to accomplish the impossible: the resurrection of the lovers and the bestowal of immortality on the lovers. Linden reminds us that, “In its most extreme form [alchemy and the spiritual progress of the soul] leads to a direct identification of Christ, or his attributes, or God, with the master alchemist who creates, directs, and will someday end the world and the course of human history”( Mystical Alchemy 80). Perhaps Donne’s association with God sounds blasphemous. However, if we revisit some of the tenets of Familism, Donne’s so-called blasphemy might be more palatable. According to Lake, Familists “asserted their belief in their own spiritual and moral perfection” (150). They maintained that “every one of his family of love to be Christ, yea and God, and himself with God

26 Donne may have utilized Paracelsus’ alchemic formulations but he was no blind worshipper of Paracelsus. Ball tells us that Donne referred to Paracelsus as the “leader of the ‘legion of homicide physicians’ and a candidate for the ‘principal place right next to Lucifer’s own throne’ ” (85).
and Christ in a more excellent manner, saying that he is Godded with God and codeified with him and that God is hominified with him” (150). The other creative association that Donne mines is the figure of the poet as alchemist / creator. Demystifying Donne’s hyperbole of Elizabeth Drury and his use of “She” in “An Anatomie of the World,” Mazzeo points out:

One of the most important theories in alchemy was that the success of an attempted transmutation depended on the purity of the body to be transformed as well as on the efficacy of the transmuting agent. The importance of securing the proper first of the work and the necessity of working with ‘pure’ materials in every phase of the alchemical process is clearly implied in this passage. What is to be transmuted or healed must be ‘pure’ or ‘She,’ otherwise virtue as the elixir will only be able to gild and not transform it. (Mazzeo 116)

And again, in a verse letter to the Earl of Dorset, titled “To E. of D. with six holy Sonnets,” Donne utilizes “Elixir” making explicit the connection between the poet and the alchemist. I quote the sonnet in its entirety:

See, Sir, how as the Sun’s hot Masculine flame

Begets strange creatures on Niles durty slime

In me, your fatherly yet lusty Ryme

(For, these songs are their fruits) have wrought the same,

But though the ingendring force from whence they came

Bee strong enough, and nature doe admit

Seaven to be borne at once, I send as yet

But six, they say, the seveanth hath still some maime;

I choose your judgement, which the same degree
Doth with her sister, your invention, hold,
As fire these drossie Rymes to purifie,
Or as Elixir, to change them to gold:

*You are that Alchimist which alwaies had*

*Wit, whose one spark could make good things of bad. (1-14 emphasis mine)*

To further his purposes, Donne draws on the macrocosm- microcosm theory of the universe to create his own world that encapsulates the bodies, souls and spirits of the lovers. His declaration in Holy Sonnet 5, “I am a little world made cunningly / Of Elements, and an Angelike spright” (1-2), is according to Mazzeo “not simply a poetic metaphor; man literally was a ‘little world,’ the microcosm, made up four elements and possessing an immortal soul” (105). In this universe the body is also the book and vice versa. More importantly, the assumptions undergirding the patterns of Donne’s transcendential sexuality rely heavily on the physical unity of male and female and the early modern theory of correspondences.

**Sex, Alchemy and the Soul in “A Valediction to His Booke,” “The Dissolution” and “The Extasie.”**

Let us now direct our attention to the poetry and the various alchemical analogues therein. The first stanza of “A Valediction to his Book” anticipates Donne’s penchant for taking the lovers outside of this world, this universe, to one he himself creates. Using his familiar “body as book” conceit he transforms the lovers into “manuscripts” (10) a miracle afforde by the “grace of Love” (17). As proof of their miraculous transformation the lovers are reconstituted as Love’s “records” (18). Therefore, the body of the lovers become proof of love, proof of the divine. He declares:
This booke, as long-liv’d as the elements,
Or as the world’s forme, this all-graved tome
In cypher writ, or new made idiome;
We for love love’s clergie only’are instruments;
When this booke is made thus,
Should againe the ravenous
Vandals and Goths invade us,
Learning were safe; in this our Universe,

Schools might learn Sciences, Spheares Musik, Angels Verse. (19-27)

It is interesting to note that Donne uses scientific discourse to depict the lovers’ materialization into love: “elements,” “the world’s form,” “new made idiom,” “instruments,” “learning,” “schools” and finally “sciences.” I suggest that Donne’s use of scientific language is his “proof” that the lovers’ conversion into love and love’s (books) is in fact real. This reading of the lovers’ bodies as proof of love anticipates the section on anatomy, but for now, let us continue with Donne’s divine love.

Another facet of science is involved in their transformation. Clearly, in line 19 the Aristotelian theory of the elements forms the basis for the lovers’ transformation. Given that everything in the world was thought to have been created from one primary source; it is not unreasonable to assume that the lovers become an ancient book which in turn becomes a universe. Mazzeo attests, “The interconvertibility of the elements was linked to a theory of a primary matter from which the elements were derived, and in which all things were latent” (105). If we are attentive we can see not only the Aristotelian artifacts in the poem but also hear the alchemical intonations. “This all-graved tome” (20) foreshadows the lovers’ spiritual and sexual
death and their spiritual and sexual rebirth. Their very bodies, that is, their “booke” metamorphose into a limbeck. It would seem that Donne is at pains to demonstrate the lovers’ fitness for transubstantiation from finite, secular matter to infinite, sexual matter.

Elsewhere, Donne frequently draws on the image of death or the grave as the limbeck that purifies the soul or the body. In his “Elegie on the Lady Markham” he asserts,

So at this grave, her limbecke, which refines
The Diamonds, Rubies, Saphires, Pearles and Mines,
Of which this flesh was, her soule shall inspire
Flesh of such stuffe, as God, when his last fire
Annuls this world, to recompence it, shall
Make and name then, th’Elixar of this All. (28-29)

And, we need look no further than stanza two for proof of the lovers’ death. There he depicts love as a “subliming fire” which “invades” all who are true to the study and purpose of love (13). Again, Donne draws on the popular typology which connected the limbeck with fire. Unraveling the alchemists’ use of fire, Mazzeo explains, “The alchemists are generally careful to state that a special kind of fire must be employed in the great work, although they are seldom very explicit about it and shroud it in the general secrecy that covered all the important phases of the alchemical process” (112). Nonetheless, what is more significant is that Donne transfers the limbeck’s correlation with fire to an association with learning and books and thus by extension to an association with love and the lovers. Pontanus declares, “The inner fire is ‘found by deepe and profound meditation onely, and then it may be gathered out of Bookes and not before’ (quoted in Lyndy Abraham 76). I cite the following lines to emphasize my point: “Study our manuscript, those myriads / Of letters, which have past ‘twixt thee and me; / Thence write our
Recall our earlier discussion about the established idea of correspondences in the early modern period and it should come as no surprise that Donne harnesses the theory of correspondences in order to depict the lovers’ elevated state. So in Donne’s universe learning is equal to love, and the right type of book is akin to the lovers.

In stanza four of his “Elegie on the Lady Markham” Donne reemphasizes the inquisitive and scholastic nature of love. In fact, it is this inquisitive nature of love which allows it to be the true religion and moreover, truly divine. His characterization of divine love is one that sanctifies and accepts all types of love, be it spiritual or sexual. Announcing that “Love’s all Divinity,” he exhorts his readers to look again at the lovers for proof that in his Love, in his world, one “may finde all they seeke / Whether abstract spirituall love they like / Or loth so to amuze / Faith’s infirmity, they chuse” (29-30, 32,33). He concludes the stanza with the following statement: “For, though mind be the heaven, where love doth sit, / Beauty a convenient type may be to figure it” (35-36). A conventional reading might interpret “heaven” in this instance as a reference to either the teachings of the Catholic or Protestant church. But I offer another explanation: one that encompasses the entire poem and unifies the various metaphors therein. I turn again to one of the tenets of Familism as cited by Wooton. The phrase necessitates the full quotation. According to Wooton:

A fundamental part of Familist doctrine was that, just as believers experience the Resurrection in themselves, so too for believers the Last Judgment is past, and heaven is here and now. As Niclaes expressed it: ‘the coming of the kingdom of God cometh not to pass with outward appearance, and that men may say: Lo, here or there it is. For behold: The kingdom of God, and the life of the heavenly being,
is inwardly, within us.’ Again and again Donne tells us in the sermons, as the Familists did, that we can heaven upon earth: ‘even here I have Goshen in my Egypt, incorruption in the midst of my dunghill, spirit in the midst of the flesh, heaven upon earth.’ Christ told the thief on the cross, who was about to die: ‘If you will hear his voice this day, hodie eritis, this day you shall be with him in paradise, and dwell in it all the year, and all the years of an everlasting life.’ ‘My soul is united to my Saviour, now in my life, as in death can do, this kiss, this union can do, that is give me a present, an immediate possession of the kingdom of heaven.’ ‘The joy of heaven, God opens to our discovery, and delivers for our habitation even whilst we dwell in this world.’ By our conversation in heaven here . . . we have lucem essentiae, possession and fruition of heaven.’ (43-44)

The spagyric inflections in Donne’s sermon are many. Words such as “united,” “life,” “death,” “kiss,” and “union” figure a marital / sexual union with God borne out of death and destruction. To a novice it may appear that Donne satirizes alchemy, but this satire is aimed only at the blind: those who refuse to see the true value of the lovers. Considering the skepticism regarding alchemy and the coercive nature of traditional religion, it makes sense that in his poetry Donne ensures a safe haven for sexual love. And it is a good thing too as he has to create a sanctuary for a more explicit expression of the lovers’ transformative sexuality.

Turning now to “The Dissolution,” and to “The Extasie,” I find Donne’s transmutative sexuality bound up in orgasmic images of tears, semen and vaginal fluid. Let us first proceed with “The Dissolution.” With the notable exception of Jay Arnold Levine and Roberta Albrecht the critical commentary on “The Dissolution” remains scant. Levine reads the poem as a deliberately disguised reference to male impotence and the overwhelming moisture of female
orgasm in the alchemical experiment—a moisture that douses the flame or the male’s regenerating fire (314). Albrecht bristles at Levine’s claim, asserting:

Though Levine studies many of the hermetic analogues in Donne’s poem, he fails to address the range of possibilities available from the broader patterns of occult doctrine and early medical theories. . . . Though Levine’s interpretation applies in terms of human sexuality and in terms of the alchemical process, the consequent ‘solution,’ at least the alchemical sense of successful completion of the opus, is somehow missing.” (95)

Albrecht provides the piece she believes to be missing from Levine’s interpretation; suggesting that the seeming death of the speaker is not in fact an ejaculatio retardata (Levine 314) but rather a symbol of the lovers’ regeneration into the alchemical figure of the Phoenix. Generally speaking, I find both Levine and Albrecht’s arguments compelling. However, I believe that both have misidentified the central conceit of the poem. For me “The Dissolution” can be better understood in terms of a divine but physical expression of sex, specifically male and female orgasm.

The poem begins en medias res and the female addressee has already had an orgasm: “She’s dead; and all which die / To their first elements resolve” (1-2). What we are apprised of next is the opposing yet mutual equality of the lovers: “. . . we were mutual elements to us, and made of one another”(1-4). In fact, lines 1-10 are typical of alchemical sexual imagery. Moreover, these lines and the rest of the poem depict the idea of the chemical (alchemical) wedding. Abraham explains that the chemical wedding was “one of the central images of the opus alchymicum and a crucial operation in the creation of the philosopher’s stone” (Abraham 35). Furthermore, “The alchemists were ultimately concerned with the union of substances, the
reconciliation of opposites. Through this ‘marriage’ of opposites the goal of the opus, the production of gold and its metaphysical equivalent was obtained” (Abraham 35). Indeed, “images both verbal and visual representing this union range from the most primitive animal matings (dog and bitch, hen and cock, amourous birds of prey, winged and wingless dragons or serpents) to the union of human lovers, red man and white woman, and ultimately to the royal wedding of Sol and Luna as king and queen (Abraham 35). Line five is where we gain a more direct sense of the explicit nature of the speaker’s and addressee’s union: “My body then doth hers involve.” And the rest of the poem echoes this explicitly sexual union. The poet-speaker tells us that the things that make up his nature “grow” “abundant” and “burdenous” (7). Moreover, they “nourish not, but smother” / his “fire of passion, sighs of air, / Water of tears, and earthly sad despair” (9-10). These lines are where most readers begin to falter. Clearly, Donne conjures the four Aristotelian elements. However, without an understanding of Donne’s alchemical references our interpretations would be merely facile. Abraham reminds us:

The idea of ‘converting’ the contrary four elements into a state of union to form the fifth element or philosopher’s stone is frequently met with in [sic] the alchemical treatises. Johannes Mylius wrote of the four elements: ‘the first, second, third and fourth are all made one by converting the square into the circle. The process of converting the four elements into one ‘circular’ unity is synonymous with the union of opposites, male and female, spirit and body, at the chemical wedding. Artephius wrote, ‘By this means also is made mixtion and conjunction of body and spirit, which is called a conversion of contrary natures’ (SB,50). During this process the body is dissolved into spirit while the spirit is simultaneously
coagulated into form, so that they may be perfectly mingled together in union. In alchemy, the spiritual conversion of man was seen as analogous to the purification of metals. (46)

Thus, reading the poem in the context of “uniting opposites,” helps to clarify the remaining images that at first seem difficult to penetrate. Therefore, when Donne states that the addressee is dead and her death allows his “repair” (13), he is not suggesting that her death is a final death which has given him a type of vampiric nourishment. Rather, her death is the first part of the lovers’ resurrection. Again, if read as female orgasm, her “death” in line 13 simultaneously explains the speaker’s analogy of himself as a king who “receive[s] more, and spend[s] more, and soonest break” (18) as well as the speaker’s inability to speak after having had an orgasm.

By presenting himself as the agent of fire yet subject to “water of tears, and earthly sad despair” (10), Donne recasts a typical alchemical metaphor which equates moisture solely with women and fire exclusively with men. Thus, his lover’s “wet” orgasm is not in danger of dousing his manly fire as Levine incorrectly supposed. Rather, his lover’s wet orgasm enriches his fire.

Two final images may present a further complication for readers. The first is Donne’s elucidation of his “fire” and his comparison of his soul to a bullet. Let us begin with the fire image. The poet-speaker states that his “fire” and his “fuel” “grow[s]” simultaneously. And it his fire and fuel that adds substance to his orgasm so that he can: “receive more, and spend more, and soonest break” (18). At this point we must keep in mind that fire is one of the four elements and that a special type of fire is needed for the great work. And as Abraham informs us, “the mastery of [fire] brings the ability to express divine love; the chief agent of transmutation in the opus alchymicum” (76). Furthermore, one needs a special type of fire to do the work. “The alchemist in John Lyly’s Gallathea says of the outer fire: ‘Ay, Rafe, the fortune of this art
consisteth in the measure of the fire, for if there be a coal too much or a spark too little, if it be a little too hot or a thought too soft, all our labour is in vain’ (3.3.13-16)” (Abraham 76). In “The Dissolution” then we see that fire is crucial to the lover’s sexual and divine transformation. In fact, it is the woman’s orgasm that maintains the delicate balance needed for the right type of fire.

The woman’s orgasm which causes his fire to grow also parallels another crucial step in the chemical wedding, and that is the release of the soul. According to Abraham,

The bodies of the lovers lying dead in the grave symbolize the death which frees the soul to be released and rise to the top of the alembic. Some treatises indicate that the soul is then united in a new wedding with the spirit. . . . The next step is the union of the already joined soul and spirit with the purified body below, at which point the body is resurrected. Some treatises say that the soul unites with the purified body by means and mediation of the spirit, some that spirit and body unite by means of the mediation of the soul. But whatever names are applied, a supreme union occurs, with the death and resurrection symbolizing the transmutation of matter. When the union of body and spirit take place, the body is dissolved into spirit, while the spirit is simultaneously coagulated into form (i.e. body) so that the ‘opposites’ may be perfectly mingled. (38)

It should be clear by now that “The Dissolution” dramatizes a portion of the chemical wedding so key to the transformation of the lovers. By the end of the poem both of their souls are released. This release not only echoes their mutual orgasmic delight but also illustrates their transformation from finite body to infinite sexuality. More importantly, the poem’s final lines erase any lingering doubts about their transformation: “And so my soul, more earnestly released,
/ Will outstrip hers; as bullets flown before / A latter bullet may o’ertake, the powder being more” (22-24). “Powder” here is a direct reference to the philosopher’s stone, the holy grail of alchemists.

In “The Extasie” Donne continues to harness the alchemical typology of the body and soul. And in order to buttress his depiction of the lovers’ transformation he draws on a core Familist belief regarding the nature of the soul. A hasty first reading may suggest a disjunctive quality to “The Extasie.” After all, the poem concentrates its energy on descriptions of sex and the bodily materialism of the soul. Yet, despite this seeming disjunction, “The Extasie” manages to accomplish a lot. The poem naturalizes sex, refutes popular notions of male orgasm shortening a man’s lifespan, and like “The Dissolution,” “The Extasie” places sex and orgasm in the realm of the divine while reversing popular concepts of the body’s sinful corruption.

The first few lines intimate the alchemical and sexual nature of the poem. The lovers are seated by a river described as “A Pregnant banke” that’s already “swell’d up” (2). This image of sexual tumescence permeates the balance of the poem. Furthermore, there is a reference to “The violets reclining head” (4). Patrides glosses violet in this instance as “an emblem of faithful love and truth, but also, in its physical nature, self-evidently sensuous” (99). Patrides is quite right to reference the sensual attributes of the violet. However, there is an additional significance to the violet in the poem. The violet in the poem substitutes for the purple tincture of alchemy. Abraham states that the purple tincture is

the same as the red elixir or stone. The Latin purpureus-a-um means purple-coloured; dark red, dark brown. The red stone or elixir, which can tinge all base metals to gold and restore man to perfect health and consciousness of God, is frequently described as the precious purple tincture. The colour of the tincture is
frequently compared to the Tyrian purple of costly fabrics worn by persons of royal or imperial rank. . . (Abraham 159-60)

Donne returns again to the image of the violet in lines 37-40. And this violet continues to replicate itself in terms of “strength, colour and size” (38). The image of the multiplying violet is Donne’s forceful reiteration of the lovers’ independent immortality. Therefore, when Donne foregrounds his poem with a reference to violet, he is in fact stating that the lovers are royalty; subject to their own laws whether physical, social or religious. Moreover, he announces their unblemished goodness as the purple (red) tincture or stone is a symbol of the attainment of perfection.

And there is another layer of significance which Donne mines. Abraham explains that the “metaphysical symbolism of the purple robe of the adept” is reserved for one “who has mastered himself and the elements” (160). Citing Joan Hodgson Abraham states:

The fully evolved child of the seventh ray does indeed wear the kingly purple, not the dark heavy shade symbolizing material power, but a robe of rich amethyst light, indicating his dominion over the kingdom of the self. He has reached the state of mastery where the lower self has become completely absorbed into the higher. In the words of the old alchemists, the base metal has been transmuted into fine gold.” (160)

Clearly, Donne is at pains to emphasize that the lovers have taken on a different body; a sexual body no less, but one that is invulnerable to the vicissitudes of this earth.

Lines 5-8 expound on the nascent sexual imagery in the first four lines. The lovers’ hands are “firmly cemented / By a fast balm” which springs from them. It should come as no surprise that I read “balm” here as some sort of orgasmic fluid. Yet, balm in this instance is also
a reference to the balm or balsam of the alchemists. Balm akin to the philosopher’s stone is a substance capable of healing all infirmities and retarding the onset of death and decay. With the acquisition of this balm one could become immortal. So Donne sets up the lovers’ orgasmic experience as one that wards off decay. Furthermore, their orgasmic experience makes them one. If we are still unconvinced that balm in this poem is a substitute for the lovers’ orgasmic emissions, we need look no further than Debora Shuger’s brilliant articulation of the “gums of glutinous heat” which trap the Lady in Milton’s A Maske. Drawing on Catholic and Protestant doctrine, Shuger demonstrates that the gums which trap the lady “are (or are like) birdlime” (2). Going a step further Shuger illustrates that “wet dreams are birdlime” (2). She explains, “The metaphor, based on the shared “stickiness” of the substances in question, likens the soul’s bondage to carnal compulsion to the plight of a bird held down by lime-twigs, its wings useless” (Shuger 2). But again Donne reshapes conventional metaphors to his liking. At first glance it may seem that the lovers’ are in fact held captive by their shared sexuality. However, this is not the case. Their souls have “gone out” (16) to “negotiate” (17) the next step in their transformation. In the meantime, the lovers are purified by the limbeck of love as demonstrated by the statement, “If any, so by love refined . . .” (21). And the phrase “We like sepulchral statues lay, / All day” (18-19) emphasizes their physical position within love’s limbeck. Recall that in the chemical wedding, (the process which leads to the attainment of the philosopher’s stone,) the body of the lovers lay at the bottom of the limbeck while they are being refined by fire. Abraham reminds us that “At the chemical wedding the vessel [limbeck, alembic] is represented as the conjugal bed in which the lovers unite” (6). After this refinement they rise to the top of the limbeck as one entity.
The remainder of the poem shows this oneness as a unity of souls and a disruption of traditional gender roles. The speaker informs us that their ecstatic union of sex and the soul affords them the clarity to repudiate gender roles. He asserts: “This Extasie doth unperplex / We said and tell us what we love; / Wee see by this, it was not sexe; / Wee see, we saw not, what did move” (29-32). By lines 45-48 they have attained their immortality. “Th’ atomies of which [they] grow” is such that “[. . . ] no change can invade” (47-48). Notwithstanding, this miraculous transformation is exceeded by another more momentous change. Just as their souls have been elevated to a new realm of existence so too have their bodies.

The elevated state of their souls signals the next change that the lovers undergo. Donne alerts us to this change in lines 49-52. He demands, “Our bodies why do we forbear?” (50). His reply is a restatement of the macrocosm / microcosm theory: “They are ours, though not we; we are Th’ intelligences, they the spheres” (51-52). Again, Donne asserts their mastery over their bodies. They control the universe of their bodies. Their bodies do not control them. It is with this sense of mastery that he concludes the poem. In lines 65-66 he declares that “pure lovers’ souls” should “descend” / “To affections, and to faculties.” Paradoxically, the descent of the soul is not as some would assume a negative undertaking. Rather, it is a glorification that frees the soul from the prison of religious doctrine. And so in the final lines Donne demands that the lovers turn once again to their bodies. Not only for themselves, but so that “Weak men on love reveal’d may look; / Love’s mysteries in souls do grow / But yet the body is his book” (70-72). These men are weak because they have not tasted of this transformative sexuality. More importantly, Donne offers a radical restatement of the position between body and soul. It is the soul that learns from the body. The body is the soul’s book or reference. In a sense then, the body is the center of reasoning. And it is from this seat of rationale that the soul must learn. The
speaker boasts in the final lines that the lovers’ final transformation will be “marked” by their return to their bodies. It is as if Donne creates his own church of lovers / believers. To the unbeliever in the matters of love the change is imperceptible. But Donne exhorts any lover to “mark” them or watch them as they undergo this momentous change (75). By assimilating the image of body with soul or soul to body and all its attendant metaphors, Donne transforms the poem into a type of hermaphrodite which is a strange yet symbiotic creature made up of opposing dualities: sex and soul, mind and body, alchemy and religion. Yet it is this duality that rescues “The Extasie” from merely being a disparate poem of two halves. This hermaphroditic duality unites the poem and Donne reproduces this image of the hermaphrodite for “The Canonization” and “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning.”

**Forged by Fire: Donne’s Hermaphrodite in “The Canonization” and “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning”**

Both “The Canonization” and “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” synthesizes Donne’s vision of an alchemical creature formed by the unification of the lovers’ souls. In “The Canonization” Donne represents their unification in an alchemical language specific to birds, and in “A Valediction,” he uses gold, moving from creatures of nature to metals of the earth.

As he does in the previous poems we have discussed, in “The Canonization” Donne critiques organized religion in order to establish that the lovers are in fact the spiritually authentic representations of love. Moving from a rejection of organized religion in stanza 1, to a dismissal of overplayed Petrarchan clichés in stanza 2, Donne establishes himself as a true acolyte of love in lines 10-17. In line 18 he reiterates his assertion that he and his mistress are the only faithful lovers in the religion of love. He reinforces this assertion with his turn to
alchemical metaphors in stanza 3. In fact, stanza 3 summarizes the crux of the poem’s “prima materia.” The poet-speaker dares anyone to deny the veracity of their love:

Call us what you will, wee are made such by love,

Call her one, mee another flye,

We’re Tapers too, and at our owne cost die

And wee in us finde the’Eagle and the dove,

The Phoenix ridle hath more wit

By us, we two being one, are it.

So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit,

Wee dye and rise the same, and prove

Mysterious by this love. (19-27)

Line 21 is misleading. It would seem that the lovers are only tapers, phallicly doomed to burn due to the intensity of their love. But the rest of the stanza provides the answer to the “ridle” that Donne formulates. In the alchemical tradition, “the Eagle, dove and Phoenix” symbolize different stages of the alchemical experiment. Abraham comments that the Eagle, is the “philosophic mercury which has been ‘sublimated, the white tincture or water also known as the virgin’s milk; sometimes philosophical sal almoniac. Thomas Lodge wrote of the alchemists’ enigmatic riddles: ‘Let us marke their misteries and spels. . . First aske where the flying Eagle dwels’ (Works, 3:69)” (Abraham 64). Therefore, Donne’s use of “riddle” in the context of the Eagle, dove, and Phoenix leads me to believe that perhaps Donne was familiar with the work of Thomas Lodge. Nevertheless, let us continue. Abraham goes on to explain that the “virgin’s milk” “is the transforming mercurial waters, the white mercury of the philosophers” (211, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the dove “like the swan” symbolizes “the pure white stage of the
opus, the albedo. The stage of the dove succeeds the corruption, putrefaction and sublimation of the black matter (the caput corvi) at the nigredo)” (Abraham 58, emphasis mine). More importantly, “The dove is also a symbol for the transforming Arcanum, Mercurius, because it reconciles and unites the opposite substances, male Sol and female Luna; it brings peace to the quarrelling elements” (Abraham 59). Clearly, if the lovers are tapers that burn, the fire of their love is the limbeck that refines and allows them to undergo the transformative stage depicted by the eagle and the dove. Donne’s use of the dove and the eagle simply reiterate their transformation. Turning now to the final bird in the poem, albeit a mythical one, we find that the lovers have become the Phoenix. Even without any alchemical knowledge, most modern readers would be familiar with the signification of the Phoenix as a mythological emblem of resurrection from fire. And so it is in alchemical lore. The Phoenix is “a symbol of renewal and resurrection signifying the philosopher’s stone. . .” (Abraham 152). Therefore, when Donne declares that the lovers “dye and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love,” (26-27) he merely summarizes the process of their resurrection.

Let us now consider the sexual symbols in stanza 3. Stanza 3 is replete with sexual metaphors tied to Donne’s representation of a hermaphrodite. If we return to line 20, we can fully see how Donne harnesses both social and alchemical symbols of sexuality. “Flye” as Patrides glosses is “a common [societal] example of both ephemerality and unbridled sexuality said to be hermaphroditic and resurrectable” (58). The attributes of “unbridled sexuality” and “resurrectability” conjured in the word “flye” find their fullest expression in Donne’s depiction of the Phoenix and the lovers. Donne affirms that the lovers are the Phoenix: “By us, we two being one, are it. / So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit, / Wee dye and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love” (24-27). In lines 24-27 two conceits are operating at once. When he
states that the lovers are one and that both sexes “fit” “this “one neutrall thing,” Donne delineates the first level of sexual signification regarding the lovers. Here they are the hermaphrodite of the alchemical experiment. A creature made up of:

Mercurius and the philosopher’s stone, which are composed of both male sulphur and female argent vive. In the production of the Stone the alchemist must join sulphur, the hot, dry, active male aspect of the prima materia, to the cold, moist receptive female aspect, argent vive or mercury. The union of these two metallic seeds is presented as the copulation of two lovers, and later, at a higher level of union, the chemical wedding of Sol and Luna, sun and moon, king and queen. This complete, undivided unity, known as the rebis or hermaphrodite is the perfect integration of male and female energies. (Abraham 98)

Time and time again we witness Donne’s efforts to unite opposites, that is, the masculine and feminine virtues. Their hermaphroditic characteristics efface their gender and contribute to the heightened sense of copulation suggested in the poem.27 Yet, paradoxically, their gender is still maintained as a paradigm of their sexuality. On the second level of signification, the “neutral thing” to which “both sexes fit” is none other than their genitals fitting perfectly together during the act of lovemaking. Consequently, when they “dye and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love” (26-27), the orgasmic conceit of die and the erection (“rise”) sustained by the speaker is not as some would infer a signal of their death. Rather, as we have seen heretofore in Donne, these elements illustrate their resurrection. Indeed their resurrection, their trial by fire, their rise from the ashes of the limbeck advances them to sainthood. For proof, look no further

27 Margaret Healy reads the Renaissance hermaphrodite as the unblemished figure of the human form before sin was introduced into the world. For an alternative reading see Kathleen P. Long. Long analyzes the figure of the hermaphrodite on the continent and finds the hermaphrodite suggestive of political unrest, gender subversion and ethnic difference.
than the “ashes,” “sonnets” of “pretty roomes” and “hymns” of stanza 4. The lovers are “Canoniz’d for love” (36). “The Canonization” continues Donne’s theme of uniting sexual and alchemical metaphors to articulate a new type of sexuality, one that is both divine and immortal.

“A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” adds to Donne’s oeuvre of poems attesting to the divine sexuality of the soul and the corrupt make-up of organized religion. Like “The Canonization,” Donne idealizes the lovers’ union in the form of the alchemical hermaphrodite. First, in stanza 2 he warns his mistress not to reveal their love to “the layetie” (8). Otherwise it would be a “prophanation” of their “joyes” (7). Having demarcated the line between his type of love and that of the church he proceeds to outline the alchemical elements in the poem which vivify the lovers’ sexuality. Stanza 5 echoes Donne’s familiar representation of love as the limbeck that refines the lovers: “But we by a love, so much refin’d, / That our selves know not what it is, / Inter-assured of the mind, / Care lesse, eyes, lips, hands to misse” (17-20). Here the lovers are so fully integrated that they become indistinguishable. Even their “soules,” “which are one,”[. . .] / endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion, / Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate (21-24). The reference to gold is no accident. Gold along with silver is “two of the most precious metals” in alchemy (Abraham 86). For alchemists, the attainment of gold from base metals was akin to the attainment of human perfection both bodily and spiritual. Abraham expounds on this point:

Gold is seen as the perfect immutable metal which is able to withstand the test of the fire. But when the alchemists speak of gold they mean more than material gold. In the microcosmic-macrocosmic law of correspondences, gold is the metallic equivalent of the sun, the image of the sun buried in the earth. The sun in turn is the physical equivalent of the eternal spirit which lodges in the heart (the
‘sun’ of the human microcosm. Michael Maier’s *Lusus Serius* referred to gold as the ‘shadow’ of the eternal spirit: ‘Gold, which is in itself incorruptible, is on earth accounted the symbol, the marke and the shadow of that eternity, which we shall enjoy above’ (122). (87)

What Donne compels us to see then is not merely the oneness of the two souls, but more importantly their sexual immortality. We know from stanza 5 that they have already been tried in the fire of love or the limbeck of love. Stanza 6 outlines their immortality and both stanzas 7 and 8 identify the constituents that reveal their sexuality. In these stanzas, Donne mobilizes the metaphor of a compass and the figure of the hermaphrodite to elevate what could easily have been a trite discourse on sex, and female and male genitals.

So he likens their souls to the feet of “stiffe twin compasses” (26). They are so yoked that if one moves then “the’other doe” (28). The references to their souls being “one,” and his depiction of the lovers as the inseparable feet of the compass leads me to believe that here Donne seeks to completely efface gender. At this point the metaphors of explicit sexuality begin to materialize. The directional position of the compass now compels me to read the remainder of the poem as an explicit act of lovemaking. I see the movement of the compass as a substitution for their genitals. The phrase “Yet when the other far doth rome” (30), encapsulates the image of his mistress’ vagina not yet in contact with the poet-speaker’s penis. This distance titillates the poet, causing him to remark, that his penis, the movable foot of the compass, “leanes, and hearkens after it, / And growes erect, as that comes home” [her vagina draws nearer ] (31-32). Donne’s articulation of female sexuality as immovable defies our expectations of his oft-famed misogyny. And he transfers this fresh understanding of female sexuality to the last stanza.
In the final stanza Donne formulates their sexual union as one of perpetual constancy. And he intimately details their union: “Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begunne” (35-36). In other words, the woman’s “firmness” or vagina justifies his penis, that is, her vagina elevates their sexuality from mere copulation to divine sexuality. More importantly, the circle is never-ending. Wherever he begins is where he will eventually end. The circular nature of their desire illustrates the divine and immortal aspect of their love. The final lines culminate in an even more graphic portrayal of their sexual union. When the poet declares that his mistress makes him end where he began, he is also documenting their sexual bliss *en medias res*. Now his penis is fully inserted into her vagina and so he ends where he began. Indeed, Donne paints a rather unambiguous picture of their lovemaking. Nevertheless, what I find more startling is that the movement of the compass depends solely on the strength of his addressee. In this poem, Donne reformulates the archaic conceits of feminine sexuality as changing and shallow and creates instead a trustworthy feminine sexuality. Moreover, this feminine sexuality is divine and allows the poet-speaker to gain immortality.

**The Limbeck of Death: Despair and the Grave in “A Nocturnall Upon Saint Lucie’s Day.”**

With the possible exception of “An Anatomy of the World” no other poem in Donne’s alchemical canon has been so hotly contested as “A Nocturnall Upon Saint Lucie’s Day.” The poem is a stark and unremitting dramatization of the agonies of death. This dramatization of death has led many scholars to conclude that there is no hope in the poem and that the final image of the poet-speaker is one that reinforces his lifeless state. Such a reading is hardly surprising. The poem begins and ends with images of midnight, and a perpetual midnight at that. Yet, these misinformed readings go back to my initial statement that without a thorough
knowledge of alchemy, scholars will be led astray by the alchemical references in Donne’s poems. In fact, Kate Gartner Frost, one of the few scholars to correctly assess “A Nocturnall” declares that these many misreadings stem from:

an ignorance of the transmutative processes of alchemy and, more important, the place it occupied in the thinking of Donne and his contemporaries. Where the material alchemical process is acknowledged, its spiritual implications are often overlooked, or interpreted through the deceptive mesh of Jungian or Eliadean thinking, or forced without historical examination into the mold of twentieth-century context” (151).

Seeking to redress these flawed readings, the purpose of this chapter then is to read the poem in light of a specific stage of the alchemical opus. Therefore, I read “A Nocturnall” not as the end point of the speaker’s existence but as explications of the harrowing moments when the poet and his lover must become nothing. In fact, this poem captures, distills if you will, the putrefaction (nigredo) stage of the opus. Thus the poem is a deep mediation on the purging process of the alchemical wedding. What seems to have caused a stumbling block for scholars is the many images of darkness and nothingness in the poem. Yet if we look to Donne’s theology, his sermons specifically, we may find that the darkness is in fact part of the entire schema of the poem. Let us begin with the first stanza.

The first stanza deftly introduces the elements of death and darkness. The speaker informs us that “Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes, / Lucies, . . / The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks / Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes;” (1-4). Immediately, we come to realize that we are in the midst of darkness. And the rest of the stanza does not let up either. The world has drunk and devoured the healing “generall balme” and the poet now seems to be an
object lesson of laughter. But is that really so? Let us parse the stanza for alchemical clues. Our first consideration must be the mythical figure of the “Sunne.” According to Abraham, “The sun is one of the major symbols in alchemy” (194). In fact, it is the “symbol of gold, the secret fire, the masculine power or principle in the opus” (Abraham 194). And the sun is the key indicator during the rubedo stage that the opus, elixir, or Philosopher’s Stone has been attained (Abraham 194). I would be so bold as to add that a second level of meaning can be adduced from the poet’s use of sun. So I suggest from the outset that sun in the first stanza, in fact the entire poem, is not only symbolic of the alchemical sun but also the Son of God. Blasphemous to be sure, yet, considering that our domain is alchemy we can take the risk. Recall that in alchemy the poet / alchemist is associated with God and his creative powers. Furthermore, as we delve into the poem, we shall discover that the Christocentric intimations are in fact, deliberate. So in a litany of self-pity the speaker concludes stanza 1 with the assertion that he is “dead, enterr’d” and reduced to a mere “Epitaph” (8-9).

Moving from self-pity toward acceptance, the poet demands that future lovers “Study” him (10). He insists that he is “every dead thing, / In whom love wrought new Alchimie / For his art [Alchimie] did expresse / A quintessence even from nothingnesse” (12-15). Perhaps. But the poet is certainly not at the end. On the contrary, he is just beginning to be reborn. The harrowing effects of the nigredo stage has addled his brain. Fortunately, the poet still manages to provide us with enough information for us to make a proper reading of the poem. He painstakingly delineates his suffering throughout the rest of the stanza, declaring that “From dull privations, and leane emptinesse / He ruin’d mee, and I am re-begot / Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not” (16-18). The “He” of course is the figure of alchemy and as we shall see momentarily, God. I take my leave from Donne’s sermons which are replete with images of
darkness, nothingness if you will, tied to the creative omniscience of God. In one sermon he proclaims, “God found me nothing, and of that nothing made me” (Sermons 7:136). But returning to our earlier supposition about the sun, we can state with a high level of confidence that “He” here is also God. Eugene R. Cunnar finds that:

On the most serious level, the alchemist’s process was analogous to God’s Creation from nothing. Like God and the alchemist, the poet also had the capability of creating out of nothing, of reducing life to its original components and then redirecting it back to God. Moreover, just as God is manifest in his Creation so may he be present also in man’s creations, and the process of His thus becoming present could be expressed alchemically by Donne (77).

Allowing for Paracelsus as one of Donne’s main source of alchemy, Cunnar explains that:

Paracelsus analyzes death as a separation that is equivalent to God’s creation of the universe out of nothing by chemical separation and as equivalent to the final separation in which ‘something will be produced out of me, except by death. . . when they are turned to nothing, then they exist in their prime. That prime must be sought in the beginning. What that means—going into nothingness—must be accounted one of the secrets. . . And so the passing away of all things is desired. (79)

I cite Cunnar to emphasize what Donne does so cleverly. Through a series of images he links the Christian God with the figure of the alchemist and correspondingly the figure of the Sun to Christ and by extension to himself. Some traditional readings of the second stanza tend to accept the poet’s denunciation of alchemy, going so far as to suggest that the poet renounces alchemy
and dies at the end. Yet just an understanding of the quintessence makes such an interpretation impossible. Abraham points out that the quintessence also known as the fifth element is the very essence of the body of the metal or Stone, the incorruptible, pure and original substance of the world magically able to preserve all sublunar things from destruction and corruption. The fifth element is frequently identified with the final goal of the opus, the philosopher’s stone. The philosopher’s stone cannot be created until the alchemist has first united the four contrary elements—earth, air, fire and water—into an integrated, harmonious whole. Mylius described the fifth element as a ‘mixture of all the elements, and a reduction of them to one pure substance’. Isaac Newton wrote in his ‘Index chemicus’ that ‘Quintessence is a thing that is spiritual, penetrating, tingling and incorruptible, which emerges anew from the four elements when they are bound to each other.’ This perfect substance or balsam, thought to be beyond the realm of change and decay, was believed to be a panacea with miraculous healing properties and the power to transform the impure into the pure, the perishable into the imperishable (75).

Clearly then, the poet is slowly being transformed. But the experience is such that he believes he is being “re-begot” of “things which are not” (17-18). Another of Donne’s sermons rehearses this theme of nothingness. The poet declares, “He created thee ex nihilo, he gave thee a being, there’s matter of exaltation and yet all this for nothing . . . but he did not create thee ad nihilum, to returne to nothing again” (Sermons 2:147). As the sermons wind their way through a labyrinth of darkness to hope so too does the poem. However, as stated previously the poet must first endure overwhelming sadness.
The third verse of the poem reflects this overwhelming despair. And again, it is only through a thorough understanding of alchemy that we are able to make sense of the poet’s desolation. The speaker contrasts the more familiar images of flood and tears with the less familiar image of the grave and the limbeck: “I, by love’s limbecke, am the grave / Of all, that’s nothing. Oft a flood / Have wee two wept, and so drown’d the whole world, us two;” (21-24). Taken altogether, limbeck, grave, flood, world, tears, all imply the paradoxical nature of the alchemical dissolution which leads to creation.

Therefore, when Donne summons the figure of their tears as the flood that drowns the whole world in stanza three (23-24) he telescopes their love and his death back again to the universe he creates. I quote Abraham to give credence to my assertion. Abraham states that:

flood is a symbol of the dissolution and putrefaction of the matter of the Stone during the black nigredo stage when water is the dominant element. Mylius wrote: ‘And this blackening is the beginning of the operation and indication of putrefaction. . . a sign that the body is dissolving. . . And as it says in the story of Noah, “The waters prevailed over the earth and had dominion over it” so for one hundred and fifty days six days it is concealed in the blackness before the time of the whitening. (78)

Reading “A Valediction Forbidden Mourning” in a similar vein, Cunnar expands on the creative and divine potential of water in alchemy:

[Donne] treats their separation as an alchemical dissolution that is a creation. The water, rather than separating the lovers, unites them, since both the sea journey and the water of creation were an essential step prior to the chemical marriage.
The sea as a symbol of *aqua aeris*, the medium in which the conjunction of opposites took place, was analogous to the waters of creation. (82)

Thus in a brilliant reinterpretation of his creative, that is, poetic powers, Donne figures the death of the world as the birth of their union, which is to say the dissolution that creates the lovers as one entity.

We need only look to stanza four to recognize what the poet is slowly becoming: “the Elixir” (29) or philosopher’s stone and ultimately in stanza five, a type of Christ. In stanza four he is careful to inform us that his lover is not really dead (28) and that because of her “non-deadness” he is “Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown” (29). Donne’s word recalls Paracelsus’ language of creative nothingness. In the fifth stanza Donne returns to the image of the Sunne. Continuing his explanation of his nothingness from stanza five he declares that the “Sunne” will not “renew” him (37). In this final stanza he resigns himself to his fate, determined to “prepare toward” his lover (43). However, if we have been integrating our alchemical knowledge the final stanza should be clearer to us. The poet is about to experience the last pangs of the nigredo process. Having endured the agonies of the chemical dissolution the poet has now resigned himself to the final moments of pain. Considering the aforementioned religious invocations it is not a stretch to think of the poet in these final moments as a type of Christ. Like Christ, he has gone down to the very essence of the grave and will rise again. Sensing the complete withdrawal of God and experiencing a profound sense of emptiness, Jesus cried out during the spiritual agony of the cross, “My God why hast thou forsaken me?” So too the poem is the poet’s question of why. Clarence H. Miller nicely sums up the final moments of the poem. He reveals, “There is, of course no joyful exaltation at the end of the “Nocturnall,” nor has the time changed from midnight. But it is clear that in the last four lines the poet is looking ‘towards her,’ the
Lucy whose name means ‘light’; and the midnight is now ‘deep’ not because it expresses despair greater than the first stanza, but because it betokens a profounder understanding of darkness” (82). It is only through such a “profound understanding of darkness” that the poet can subsequently become the agent of his creative imagination, one where he can create worlds and alternate sexualities.\(^\text{28}\)

**Conclusion - Donne and the Alchemy of Sexuality**

What then are we to conclude about Donne’s use of alchemical metaphors? The first conclusion we may draw is that Donne’s coterie is larger than we first supposed. Or, if this conclusion does not suffice we can confidently say that alchemy was not the unique occupation of quacks, conmen and mountebanks. Rather as Emerson has demonstrated, alchemy belonged to the purview of both the elite and the non-elite. Donne’s use of alchemy then questions our linear romanticization of the history of science. And Carla Mazzio cogently argues that, “it was not until the 1650s that the word ‘science’ first became synonymous with the natural and physical sciences, and it was not until almost two centuries later that the word ‘scientist’ would be coined as a possible term through which to distinguish ‘students of the natural world’ from other knowledge practioners” (1). Moreover, alchemy was not segregated from science (chemistry) until later in the eighteenth century. Therefore, Donne’s use of alchemy invites us to consider questions of critical practice and ontology. What is the nature of sexuality? The body? The soul? How are men and women biologically and spiritually different? And can we legibly discern these distinctions? Perhaps more significantly is that Donne’s use of alchemy highlights the scholarly

\(^{28}\text{For a nuanced rereading of male poetic/procreative powers in early modern England see Spiller’s “Poetic Parthenogenesis and Spenser’s Idea of Creation in The Faerie Queene.” Using episodes from The Faerie Queene, specifically what she terms “initiation narratives,” Spiller argues that Spenser’s Faerie Queene challenges the Aristotelian model of biology and creation, thereby inviting us to rethink contemporary notions of poetic parthenogenesis.}\)
work we still have to do in early modern studies. As we have seen, alchemy traversed the mediums of poetry, religion, spirituality, anatomy, and chemistry. This list is by no means exhaustive. But our list demonstrates that we can no longer place the discourse of alchemy as a footnote to larger more important studies in the above-mentioned fields. Early modern alchemy enjoyed a dialectical relationship with science and literature. In fact, the study of alchemy and the knowledge of alchemy formed a popular place in the imagination and thinking of many early modern people. Paying attention to the overlap between alchemy, literature, and science, may expand our understanding of early modern categories of the body, soul and gender. It is important to realize that without an awareness of how alchemy informed early modern culture we like the uninitiated labor in darkness with the true knowledge and secret of the art left solely to the adepts.
CHAPTER THREE

“THAT WANTON LADY WITH HER LOVER LOSE”: READING THE AESTHETICS OF ALCHEMY AND PASSIONATE DISCOURSE IN BOOKS 2 AND 3 OF THE FAERIE QUEENE

Tis A Pageant to Keep Us In False Gaze
Othello

The sexual episodes in Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene are marked by violence. One readily thinks of Amoret’s torment at the hands of Busyrane, and Guyon’s destruction of Acrasia’s Bower of Bliss. Stephen Greenblatt famously proposes that the bower has to be destroyed because the pleasures found within it threaten civilization. He specifically parallel’s the bower’s destruction with the European encounter of the New World and the attempt by English Protestants to extinguish Roman Catholic images:

The violence of the destruction was regenerative; they found in it a sense of identity, discipline and holy faith. In tearing down what appealed to them and sickened them, they strengthened their power to resist their dangerous longings, to repress antisocial impulses, to conquer the powerful desire for release. And the conquest of desire had the more power because it contained within itself a version of that which it destroyed: the power of Acrasia’s sensuality to erase signs and upset temperate order is simultaneously attacked and imitated in Guyon’s destruction of the exquisite bower. (Renaissance Self-Fashioning 183-84)

And what of Amoret’s suffering? Can we locate her torment within the civilizing process that Greenblatt describes? Perhaps not so directly. Katherine Eggert sums up the critical consensus regarding Amoret’s suffering thusly:

For some thirty years beginning in the mid-1960s, the dominant critical trend among Spenser scholars was to describe Amoret’s suffering as an externalized, allegorically expressed form of either her dread of sexual union with her brand-new husband, Scudamour—Busirane having kidnapped her at the wedding masque, before the marriage could be consummated—-or her shock and shame at the magnitude of her own sexual desire. (1)

Eggert goes on to stipulate that Busyrane’s sadism is not an instance of wish fulfillment on Amoret’s part, but rather, one of the many episodes of allegorical rape in The Faerie Queene. For Eggert, rape in The Faerie Queene, is “a narrative event” which “is a metaphoric maneuver, a substitute action foisted on the narrative in order to conceal or evade a rapturous mode of poetic production” (3). Rape then is the vehicle which drives the central movements of the poem.30 Likewise, Sheila T. Cavanagh cautions us not to be beguiled by Spenser’s allegorical blandishments. She remarks that “The Faerie Queene has traditionally been read without much overt recognition of the poem’s repeated displacement, subversion, and abuse of female characters” (3). Cavanagh and Eggert are right to elucidate the problematic aesthetic of the violence against women that underscores the language of the poem. Indeed, it has been cogently argued that much of sixteenth and seventeenth century English lyric poetry owes its status and its beautiful symmetry to the violent “dismemberment” and “fragmentation” of the female body (Vickers 117). In fact, we can see this Petrarchan architecture in other sexual episodes of The

30 Eggert also finds that in The Faerie Queene “rape is revelation” (6).
Faerie Queene: the rape of the nymph Chrysogene, and the planned consumption / consummation of Serena by a group of cannibals. It would seem then that the poetic power of The Faerie Queene hinges in many parts on the sexual violence toward women. The work of scholars such as Eggert and Cavanagh is important because it allows us to disentangle the misogyny from the canonical aestheticism of Spenser’s text. In this chapter, I would like to build on the feminist work of these scholars in extricating the sexual brutality from the poetic consonance of Spenser’s epic. My focus will be Amoret’s torture in the House of Busyrane and Guyon’s destruction of Acrasia’s Bower. These episodes of sexual barbarism are the underpinning for two complementary, generic discourses hitherto unexplored by scholars of The Faerie Queene. Ultimately, what I would like to demonstrate in this chapter is that there is a dialectic occurring between the discourses of alchemy and the erotic both in Acrasia’s Bower and in the House of Busyrane. Furthermore, the alchemical metaphors and the alchemical iconography enable Spenser’s erotica. More importantly, the voyeuristic elements and the fantasies that gesture toward an illicit sexuality lend these books and the other books an early modern erotic aesthetic. Together, the alchemy and erotica of The Faerie Queene perform the cultural work of educating Spenser’s male reader on how to consume and erase illicit texts.

Early modern alchemy has traditionally been read in the context of spiritual regeneration or in its most literal sense: turning base metals to gold. However, alchemy also had very strong sexual subtexts and robust, procreative overtones. Concomitantly, given that The Faerie Queene is rife with sexual encounters, it should come as no surprise that an overtly erotic aesthetic is at work in the epic. Altogether, the voyeuristic elements and the fantasies that gesture toward an illicit sexuality lend these books and the other books in The Faerie Queene an erotic aesthetic. In order to demonstrate the erotic potential of books 2 and 3, I call upon the following definition
of early modern pornography by the following historians and scholars. Sarah Toulalan and Dorelies Kraakman have argued that early modern pornography was part of a wide variety of texts. Kraakman states that pornography in general “has long been a hybrid in Western European literary history, partaking of genres as diverse as medical and paramedical advice literature, drinking songs, and the novel” (105). Additionally, Toulalan points out, “There is contemporary evidence which suggests there was a kind of sexual literature that was of a particular nature, and into which a variety of texts were thought to fit, including medical and midwifery books, cheap pamphlets, longer prose narratives and various kinds of verse” (“The Act of Copulation” 522).

Ian Frederick Moulton is also right when he declares that the definition of pornography is at once historic and constantly changing (Before Pornography 11). And Katharine Craik defines early modern pornography as a “passionate transaction between books, writers and readers made possible by earlier discussions of the stimulating effects of literature on the body. Pornography is a matter not so much of textual content but readerly approach” (116-117).

I have summoned the aforementioned definitions of pornography not to equate Spenser’s erotica with it, but rather to highlight the inherent dangers of reading Spenser’s text, and to emphasize the experience of reading.

Although I obliquely suggest that there is a pornographic gaze in these two books, I am by no means equating Spenser’s erotica with contemporary pornography. The sense of the pornographic that we find in books 2 and 3 is more accurately described as passionate discourse, and is historically bound up in discourses of the period that warn young men against the dangers of reading “wanton workes” as we see in Richard Brathwait’s A Nursery for Gentry (1638). I

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31 Considering the precarious yet complex link between alchemy and pornography, I invite us to consider Spenser’s Faerie Queene as an example of a dangerous text. And I also propose that the peril inherent in Spenser’s epic is its infinite potential to be misread. Furthermore, imbricated in the text’s potentialities for misreading are the obfuscatory and transgressive discourse of alchemy and the erotic.
coined this phrase to represent the erotic investiture of books 2 and 3. I also proceed with this phrasing / definition in order to counter the notion that the erotica present in *The Faerie Queene* is already self-evident. Spenser’s text unmistakably defies such a formulation because of how it teaches one to read the erotic and therefore bypass the dangers inherent in reading salacious material. In terms of early modern poetry, passionate discourse is is a fluid form of erotic retelling or representation which depicts sexual fantasy via the voyeuristic medium of reading. Furthermore, Spenser’s passionate discourse offers solace to the vulnerable reader as it is a voyeuristic non-space between the poetry and the reader. In this voyeuristic non-space, the reader is able to suspend the bodily vulnerabilities associated with reading questionable texts. But this non-space occurs only in a voyeuristic vein or mode. I also argue that the metaphors Spenser utilizes and the noumenal sense of a continued robing, disrobing, probing, and watching imbues the poem with its erotic representations and thus its passionate discourse.

Clearly, the early modern erotic is bound up in all sorts of texts of the period and so is alchemy. Both discourses deal fundamentally with sexed bodies and on many levels transgression and transformation, and both discourses offer fluidity to ideas of fixed genders or fixed sex differences. Most importantly, both discourses emphasize the permeability of boundaries. It should come as no surprise to us then to find that Spenser has linked both genres in his *Faerie Queene*.

**Guyon’s Misreading in The Bower of Bliss**

Spenser’s knowledge of alchemy appears frequently in *The Faerie Queene*. But his alchemical understanding is given magnificent display in The Bower of Bliss. What I will argue here is that Spenser collapses several alchemical conceits onto Acrasia’s bower and her body in order to warn readers about the deleterious effects of unlicensed reading and an engagement
with an immoral female sexuality. However, Spenser’s attempts to implicate Acrasia within the paradigm of an unproductive thus illicit sexuality falter when juxtaposed against Guyon’s susceptibility to the charms of the bower. In fact, Acrasia is ultimately realized as a “self-fashioner,” writing on her own body and subsequently her own sexuality. A word of warning, Acrasia’s connections to the different alchemical steps might seem confusing. Yet the accretion of all these alchemical conceits shouldn’t discourage our appreciation of Spenser’s alchemic accents. It is their accumulative meanings that are important. In total, they signify Acrasia’s transgressive sexuality.

Both the Palmer’s and Guyon’s first sight of Acrasia in stanza 73 is shocking. Nonetheless, in stanza 72, Spenser prepares us for what we encounter in stanza 73. In stanza 72, he describes Acrasia as a “faire Witch her selfe now solacing, / With a new Louer, whom sorceree /And witchcraft, she from farre did thether bring” (2.12.72.1-3). This lover, a former soldier, has been literally transfixed by Acrasia’s devouring sexuality. Perhaps witch is not such an unfair term. Acrasia is the equivalent of Circe. Indeed, Acrasia seems to be sucking the life out of the young boy. But Acrasia supersedes the Circean equivalence with her concomitant alchemic retinue which is outlined in stanza 73:

And all that while, right over him she hong,
With her false eyes fast fixed in his sight,
As seeking medicine, whence she was stong,
Or greedily depasturing delight:
And oft inclining downe with kisses light,
For feare of waking him, his lips bedewd,
And through his humid eyes did sucke his spright,
Quite molten into lust and pleasure lewd;
Wherewith she sighed soft, as if his case she rewd. (2.12.73.1-9)

Linda Gregerson reads this episode as “anticipatory necrophilia” (121). Alternately, I read this sexual encounter as a symbolic form of ocular fellatio and the humid, fluid protruding from the young man’s eyes as a figurative form of semen. By sucking this humid fluid / life from the young man’s eyes, Acrasia initially appears to reinscribe the traditional Aristotelian view of women’s reproductive need for male semen. Not so. The young man is being joined to Acrasia via a violent, if mutual alchemic orgasm. And his body has become the alembic from which Acrasia derives her power. Sarah Toulalan reminds us “that sperm has vital heat in three elements: its natural, elemental heat, heat from the father’s soul, and from the heat of the sun” (“The Act of Copulation” 526). Therefore, I read the heat from the young man’s semen as the heat from the sun necessary to the fire of the alchemic experiment which is encapsulated in the third alchemical stage or the citrinitas stage. Moreover, this section anticipates Acrasia’s complete self-investiture of the masculine attributes in the alchemic experiment, which we will momentarily see in stanzas 77 and 78. Her sexuality is figured as illicit because it is divorced from patriarchal imperatives of procreation.

Having noted Acrasia’s masculinity, it is thus ironic that between stanzas 74 and 77, Spenser uses the feminine “rose” four times to refer to Acrasia and her bower, both directly and indirectly. Nevertheless, this nomenclature makes more sense when understood in an alchemical milieu. According to Margaret Healy, in the alchemical pursuit, the rose was an emblem of the philosopher’s stone (“Making the Quadrangle Round” 412). Lyndy Abraham also asserts that the red rose was a “symbol of the goal of the opus alchymicum, the perfect red stone or elixir attained at the culmination of the rubedo [stage]” (173). The rubedo was the final step of the
alchemical experiment. And Abraham posits that the red rose or “the red stone, has the power to transmute all base metals into pure gold and earthly man into the illumined philosopher” (173). I hazard an obvious statement here by mentioning that Acrasia’s bower is decked with gold, and in turn, her bower enacts a moment of epistemological crisis for Guyon, which he resolves by extinguishing her grove.

It is therefore salutary that the image of the rose is explicitly tied to alchemy in stanzas 77 and 78. Of necessity, I quote both stanzas in their entirety:

Vpon a bed of Roses she was layd,
As faint through heat, or dight to pleasant sin,
And was arrayd, or rather disarayd,
All in a vele of silke and silver thin,
That hid not whit her alabaster skin,
But rather shewd more white, if more might bee:
More subtile web Arachne cannot spin,
Nor the fine nets, which oft we woven see
Of scorched deaw, do not in th’ayre more lightly flee. (2.12.77.1-9)

In stanza 78, Spenser continues his visual disrobing of Acrasia:

Her snowy brest was bare ready spoyle
Of hungry eies, which n’ote therewith be fild,
And yet through languor of her late sweet toyle,
Few drops, more cleare than Nectar, forth distild,
That like pure Orient perles adowne it trild,
And her farie eyes sweet smyling in delight,
Moystened their fierie beames, with which she thrild

Fraile harts, yet quenched not; like starry light

Which sparkling on the silent waves, does seeme more bright. (2.12.78.1-9)

While the previous images of rose allied Acrasia to the rubedo stage in alchemy, stanzas 77 and 78 connect Acrasia to the albedo phase of the alchemic experiment. The albedo juncture, the whitening stage, is the second part in the alchemical process. All of the dross and impurities left over from the first stage, the nigreda, or the black stage is washed away. Pure whiteness is the desired result of the albedo stage. Acrasia’s whiteness if “more might be” is the primary determinant of her beauty and to a large extent, her sexuality. Acrasia is clothed not only in “whiteness” but in a veil of silver “silke” (4). In the alchemical process, silver is associated with the moon (Luna) and correspondingly with the feminine. But in stanza 78 Acrasia again appropriates the factors associated with the citrinitas or third stage, the masculine fire and heat of the sun or (Sol). Her “faire eyes” are “fierie beames” which cause ecstatic pain in the hearts of many (6-7). Through Acrasia’s sexual labors a pure substance, “a few drops more cleare than Nectar” are “distild,” upon her snowy breast (4). I propose that this material is the attainment of the elusive elixir vitae, and Acrasia has achieved the philosopher stone through the “languor of her sweet toyle” or her sexual work (3). Her hold over the men or the soldiers is made manifest by her access to this unique elixir. She keeps these former soldiers in a perpetual state of youthful if not effeminized languor.

Another masculine ethos is also at work in the alchemical description of Acrasia in stanza 78. The nectar distilled from Acrasia’s body symbolizes the philosopher’s stone, but it is also again emblematic of male semen. In some models of the early modern body, women were also thought to produce semen, but I read Acrasia’s flow as masculine because of her ability to
control her bodily fluids. Acrasia’s distilled nectar recalls Gail Kern Paster’s work on the humoral body, *The Body Embarrassed*, and more recently, Lisa Wynne Smith’s article, “The Body Embarrassed? Rethinking the Leaky Male Body in Eighteenth-Century England and France.” Smith demonstrates that, “The distrust attached to the leaks of the female body was applied to upper-class men’s flows during the eighteenth-century, but with a caveat: men could control themselves” (29). Even more significantly as Smith notes, “men’s bleeding in literature was depicted as purgative and voluntary, unlike women’s involuntary bleeding. Men could choose to start or stop bodily flows” (30). I submit that Acrasia is able to manage her bodily fluids with the same discipline attributed to men.

Having adopted the identities of the feminine and masculine aspects of the alchemical experiment, Acrasia converts her body into the limbeck, the vessel necessary for the final achievement of the philosopher’s stone or elixir vitae. Thus the liquid of Acrasia’s nectar becomes doubly clarified. By poetic extension, the limbeck of her body has now been conjured into a book. It is a commonplace in the Renaissance to read books as physical bodies and bodies as material books. As we saw in the earlier chapter, John Donne incorporates this conceit in his poems, and I cite from two. In “A Valediction to His Booke” Donne deifies the lovers’ bodies and declares:

This booke, as long-liv’d as the elements,

Or as the world’s forme, this all-graved tome / In cypher writ, or new made idiome;

We for love love’s clergie only’are instruments;

When this booke is made thus,

Should againe the ravenous
Vandals and Goths invade us,
Learning were safe; in this our Universe,
Schools might learn Sciences, Spheares Musik, Angels Verse. (19-27)

Elsewhere, in the final lines of “The Extasie” Donne demands that the lovers turn once again to their bodies for spiritual inspiration: “Weak men on love reveal’d may look; / Love’s mysteries in souls do grow / But yet the body is his book” (70-72). Bearing in mind the alchemic link with poetry, I believe that Acrasia transforms her bower and her body into a book capable of being read only by the initiated few. Moreover, Acrasia’s masculine and feminine characteristics render her as the alchemic hermaphrodite. As we already observed, Acrasia is the ultimate combination of Luna (the feminine) and Sol (the masculine). Abraham articulates that “In the production of the stone the alchemist must join sulphur, the hot, dry, active male aspect of the prima material, to the cold, moist, receptive female aspect, argent vive of mercury” (98). When joined, “The union of these two metallic seeds is presented as the copulation of two lovers, and later, at a higher level of union, the chemical wedding of Sol and Luna, sun and moon, king and queen” (Abraham 98). This consummate union, “known as the rebis or hermaphrodite, is the perfect integration of male and female energies” (Abraham 98). Our analysis of Acrasia’s hermaphroditic properties is even more freighted with significance if we contemplate the full extent of her powers. Taking her Circean, alchemic and hermaphroditic qualities into account, it is not far-fetched to assume that Acrasia establishes herself as an alchemist. Indeed, she is the rival alchemist to Spenser and writes her own body and on her own body. Her autonomy will be fully explored in the latter part of this section, but for now I return briefly to the middle of the canto.
As Guyon journeys through the Bower’s bounties, he is careful to keep his mind from falling prey to the deleterious effects of reading / seeing. Nonetheless, the task is challenging and he becomes enmeshed in Spenser’s erotica. Stanza 53 reiterates this difficulty:

Much wondred Guyon at the Fayre aspect
Of that sweet place, yet suffred no delight
To sincke into his sence, nor mind affect
But passed forth, and lookt still forward right,
Brydling his will, and maystering his might:
Till that he came unto another gate, (2.12.53.1-6)

But he is soon struck by his vision of the two “naked damzelles.” When he encounters them, they are bathing each other and they are content to “wrestle wantonly,” “ne car’d to hyde, / Their dainty partes from view of any, which them eyd”(2.12.63.8-9). They are laid bare for anyone to see, and in fact both of their genitalia are in full view. The “girl on girl” fantasy continues. They take turns lifting each other out of the water, careful to fully expose themselves to strangers so that their “amorous sweet spoiles to greedy eyes” can be revealed (2.12.64.9). What is also titillating is that when they are cognizant of an audience they do not vanish or flee like chaste maidens are wont to do in *The Faerie Queene*. Instead, one damsel reveals herself to him in even bolder detail, “But thither rather did higher arise, / And her two lilly paps aloft displayd” (2.12.66.5-6). The other maiden, the seemingly innocent one, blushes most gracefully and invites Guyon to join them.32 Were it not for the Palmer’s stern rebuke, Guyon would have acquiesced.

32 I read the two maidens as symbols of Acrasia’s power and consequently subject to Guyon’s gaze. On the other hand, Melissa Sanchez finds that the maidens possess their own autonomous power. She reasons that “Power is interchanged not just between the women but also between the women and Guyon. However much Guyon may enjoy the women’s wrestling, it is not initially performed for his benefit, nor does it receive sexual meaning from his voyeurism” (498).
The Palmer has to remind him that he has been caught up in his reading / sight of the maidens and must stay on course. The Palmer’s rebuke underscores early modern literary theorists and their mediations on reading. They thought of reading in ways that differ from our own. Reading was not merely a passive affair. Instead, reading was thought to produce all sorts of reactions, (positive, benign, and negative) in and on the body. These reactions ranged from curative or palliative healing to crucial changes in the homostatic nature of one’s humoral complexion. Certain theorists like Thomas Wright thought that reading elevated one’s mind to seek the greater good of society. However, he cautions that one had to be careful as reading was capable of producing all sorts of emotional and passionate upheaval in the minds and bodies of vulnerable men.33

Joseph Campana signals this connection between reading, poetry and sexuality: “Poetry was not just a means of representing the problems of immoderate desire; rather, poetry and sexuality were partners in crime, and their common pleasures threatened the constitution of masculine agency” (469). Acrasia’s body (her book) and her bower constitute this threat for Guyon and so he ruthlessly defaces her bower, and binds her in a net “neither guile, nor force might it distraine” (2.12.82.3). Our narrator informs us that:

... all those pleasaut bowres and Pallace brave
Guyon broke downe, with rigour pitilesse,
Ne ought their goodly workmanship might save
Them from the tempest of his wrathfullnesse,
But that their blisse he turn’d to balefulnesse

33 For example, Wright avers, “the vehemency of the passion continueth the force of our imagination, because whatsoever passeth by the gate of our senses presently entereth into the court of our imagination, where the sensitive appetite doth entertain it. Therefore, seeing all passions cause some sense or feeling more or less in the body so long as they endure, the imagination likewise representeth to the understanding so long the object of the passion, and as a deceitful Counsellor, corrupteth his Judge” (129).
Guyon’s destruction of the bower is the final text that needs to be dissected with careful thought. The destruction of the bower may signal unchristian wrath, but it also advances the notion of a righteous Christian anger when confronted with the obscene. For all that, Guyon’s destruction of the bower seems particularly disproportionate, and it emphasizes my contention that both Guyon and Spenser are unable to control Acrasia’s writing of her body. Acrasia is the archeus of her body and her home, and even Spenser is powerless before her “self-fashioning.” I contend that while Guyon is vulnerable to his reading, Spenser’s reader has been offered the choice (engage in passionate discourse and read safely) to sidestep the danger through Spenser’s positioning of Guyon’s emotional struggle and his destruction of Acrasia. Consequently, the destruction of the bower represents the struggle over who will retain control of poetic representation.

**Britomart’s Careful Reading of the House of Busyrane**

When Britomart enters Busyrane’s House the second stanza highlights that it is a place akin to hell. As soon as she enters Busyrane’s lair, “an hideous storme of winde arose, / With dreadfull thunder and lightning atwixt, / And an earthquake, as if it straight would lose / The world’s foundations from his centre fixt;” (3.12.2.1-4). These hellish descriptions are followed by even more infernal imagery: “A direfull stench of smoke and sulphure mixt / Ensewd, whose noyaunce fild the fearefull sted,” (3.12.2.5-6). Scholars have rightly noted that these diabolical signs presage Busyrane’s “black magic,” and Matthew Fike calls Britomart’s entrance into the house, a descent into hell (15-16). Fike goes on to compare Britomart’s experience in book 3 to
that of Christ’s descent into hell. Fike is right to note the mental testing that Britomart has to endure; nonetheless, I believe that he is misdirected when he speaks of the kind of magic present in Busyrane’s House. I believe that as with Acrasia’s Bower, Busyrane’s House is alchemical, and that Busyrane is the false alchemist discussed in my introduction. Peggy Simonds demonstrates that sulfur is often associated with the alchemical lab (“My Charms Crack Not” 547). Moreover, the House of Busyrane is also a house of debauched pleasure with a lot of erotic if violent subtexts. Busyrane’s cruel display of Amoret and his numerous paintings of ancient Greek erotica make up the substance of the carnal milieu and is an example of the passionate discourse that recurs throughout *The Faerie Queene*.

I cite the paintings as an example of *passionate discourse* because they are intricate descriptions of Zeus’s mating with various mortals, and they offer the reader a way to integrate such reading in his experience without the nasty side effects. There is a voyeuristic element present which may safeguard the reader’s contact with such intimate sexuality. In fact, these paintings are “speaking pictures” of bestiality as Zeus transforms himself into various animals in order to consort with the women. Thomas P. Roche doesn’t explicitly equate the pictures with explicit erotica but he is insightful enough to perceive that “it is a picture of love as bestiality” (84). There are of course other paintings on the walls, but these ancient forms of erotica constitute the majority of Busyrane’s pictorial milieu. Alastair Fowler concurs pronouncing that

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34 Fike declares that, “In the Faerie Queene, those who descend and return become rescuers who embody the main type of descent that Spenser weaves throughout the first three books of the poem: Christ’s harrowing of hell. An initiate in Merlin’s cave, Britomart becomes a Christ-like liberator when she achieves a qualified triumph by rescuing Amoret from Busirane’s castle, which is clearly meant to resemble hell. The entrance is blocked by a wall of flame giving off sulphurous smoke”(15-16).

35 Sidney’s term of “speaking picture” refers of course to poetry. But I read The House of Busyrane and its various objects as transpositional matter which can be converted into other forms of text. The tapestries are paintings *ex nihilo*, but when read by Britomart or by us, they are converted into poetry or prose. Thus they become a literal speaking picture.
“all the tapestry gods are debased, or destroy the mortals they love. Their loves are tragic—
defeats for the lovers, victories for ‘cruel Cupid’ . . . Clearly the tapestries represent a triumph of
Love, or rather of erotic passion in its most destructive form” (48). While Fowler reads the
tapestries in this manner, I would like to add to Fowler’s conclusions and read the tapestries as
essential to understanding the artistic allure or mechanism of the The House of Busyrane. The
tapestries point incontrovertibly to the pornographic gaze present in Busyrane’s lair. And a
pornographic gaze is present, not because of its treatment of erotic lust as depicted in the
tapestries, but because of how it teaches the reader or the audience to read such portrayals of
erotica.\footnote{I do not mean to read pornography uncritically, nor do I intend to get mired in a debate pro or for. While
Amoret’s suffering is horrible and unjustified, as is much of the suffering of women in The Faerie Queene, my focus
is on the aesthetic effect that reading a pornographic work such as The Faerie Queene produces.}
The erotica present in Busyrane’s House is pornographic in its intent and thus an
example of passionate discourse simply because of the effect it has on the reader or audience and
finally the poet. The House of Busyrane transforms us into either willing or unwilling voyeurs,
and the passionate discourse present forces us to choose a response to the representations of
sexual activity.

The masquers are representative of Spenser’s reading audience, and Fowler has already
suggested this (51). Britomart too is representative of Spenser’s reading audience. In Spenser’s
bawdy House of Busyrane, we become unwitting participants and the only objective recourse is
our response to the masque. We can respond like Britomart: that is, we can wait and watch, and
then attempt to destroy the creator or the picture of what we have witnessed, or we can partake,
and continue to read the text ad infinitum like Cupid’s masquers. In Spenser, the passionate
discourse is a form of response (responsive watching / responsive reading). Furthermore, in
Spenser, the passionate discourse forces you to pay attention to what you are reading. Part of my
purpose for this chapter is to illuminate the degree to which Britomart is successful at reading in The House of Busyrane.\(^{37}\)

I would like to also add that Spenser inadvertently transforms Britomart into an alchemist.\(^{38}\) Britomart is transformed into the kind of alchemist associated with healing, justice and learning. Moreover, her armor and her shield mark her as male, and I submit that the male disguise is meant to distinguish her from other “witches” such as Duessa and Acrasia. Duessa and Acrasia’s personage is distinctly feminine, and their magic is meant to seduce and inveigle the foolish. On the other hand, Britomart is meant to rescue, guide and instruct the weak. Britomart’s transformation into an alchemist is manifested by her ability to read or decipher Busyrane’s many secrets. Recall that in alchemy one of the trademarks is the secretive nature of the alchemical guild. Notwithstanding, Busyrane’s evil entourage is also suggestive of a secret guild. They are not easily located, and they disappear at the drop of a hat. Even the narrator has trouble reading the names or understanding the various partakers of the pageant. He states, “There were full many moe like maladies, / Whose names and natures I note readen well” (3.12.26.1-2). We must also note that the members of Busyrane’s personal entourage are also voyeurs in Amoret’s torture. In a way, they function as various members of Spenser’s reading audience. Alternately, they are the analogues to Spenser’s reading audience. A further

\(^{37}\) Part of my sub thesis for this chapter is that Britomart overcomes the difficulties associated with reading in Busyrane’s house. Yet Adam McKeown sees this episode differently. He reasons that Britomart’s “act of reading does not fulfill the promise of reading. The words make nothing about the visual experience clearer. Rather, they cause her to look back at the images that have dazzled her senses” (53). Additionally, he believes that “The episode in Busirane’s galleries is dominated by images and is brought to crisis by Britomart’s inability to interpret what she sees, but the words in the galleries more than the images, precipitate her interpretive failure” (55). McKeown’s argument is partly sound. But Britomart’s ability to successfully assay Busyrane’s house convinces me that she is successful at reading or interpreting the images in Busyrane’s house.

\(^{38}\) To my knowledge, no other scholar has linked the language of alchemy with Britomart. Britomart’s alchemical ascent can be seen when she first encounters Merlin. The episode in the cave is one of magic and transformation, and Britomart is changed forever by Merlin’s prophecy and her vision.
undertone to the pageant of voyeurs is that they are masquers. Fowler has commented on the
numerical arrangement of the masque noting its mathematical symmetry: “Cupid is at the centre
both of his own party and of the masquers, as he should be in a triumph of love, forming a party
of thirteen stanzas” (4). Because of their display of extravagana, our initial instincts would be
to read the pageant as that of a traditional masque; however, their lurid non-participation in
Amoret’s torture also classify them as a specialized audience.39

What I will ultimately demonstrate is that The Faerie Queene is like a gentleman’s club,
and you need the right sort of handshake or code to go in and enjoy its pleasure without being
harmed in the process. I also assert that the right sort of handshake is the passionate discourse
that the poem offers up.

The masque begins with the figures of Fansy and Desyre.40 Although Fansy seems
younger than Desyre, Fansy has in fact given birth to Desyre. But it is Fansy’s youthfulness (he
is a comely boy), that have us enthralled. This filial tableau is representative of the fruits of lust.
For Spenser, Desyre is the product of Fansy. And desire can only produce something that is
outwardly beautiful. At the same time, there is no inward substance. Moreover, if we attend
more carefully to Fansy we will note that he is also a symbolic hermaphrodite, and this is a
person of illicit sexuality as we will soon discover in our discussion of Shakespeare. Indeed, the
sexual duality of Fansy heightens the eroticism of the masque and buttresses its erotic contexts.
A description of Fansy gives credence to my statement:

The first was Fansy, like a lovely Boy,

39 The exception to the non-participants would be Despight and Cruelty. Both end the masque and both of them aid
in Amoret’s cruel bondage.

40 Although space does not allow me to fully develop this point here, I believe that the entire masque is also an
allegory for the Petrarchan process of love, lust and desire. James Broaddus offers a slightly different interpretation
of the masque arguing that the figures “provide an anatomy of sexual corruption” (91-93).
Of rare aspect, and beautie without peare,
Matchable ether to that ympe of *Troy*,
Whom did loue, and chose his cup to beare,
Or that same daintie lad, which was so deare,
To great Alcides, that when as he dyde,
He wailed womanlike, with many a teare
And euery wood, and euery valley wyde
He fild with *Hylas* name, the Nymphes eke *Hylas* cryde. (3.12.7.1-9)

The above description in stanza 7 clarifies the sexual essence of Fansy. He is a very feminine boy; in fact, he is a homosexual figure of desire. Karen Pinkus has noted that in alchemical and classical discourse, a hermaphrodite boy is an “uno puerulo hermaphrodito,” also known as a puer (91). Therefore the hermaphroditic details of stanza 7 also impart the aurific qualities of alchemy to Fansy. Stanza 8 also adds to his sexual attractiveness:

His garment nether was of silke nor say,
But paynted plumes, in goodly order dight,
Like as the sunburnt Indians do array
Their tawny bodies, in their proudest plight:
As those same plumes, so seemd he vaine and light,

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41 In her exposition of the hermaphrodite in Ovid and alchemical literature, Pinkus emphatically declares, “We must insist on the importance of the hermaphrodite as a *boy* (albeit one who exhibits some feminine characteristics), in early modern iconography. The figure of the *puer* is common in alchemical writing, whereas there is no feminine equivalent. If the “hermaphrodite,” taken in its broadest and most neutral sense, and wrenched from any mythographic or historical contexts, would seem to indicate an equal portion of both sexes, in actual representations from the early modern period, the female “half” (Aphrodite) tends to be effaced, and this is a factor that certainly deserves attention” (91, emphasis Pinkus). “Hermaphrodite Poetics.” (*Arcadia* 2006, (41)1: 91-111).
That by his gate might easily appeare;

For still he far’d as dauncing in delight,

And in his hand a windy fan did beare,

That in ydle ayre he mou’d still here and theare. (3.12.8.1-9)

Fansy’s feminine / homosexual portrayal is heightened by his foreignness, and this foreignness confers him with a triple sexual allure. During the Renaissance it was very popular to depict Indians as sexually innocent and living in almost a prelapsarian state. Michel de Montaigne’s famous essay “Of the Cannibals,” popularized Indians as noble savages:

I find (as far as I have been informed) there is nothing in that nation [the American Indians], that is either barborous or savage, unless men call that barbarism which is not common to them. As indeed, we have no other aim of truth and reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. There is ever perfect religion, perfect policy, perfect and complete use of all things. They are even savage, as we call those fruits wild which nature of herself and of her ordinary progress hath produced; whereas indeed, they are those which ourselves have altered by our artificial devices, and diverted from their common order, we should rather term savage (50, cited in Graff and Phelan).

Montaigne’s essay is a misguided but worthy attempt to erase the stigma of the “savage” Indian in the mind of his audience. But by detailing the Indians’ closeness and affinity with nature and the natural order, Montaigne erects the picture of the “noble savage.” This noble savage is linked many times to the Golden Age where sexual freedom was unfettered by man-made laws
and human institutions. Fansy is a form of this “noble savage,” and his exotic otherness hearkens back to this golden age of free sexuality thereby adding to his attractiveness. By initiating the masque in the context of a Golden Age of sexuality, Spenser is able to license his portrayal of an unfettered sexuality.

Marching beside Fansy is his “syre,” the “amorous Desyre” (3.12.9.1-3). Desyre is dressed to impressed and “His garment [is] disguised very vayne”(3.12.9.5). In his hands he holds “sparks” which he blows and “kindle[s] busily. In the masque Desyre is an overdetermined figure of alchemy because his sparks cause life to be “conceiu’d, and forth in flames did fly” (3.12.9.9). Desyre is the encapsulation of a mini alchemical laboratory where fire brings forth the Philosopher’s Stone. Desyre is also representative of a false alchemist- one whose charms and magic has made him rich. His bonet is slightly awry and this is a nod to his crooked nature. But embedded in Desyre is a cautionary tale. He engenders the fires of lust / desire, but can only produce Fansy, a prepubescent teen. The placement of Desyre at the beginning of the masque suggests to Spenser’s reader that the masque itself is only a fiction of Desyre, with the empty albeit sexual offspring of Fansy. Through the amorous pairing of father and son, Spenser cautions / manages our expectations of lust and desire so that he can proceed with the masque and Busyrane’s sadistic torture of Amoret.

More figures appear during the masque and finally we get a vision of Amoret. She is being bound and held by “two grysie villeins, th’one Despight, the other cleped Cruelty by name” (3.12.19.2-3). Amoret has been tortured to such an extent that “Deathes owne ymage [is now] figurd in her face” (3.12.19.5). Thus, Amoret has been transformed into a figure of death. Valerie Traub has eloquently argued that women in Shakespeare are only sexually alluring when they are cold, lifeless, and dead (“Jewels, Statues, and Corpses” 219-20). This is the condition
of Amoret. She is at death’s door. In fact, she is the epitome of the Petrarchan woman petrified with living pain. As we are meant to carefully read Amoret’s torture let us look at the description of Amoret in stanza 20 in more detail. The narrator’s description of Amoret reinforces my claim that Amoret is statue-like. I believe that the almost non-human characteristics also add to her sexual appeal. Our narrator informs us that like Acrasia, Amoret’s breast is on full view and that she is very white, and very exposed:

Her breast all naked, as net yvory,
Without adorne of gold or silver bright,
Wherewith the Craftesman wonts it beautify
Of her dew honour was despoyled quight,
And a wide wound therein (O rueful sight)
Entrenched deep with knife accursed keene,
Yet freshly bleeding forth her fainting spright,
The work of cruel hand was to be sene,
That dyde in sanguine red her skin all snowy cleene. (3.12.20.1-9).

Spenser substantiates many forms of early modern erotica with Amoret’s torture. What we notice first is that she is as white as ivory. The simile calls attention to her whiteness / purity / chastity. Kim Hall has noted how whiteness is also an allusion to fair as in skin color (and character) and is a pronounced subtext for beauty, chastity and virginity (69). Amoret is alchemically bare and truly exposed. She doesn’t have the protection of either gold or silver. Her vulnerability is also highlighted by the fact that her “dew honour was despoiled quight.” Several

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critics read “dew honour” as her breast. However, I believe that reading “dew honour” as her vagina is more apt.

As we can see from stanza 20, Amoret has been completely exposed as if she were naked. Busyrane’s knife has been “Entrenched deep” within her, and therefore the “wide wound therein,” keeps “freshly bleeding forth” (3.12.20.5,7) Several critics have suggested that this whole scene is suggestive of Amoret’s fear of the marriage consummation. But Katherine Eggert has rightly noted that this scene is much more like rape (2 ). Dr. Roberts agrees and sums up Busyrane’s torture as a forced penetration.43 Thus if we take into account Amoret’s nakedness, the blood “dyde in sanguine red” against her “skin all snowy cleene,” we can definitely imagine that Busyrane’s torture is a form of rape and that Amoret’s “dew honour” is indeed synecdoche for her vagina (3.12.20.4,9). We must also remember that Spenser keeps shifting his focus and manipulating our readerly expectations. Bear in mind that passionate discourse is also a process of reading, and as Craik has so eloquently demonstrated, early modern pornography is also a process of interaction between readers and books. Even if we fail to recognize Spenser’s skillful word play, we have to admit to the sexual violence which drives this portion of the canto.

The violence against Amoret continues in stanza 21, and in this stanza her torture takes on a more traditional and sadistic bent. The two villeins Despight and Cruelty hold her by force (she is chained to a pillar) while Busyrane uses her blood to write indecipherable spells on the wall. As with the previous stanza, we must carefully unpack all of Spenser’s meaning before we can proceed. Amoret’s torture is remarkable not merely because of the pain that she suffers, but because of how she suffers. She is perpetually virginized because her “blood yet steeming fresh embayd” (3.12.21.4). Every time that Busyrane thrusts his knife into her she bleeds fresh blood.

43 Private conversation with Dr. Alyssa Roberts on 21st May, 2014.
Amoret is the reluctant embodiment of the male fantasy of a woman who never loses her virginity. Or perhaps she symbolizes the woman who keeps her virginity for only one man. No matter how many times Busyrane penetrates her, she retains her virginity. She may be constrained by the evil Despight and Cruelty, but she is being figuratively chased and then caught. And this scenario is repeated every night and with every thrust of Busyrane’s knife. Amoret is indeed the object of Busyrane’s sadistic intentions as witnessed by the presence of Despight and Cruelty. Thomas Roche has argued that Despight and Cruelty are the allegorical complaints against a cruel and unavailable Petrarchan mistress. But because she has refused Busyrane, Amoret has become the victim of those ideas or ideals. It is appropriate then that Despite and Cruelty help to hold her hostage. She has denied Busyrane her virtue, so it must be the qualities that helped to strengthen her against Busyrane that would in turn be used to torture her. In some ways Despite and Cruelty also serve to validate some of our more questionable readerly impulses. They inadvertently legitimize the violence against Amoret because they are stand-ins for the Petrarchan mistress’ more controvertible qualities. Furthermore, they underscore the erotic subtext of canto 12. If we take into account Busyrane’s extensive magical powers, it seems to me that there is no need for Despight and Cruelty. Busyrane would be able to imprison Amoret solely with his words or his spell. So their presence heightens the masochist overtures of the scene when we realize that she is being bound and held half-naked by these wicked imps. Stanza 21 also strengthens the link between the erotic and the alchemic. In fact, both stanzas 20 and especially 22 with its reference to the “Lion rauenous” also demonstrate how alchemy and early modern erotica is mutually constitutive.

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44 Lion is a popular alchemical motif representing the various stages of the alchemical process, the philosopher’s stone and masculine principles.
Stanza 20 highlights popular alchemical subtexts such as the reference to silver and gold and especially to red (blood). In alchemical lore, blood was seen as a necessary part of the experiment, and quite essential to attaining the philosopher’s stone which was symbolized by the metal gold, and sometimes by the metal silver. The appearance of Amoret’s blood and its connection to alchemy cannot be overstated. Blood is a symbol for transformation. Lyndy Abraham explains that “It first occurs as the blood of death and sacrifice at the opening of the opus, when the old body of the metal (or outmoded state of being) is dissolved or killed in order to be renewed”(28). And according to Abraham, “The age-old idea of the shedding of blood from a pure being in order to cleanse the sins of the impure occurs frequently in the alchemical texts” (28). Without her volition, Amoret is undergoing a process of transformation. She is being transformed into the Philosopher’s Stone, thus she is the archetype of a virgin sacrifice. Amoret is also as I have noted earlier being transformed into a semi-attainable Petrarchan mistress. We could easily dismiss the link between Amoret, blood, transformation and alchemy were it not for the presence of the “Lion” in stanza 22. In alchemy, there is a direct connection between blood and the image of a lion. There is a green lion which represents “the unclean matter of the Stone, the prima material in the earliest stage of the opus alchymicum” (Abraham 52). There is also a red lion which symbolizes “red sulphur, the hot, dry, male seed of metals, Sol (the masculine principle of the opus) in its early primitive stage. Parascelsus wrote that ‘the matter of the Tincture [i.e. Stone]. . . is called by many the Red Lion” (Abraham 166). I am inclined to believe that our reading of Cupid’s Lion in stanza 22 is closer to the red lion than to the green lion.45 The red lion (sulphur) eventually marries the feminine principle of Mercury and together they conceive the Philosopher’s Stone. Although stanzas 20-22 are overdetermined with their

45 Red and green also refer to the colors obtained during the different stages of the alchemical experiment. Yet whatever nomenclature we may ascribe to Spenser’s text, the alchemical wording ensures an alchemical interpretation.
alchemical metaphors, it is clear that Busyrane is an alchemist attempting to metaphorically join
with Amoret. So Spenser places the most grotesque scene of Amoret’s torture (stanza 21) in
between stanzas of high alchemical moments. This placement is not a coincidence. Spenser
locates the most vivid moments of Amoret’s torture, the most vivid moments of her exposure and
vulnerability in alchemical contexts in order to establish an explicitly erotic aesthetic.

We must first recall my definition of passionate discourse. Additionally, it is important to
remember Craik’s definition of pornography as a “transaction between readers and writers.”
Stanza 26 reminds us why our recall is important: “There were full many moe like maladies, / 
Whose names and natures I note readen well; / So many moe, as there be phantasies / In 
wauering wemens witt, that none can tell” (3.12.26.1-4). If we read these lines very carefully, we
will realize that in stanza 26 Spenser literalizes the various terms of the readerly / writerly
transaction. He tells his readers that he is unable to read any further because: [he] “note readen 
well.” Spenser does this to allow the male readers the space to create their own meaning of the
text. The cause of his newfound incomprehension is apparently because the “names and natures”
of these “phantasies” are such as that appear in the minds of women. What Spenser does here is
to displace the burden of illegibility and reading onto women, just as he displaced Guyon’s
shame onto Acrasia and her bower. This roundabout avoidance of responsibility enables the
contract between men. Spenser in his letter to Ralegh declared that *The Faerie Queene* was to
“fashion vertuous gentlemen.” Many scholars have taken Spenser at his word. But I read his
letter more like his allegory. He says one thing but means another.

Yet despite Spenser’s “difficulty” in reading, Britomart attempts to read Busyrane’s
house of horrors so that she can rescue Amoret. But Britomart’s initial physical force cannot
“availe” so she has to resort to “sleights and art,” and she has to use her mind. In this instance,
she has to become a rival alchemist to Busyrane, and she does succeed. She carefully reads the
inscriptions on his door, and she is able to determine how to enter the masque. She uses her mind
to gain access and this is quite in opposition to what the narrator said earlier about wavering
women’s “witts.” But as soon as she enters the masque “Of all those persons, which she saw
without: . . . / they straight were vanisht all and some, / Ne liuing wight she saw in all that roome,
Saue that same woefull Lady” (3.12.30.3-6). As soon as Britomart enters the room, the masquers
vanish; consequently, Britomart’s presence is a reminder of the readerly nature of the masque.
Because Britomart is a real presence, she disrupts the nature of the masque. By that I mean
Britomart acts as an intrusive and real presence to the secretive, voyeuristic nature of the
masque. I also mean that the masque only has meaning when read, or the masquers only come to
life via a transaction between the male readers and Spenser. Therefore, when Britomart attempts
to enter the masque she is highlighting that the masque can only be contracted by the narrator,
(Spenser-Poet) or Busyrane (Spenser-Poet) and a secret coterie of readers. What Spenser
ultimately does is to make a distinction between two types of readers: those who take him at his
word that The Faerie Queene is a book to fashion virtuous gentlemen, and those who belong to
the secret circle. The latter group knows that The Faerie Queene is more complicitly erotic than
the poem would like to admit.

When Britomart “boldly” enters the inner chamber of Busyrane’s house she stumbles
onto Busyrane:

And her before the vile Enchaunter sate,

Figuring straunge characters of his art,

With liuing blood he those characters wrote,

Dreadfully dropping from her dying hart,
Seeming transfixed with a cruell dart,
And all perforce to make her him to loue.
Ah who can loue the worker of her smart?
A thousand charmes he formerly did proue;
Yet thousand charmes could not her stedfast hart remoue (3.12.31.1-9).

Busyrane uses Amoret’s blood to write his enchantments. Yet despite his cruel alchemy, he cannot make Amoret love him. This scene is also erotic and sadistic because of Busyrane’s sadism and the exposure of Amoret. Remember that Britomart is also witness to it. The passionate discourse present in The Faerie Queene is voyeuristic. Stanza 31 is erotic, and it is also instructive as it highlights the perceived totalitarian effect of poetry and alchemy. Poetry / Art was thought to have the ability to corrupt, control or weaken the will, while nature on the other hand was believed to lift one’s thought to God and to heaven. “Art” in line 2 represents poetry, but it also represents the art of alchemy as the narrator tells us that his art is “straunge.”

And of course Amoret’s “liuing blood” is as we have seen a symbol of the transformation which occurs during the alchemical process. So taking everything together, Busyrane is now a failed alchemist. Despite his use of Amoret’s transformative and “liuing” blood, he is unable to “remoue” her love for her husband Scudamour. Here again in stanza 31, Spenser plays with distinctions, and he also endeavors to distinguish between nature and art, by positioning alchemy as “art” and Amoret as nature. These classifications come to full affray when Britomart accosts Busyrane, defeats him and destroys his house of horrors. In the skirmish between Britomart and Busyrane, Amoret is saved by Britomart, and Busyrane’s house of horrors vanishes forever. Therefore, Spenser seems to reify the place of nature (Amoret), and he appears to delist art

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46 In numerous alchemical treatises the practice of alchemy is often referred to as the art of alchemy, or “The Great Art.”
(alchemy). Yet as is to be expected, such a reading is not wholly unproblematic and we must venture forth into the final stanzas for Spenser’s challenging resolution.

Undeterred by Busyrane’s magic, Britomart assays his domain and attempts to defeat him. But before she gains the upper hand, she is marked by Busyrane: “The wicked weapon rashly he did wrest, / And turning to the next his fell intent, / Vnwares it strooke into her snowie chest, / That little drops empurpled her faire brest” (3.12.33.2-5). Britomart is rightly outraged and “Exceeding wroth therewith the virgin grew, / Albe the wound were nothing deepe imprest, / And fiercely forth her mortall blade she drew, To giue him the reward for such vile outrage dew” (3.12.33.6-9). What is remarkable about this penultimate fracas is that there exists a pornographic aesthetic right up to the moment before Britomart gains the supremacy over Busyrane. Just as Amoret’s breast is “nett yuory” and exposed to “hungry eies,” Britomart too endures the same fate, except that her breast is “snowie cleene.” Fair or “foule,” “vertuous” or vile, women in *The Faerie Queene* are often exhibited and divested of their clothing in some manner or the other. Moreover, Britomart also suffers a momentary phallic penetration by Busyrane when little drops of blood “empurples” her “faire brest” (3.12.33.5). These droplets of blood are reminiscent of semen or perhaps vaginal blood. In Aristotle’s construction of women and sexuality which many early modern doctors and laypeople subscribed to, semen has blood, blood has semen and both are inhabited by spirits. The spilt virginal blood is also evocative of Amoret’s spilt virginal blood. In this episode, Spenser approximates a girl-girl scene, and Busyrane has managed to impale two virgins.

Nonetheless, Britomart is able to gain dominance over Busyrane and “So mightily she smote him, that to ground / He fell halfe dead; next stroke him should haue slaine, / Had not the

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47 Britomart’s “empurpled” blood is also reminiscent of the purple tincture associated with the philosopher’s stone of alchemy.
Lady, which by him stood bound, / Dernly vnto her called to abstaine,” (3.12.34.1-4). Yet even line 4 resonates with sadism. Words like “bound” and “abstaine” remind us of the frisson of sexuality that pervades the episode. Notwithstanding, were it not for Amoret’s intervention, Busyrane would be dead. In exchange for his life, Britomart demands that Busyrane undo his evil spell and free Amoret, and Busyrane wisely agrees. However, to ensure that he sticks to his words, Britomart oversees the undoing of his spell, and she holds her sword over him as if it was the sword of Damocles:

And rising vp, gan streight to overlooke
Those cursed leaues, his charmes back to reuerse;
Full dreadful thinges out of that balefull booke
He red, and measur’d many a sad verse,
That horror gan the virgins hart to perse,
And her faire locks vp stared stiffe on end,
Hearing him those same bloody lynes reherse;
And all the while he red, she did extend
Her sword high ouer him, if ought he did offend. (3.12.36.1-9)

Stanza 36 underscores the power of poetry, and for our purposes we can read poetry as alchemy. Moreover, stanza 36 highlights the power of the poet. Verse as we have already seen John Donne is another way to refer to poetry. Busyrane is reciting poetry because “He red, and measur’d many a sad verse” (3.12.36.4). In this instance we can also read Spenser as Busyrane. When Busyrane reads his poetic charms it is so forceful that it “perse[s]” Britomart’s “hart.” Britomart begins to feel the same suffering that Amoret felt. Again, Spenser duplicates Amoret’s suffering in Britomart and two virgins have been sadistically tortured in Busyrane’s house.
When Busyrane finishes his recitation, his house begins to fall apart, and Amoret begins to heal. And her healing is the penultimate image in the erotic episodes from the House of Busyrane:

That cruell steele, which thrild her dying hart,
Fell softly forth, as of his owne accord,
And the wyde wound, which lately did depart
Her bleeding brest, and riuene bowels gor’d,
Was closed vp, as it had not beene sor’d
And euery part to safety full sownd,
As she were neuer hurt, was soone’ restor’d:
Tho when she felt her selfe to be vnbownd,
And perfect hole, prostrate she fell vnto the grownd. (3.12.38.1-9)

That “cruell steele” is overdetermined. While it is a knife, it also represents Busyrane’s pen, but more exactly his penis. It should be noted that Spenser uses “thrild” instead of pierce to perhaps suggest some sort of masochistic enjoyment on Amoret’s part. No wonder Roche and Fowler and other critics have suggested that this whole episode is Amoret’s fear of sexual consummation. Clearly, Amoret has been phallicly penetrated. But thankfully, she is made whole and “every part to safety full sownd, / As she were neuer hurt” (3.12.38.6-7). Before setting Amoret free, Spenser reinstates the fantasy of an eternal virgin, and a Petrarchan mistress in point of fact sexually attained.

The repetitive nature of Amoret’s suffering is contrasted with the finality of Busyrane’s defeat. When Britomart returns, “those goodly rooms which erst / She saw so rich and royally arrayd, / Now vanisht vterly, and cleane subuerst / She found, and all their glory quite
decayd’(3.12.42.1-4). This complete eradication of Busyrane’s house is quite reminiscent of the devastation of Acrasia’s bower. Nonetheless, there is a difference in the ferocity of the extinction. Unlike Guyon, Britomart is not emotionally invested in the house’s demise. In fact, her reaction is one of surprise: “That sight of such a change her much dismayd. / Thenceforth descending to that perlous Porch, / Those dreadfull flames she also found delayd, / And quenched quite, like a consumed torch” (3.12.42.5-8). Britomart can exhibit surprise but she knows how to “read,” or perhaps she has learnt how to read clandestine texts. She does not get caught up in her reading as Guyon does; therefore, she does not need a show of brute force in order to blazon her disapproval. In any event, it is only when Amoret has been united with Scudamour that we witness Britomart’s yearning for passion and love. The flames of hell which formerly surrounded Busyrane’s house have now all vanished. They have been “quenched quite” much like Busyrane’s alchemic power has been doused. The extinguished fire is the final symbol of the dismantling of Busyrane and his house. But there is a final image related to fire, alchemy and the erotic which is only realized in the final stanzas.

Amoret’s reunion with Scudamour is the final alchemic and erotic symbol of the episode. Furthermore, the basis for the symbolism is the deliquescent and smoldering simulacrum of wax figures melting in a fire. Scudamour’s embrace ignites Amoret’s sensuality and erases her pain: “Her body, late the prison of sad paine, / Now the sweet lodge of loue and delight” (3.12.45.3-4). The contrast between Amoret’s former pain and her current pleasure is rather marked. Indeed their embrace is so overwhelmingly orgasmic that it causes Amoret to melt: “But she faire Lady ouercommen quight / Of huge affection, did in pleasure melt, / And in sweete ravishment pourd
out her spright” (3.12.45.5-7). Line 7 offers up another image of Amoret exposed and bare. Although she is aware of her audience, this time she has a choice and has chosen to give herself freely to Scudamour. And not even Scudamour remains unaffected by the intensity of their desire and their love. He too loses his voice and his senses: “No word they spake, nor earthly thing they felt, / But like two senseles stocks in long embracement dwelt” (3.12.45.8-9).

However, earlier I said that this reunion between Scudamour and Amoret is highly erotic, and I still maintain that it is. Amoret is the true focus of the stanza, not Scudamour, or Amoret and Scudamour, and our lens is trained on her as we watch her in orgasmic bliss. We see Amoret’s orgasm and not Scudamour’s. It is a moment of watching a woman experience pleasure. Amoret’s ecstasy is such “sweete ravishment” that the narrator refers to it as orgasmic in two senses: “melt” and “pourd out.” Yet there is a dichotomy between Amoret’s former pouring out and this pouring out. Amoret’s opening up by Busyrane is for his pleasure only, while this time the pleasure is for Amoret, and in a sense for us too. In fact, I would like to submit that “in sweete ravishment pourd out her spright” is a description of female ejaculation. Therefore, the ecstatic fervor represented by the image of melting in the stanza, coupled with the reader’s and Britomart’s voyeurism bestows this final scene with its erotic aesthetic. Overall, this facsimile of melting in stanza 45 is converted in stanza 46 to the image of Amoret and Scudamour as a hermaphrodite.

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48 It is interesting that it is marriage which allows the fullest expression of Amoret’s sexuality. Donald Cheney has suggested that the figure of the hermaphrodite suggests marriage. Clearly Spenser moralizes his presentation of pornography, reifying married sex over premarital intercourse.

49 Britomart is the embodiment of my theory. She is the avatar of passionate discourse, and ironically she guides our way through the erotica and the passionate discourse found in the books. Furthermore, she is a better guide than Guyon, because she becomes immersed in the “right” sexual display, while Guyon becomes absorbed in the wrong type: artificial and unnatural expressions of sexuality.
In stanza 46 Spenser makes a direct address to his audience reminding us of the voyeurism present in the poem: “Had ye them seene, ye would haue surely thought / That they had beene that faire Hermaphrodite”(3.12.46.1-2). We are informed that Amoret and Scudamour have been fused into the figure of the hermaphrodite. This passionate fusion is keenly felt by Britomart and she yearns for the same “happinesse” that Amoret feels. And why not? Britomart is the Knight of Chastity, but she is also subject to the same human longings as her rescued counterpart. Moreover, Britomart is also a hermaphrodite, and her hermaphroditic nature links her to the passion and love felt by Amoret and Scudamour. I say that Britomart is hermaphroditic because she is a woman in a man’s clothing (armor), attendant with all the weapons of soldierly masculinity. And because she remains vestal and steadfast, yet is desirous to be united with her love, Arthegall, she is also the perfect balance of sensuality and chastity, thus enabling her hermaphroditic qualities. When we witness the reconciliation between Amoret and Scudamour, and Britomart’s wistful ardor for the same rapture, we are privy to Spenser’s final collocation of alchemy and the erotic in book 3. Britomart’s several links to alchemy, (she is able to read, and defeat Busyrane, she is the figure of the perfect hermaphrodite-ever united but ever chaste, and her voyeuristic status- she guides us through all of Spenser’s sexual milieu in book 3 canto 12, and she is also an erotic figure,) both locates and conceals Spenser’s carnal intent. Ironically, Spenser uses Britomart’s neither / nor status to designate her as his intended audience, his male reader, whom he wishes to “fashion into a vertuous gentleman.” Britomart is in fact the perfect reader; she knows how to read and how to temper her desire. Spenser uses Britomart to represent the perfect “reader or to instruct us on how to read illicit texts. Britomart is

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50 Cognizant of charges of anachronism, I also read Britomart as a cross-dresser. Her cross-dressing status adds to the erotic aesthetic of the episode.

51 To clarify, Spenser uses Britomart to represent the perfect reader or to instruct us on how to read illicit texts.
also Spenser’s perfect muse; she is perpetually chaste, but capable of desire; and she gives us access to our darkest inclinations without investing us with any guilt. Britomart is Spenser’s faire hermaphrodite; she is the embodiment of the perfect reader and the perfect muse. More importantly, she is akin to Spenser’s letter to Ralegh. She is an allegory which is materially and physically real, “a pageant to keep us in false gaze.”

Many scholars have suggested that the shepherd in book 6 canto 10, Colin Clout, is none other than Spenser. I find a definite resonance to such an assertion. The flute or pipe in Colin’s hands obviously represents the poet’s instrument, his pen, and we saw the same motif with Busyrane. Besides, the presence of the dancing maidens in book 6 canto 10 strengthens such an interpretation. Colin is playing for a group of dancing women and his “shrill pipe” (6.10.10.3) summons their presence much like Busyrane’s “straunge art” summoned and controlled his cruel masque. But Colin and his dancing audience are not alone. The knight Calidore is in the middle of a quest and he happens upon the women: “There he a troupe of Ladies dauncing found / Full merrily, and making gladfull glee, / And in the midst a Shepherd piping he did see.” (6.10.10.7-9). All of these dancing women are naked, and this pleases Calidore. Their beauty and nakedness is so magnificent that he can scarcely believe his luck: “There he did see, that much pleased his sight, / That euen he him selfe his eyes enuyde, / An hundred naked maidens lilly white, / All ranged in a ring, and dauncing in delight” (6.10.11.6-9). As with Busyrane’s House the scene is voyeuristic, and totally in keeping with Spenser’s other erotic sections in The Faerie

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52 Although I did not remark fully on this, I see Britomart as a God or a Savior figure. When Amoret kneels before her, it recalls at least two episodes from the bible where we are pointed to Christ. And Matthew Fike wisely points out that Britomart “harrow” hell.

53 Many scholars have taken Spenser at his word that The Faerie Queene is to “fashion vertuous gentlemen,” and so his letter to Ralegh has received a sort of critical orthodoxy. Despite this, I believe that the letter is not the best critical apparatus with which to read The Faerie Queene. I do not take Spenser at his word. A.C Hamilton reads the letter more critically and he believes that Spenser’s letter serves Spenser’s purpose of allegory. On the other hand, Jean R. Brink, and Donald Baker cautions us to read the letter as simply literary.
Queene. Calidore instinctively knows that he cannot interrupt this display and “He durst not enter into th’open greene”(6.10.11.1). He knows that he must remain unseen “For dread of them vnwares to be descryde, / For breaking of their daunce, if he were seene; / But in the couert of the wood did byde, / Beholding all, yet of them vnespyde” (6.10.11.2-5). This has to be a moment of careful watching, and it is almost similar to Britomart’s careful reading in The House of Busyrane. Nonetheless, confronted with the women’s nakedness and beauty Calidore cannot contain himself and so he determines to know more, “But soone as he appeared to their vew, / They vanisht all away out of his sight,” (6.10.18.1-2). Yet unlike Britomart, Calidore is unsuccessful at reading, and he fails in his interpretation of the scene. Calidore must now speak to Colin Clout so that he may rightfully interpret the presence of the naked women. But their disappearance angers Colin Clout, and he breaks his pipe that had previously made sweet sounds. Colin Clout’s pipe also represents his penis, or an erection to be more accurate- again, another reference to Busyrane. The poet’s pen or erection seems to be viable only when the dancing maidens are present. Thus, when they disappear he breaks it. He has no more need of it. The passage with Calidore and Colin Clout is representative of Theseus’ declaration that the poet has such “shaping fantasies to make of nothing / an aery habitation.”54 Both Busyrane and Colin Clout who are symbols of Spenser take their art and make “out of nothing various habitations” with words that are transformative and controversial. Yet we however, must learn to read carefully.

Plutarch declared that texts come “neare unto us and touch the quicke”. Indeed, Guyon, Britomart and Calidore, have all been affected by what they have seen and read. Craik observes

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that “Literary and military theorists who described the inflammatory effects of reading fiction warned that it sometimes aroused madness and unchristian wrath” (8). Guyon, unable to read carefully, shamefully destroys Acrasia’s bower. Calidore, unable to read at all, mars a scene of exquisite beauty. On the other hand, Britomart reads the visual and verbal images in The House of Busyrane with skillful precision. Unlike Britomart, Guyon fails to find the mean, and this failure is not surprising. Alchemy and erotica are discourses built around secrets, obfuscation and sexual innuendo. Therefore, the unprepared reader might misinterpret the symbolism present in the text and act rashly, or perhaps allow the deceptions to cloud their judgment. But despite this difficulty in reading, *The Faerie Queene* enacts an important educational function for men who are able to cipher its meaning. It resolves the problem of what to do with shame and guilt after one has consumed an illicit text. Therefore, the cultural work that *The Faerie Queene* performs is the belief that sexually unsanctioned acts can be read vicariously and then bound up or erased, but only for the initiate.
CHAPTER FOUR

“ONE THING TO MY PURPOSE NOTHING”: ALCHEMY’S PROCREATIVE IMPERATIVES IN SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

And for a woman wert thou first created;
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.

William Shakespeare

Scholarship on sexuality in Shakespeare’s sonnets rarely explore the alchemical metaphors found within the sequence. This lack is curious since the alchemic process is awash with images of sex and sexual reproduction. Yet an alchemical reading of Shakespeare’s sonnets will highlight some deficiencies in our discourse on early modern sexuality. Peggy Munoz Simonds rightfully declares, “Considering the obsession with sexuality and gender questions in late twentieth-century literary criticism, it surprises me that Renaissance alchemy with its many published images of sexual copulation and its visual and verbal metaphors of incest and grotesque hermaphrodites has not attracted more attention from contemporary scholarship” (“Sex in a Bottle” 97). Margaret Healy also finds the lack of alchemical scholarship on Shakespeare, particularly the sonnets, equally as puzzling since alchemy incorporates such dense symbols and weighted sexual metaphors. She states:

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55 We have had fruitful readings of sexuality in Shakespeare’s poems and plays. These readings have helped us to grapple with the issues of homosexuality, patriarchy, and identity formation. See especially, Jonathan Goldberg, Valerie Traub and Margreta De Grazia for readings of sodomy and homoeroticism in the sonnets (Goldberg 1992, Traub 1999, de Grazia 1999). And for matters of subject formation see Joel Fineman (1986). Nonetheless, there is still more that needs to be done in the area of Shakespearean sexuality. Ignoring the alchemy present in Shakespeare’s works presents us with major critical gaps. The exception to the above is Peggy Munoz Simonds and Margaret Healy both of whom I cite in this chapter. Although she defines alchemy as a “mechanical art” Elizabeth Spiller (2009) also recognizes the importance of the alchemical motifs in Shakespeare’s work.
It is strange, given the current critical emphasis on the importance of original contexts, that the early modern obsession with form and spatial pattern has been largely ignored over recent decades. Studies of Shakespeare’s sonnets have been dominated by such topics as sexual desire, gender and racial politics, with the pursuit of linear narratives and recognizable subjectivities. (405)

Following Healy’s implicit invitation, I undertake a reading of the Shakespearean sonnets which rely heavily on alchemic metaphors for their core meaning. My reading is unified by the references to sex and procreation found in the sonnets which have been traditionally associated with the young man (sonnets 1-126).56

The questions that I attempt to address in this chapter are: 1) Why does Shakespeare use the language of alchemy to describe his relationship with the addressee? 2) What alchemical metaphors does the poet utilize in his descriptions? 3) Finally, how does Shakespeare’s alchemical language illuminate the widening gulf between the speaker and the young man? In an attempt to answer these questions what I propose to do is offer an interpretation which delineates the alchemical language of the sonnets specific to the poet’s obsession with the procreative potential of the young man and by extension the transformative power of the poet.

Alchemy is always about the alchemist. It is in fact, a self-reflexive discourse of power, autonomy and control. And specifically, in the case of Shakespeare’s sonnets, the alchemical references are mostly about sexual control, and sexual control of fecundity and reproduction. Therefore, I wish to consider the sonnets where the elements of alchemy highlight the speaker’s failed attempts to control the youth’s reproductive autonomy. My overall thesis is that the lexicon of alchemy which runs throughout the sequence is the speaker’s way of reconciling, or

coming to terms with the non-utility or perhaps the utility of the young man’s penis (“one thing to my purpose nothing”). Consequently, in this chapter I will trace Shakespeare’s alchemical metaphors as they relate specifically to the procreative impulse mapped out in the sonnets, and I conclude by commenting on the speaker’s failure to normalize the young man within a heterosexual economy and also his failure in governing the youth’s generative possibilities. Part of the speaker’s failure to imprison the young man in either a heterosexual or homosexual framework is due to the figure of Time. Time initially appears as a fickle creature of absolute power in the sonnets. Yet ultimately, Time is revealed as the poet’s alchemical rival, and this rivalry clarifies the operation of the magnum opus and its ultimate deleterious effects on the speaker.

It is salutary that the sequence begins with a sonnet laden with the language of alchemy.

In sonnet 1 Shakespeare calls on his retinue of opposites to give us an overriding picture of

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57 Following Katherine Duncan Jones in her edition of the sonnets, *Shakespeare Sonnets: The Arden Shakespeare*, (London: Thomas Nelson 1997), I read the sonnets sequentially, or within min-sequences. Heather Dubrow opposes such an arrangement (Dubrow 1999, 120) arguing that “the structure of the sequence itself is unstable: each section may contain poems that are out of place, referring to characters or values customarily associated with the other section.” Although I evaluate the sonnets sequentially, my thesis that the alchemical references reflect the speaker’s erratic behavior and erratic thinking remains intact. It is possible to move back and forth in a sequence. One need not remain static. So despite their seemingly linear nature, the sonnets highlight the emotional vicissitudes experienced by the speaker.

58 Lyndy Abraham reveals that Saturn who is also represented as Father Time in the Renaissance is also crucial to the alchemical opus: “Saturn- the base metal lead; As the reaper who cuts down all in his path, Saturn is strongly associated with the initial deathly stage of the nigredo, during which the diseased metal or matter for the Stone is killed, dissolved and putrefied into the prima materia or philosophical mercury. Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens* observed that ‘Saturn carries a scythe because like time, he mows everything he produces’(120). Old man Saturn (Mercurius senex) is that force which mercilessly destroys the old yet miraculously makes way for the new (Mercurius puer)” (178). Abraham’s explanation discloses Shakespeare employment of his alchemical figures to complicate his portrayal of the relationship between the speaker and the young man. I still assert that Time is depicted in the sequence as the master alchemist. Nevertheless, if we take into account Abraham’s clarification, we can see that Time is in fact, necessary for the biological life cycle and necessary to the life cycle of the sequence. Shakespeare presents Time, and Nature for that matter, as enemies to love, but he also positions them as guardians of life. So then, rather than just reading Time as an uncomplicated enemy of the speaker’s, I read Time as the speaker’s necessary rival.

59 Shakespeare’s explicit use of alchemy in sonnet 33: “Full many a glorious morning have I seen / Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye, / Kissing with golden face the meadows green, / Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy” (1-4), and in sonnet 114: “Or whether doth my mind, being crowned with you, / Drink up the
plenty drawn against a backdrop of famine. More substantially, this image of “abundance” is “contracted” to the addressee’s sexuality, or more specifically, the addressee’s procreative potential. In both the interest of what is natural and in his own self-interest, the young man in sonnet 1 is urged to have children. The speaker likens the young man to “beauty’s rose” (2). In the alchemical pursuit the red rose was a “symbol of the goal of the opus alchymicum, the perfect red stone or elixir attained at the culmination of the rubedo” (Abraham 173). There are course other varieties of roses in nature. And alchemy also had a symbol for a white rose. According to Abraham, a white rose is a symbol of the white elixir and the albedo or pure white stage which occurs just prior to the final red stage or rubedo. It also symbolizes the white stone which has the power to transmute base metal into silver (173). Whatever rose we ascribe to the young man, the common denominator in line two is that of alteration. The poet ambivalently wishes to transform the young man into a proper, natural man. Therefore, the poet’s message to the young man is rooted in the language of transformation. But, by refusing to participate in the monarch’s plague this flattery, / Or whether shall I say mine eye saith true, / And that your love taught it this alchemy?” (1-4), to characterize flattery and transformation should alert us to the poet’s intimate knowledge of this popular discourse. Simonds gives credence to my proposition, “. . . as many scholars have noted in other contexts, Shakespeare’s audience probably knew alchemical language as well as or better than we in the humanities today understand the language of modern physics and chemistry” (“My Charms Crack Not” 538). In sonnet 33 Shakespeare doubly manipulates the image of gold used by alchemists. Gold is a metaphor for the perfection attained at the end of the distillation process. But “gold is [also] the metallic equivalent of the sun, the image of the sun buried in the earth. The sun in turn is the physical equivalent of the eternal spirit which lodges in the heart” (Abraham 87). Consequently, the presence of gold symbolized the perfect transmuted human. Therefore, sonnet 33 portrays a fleeting image of the youth’s perfection. Again, this portrayal is a nod to the poet’s inconsistent emotions.

I have deliberately conflated the biological Shakespeare, with the terms, the poet and the speaker. However, I do not mean to imply or articulate a biographical analysis of the poems or conjecture on authorial / poetic intention. My reasons for doing so are simply based on semantic necessity.

Stephen Booth reads rose as a possible reference to female genitalia. Booth’s suggestion obliquely correlates to my overall argument that Shakespeare presents the young man within fluid but unlawful contexts of gender inversions.

The rubedo was the final stage of the alchemical experiment. Remember that this elixir was also referred to as the Philosopher’s Stone; the agent capable of turning base metals into gold, curing all diseases and conferring immortality. Abraham distinguishes between a white rose and a red rose: “the red stone has the power to transmute all base metals into pure gold and earthly man into the illumined philosopher,” (173). By contrast, the white stone turns base metals into silver, but it does not have the power to grant immortality.
ritual of reproduction, the young man denies the poet the ability to alter him. The image of flame in lines 5 and 6 ("But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel") has been correctly glossed by many critics as a reference to a self-consuming candle. Notwithstanding in alchemy, fire or fuel is “the chief agent” responsible for transmutation in the alchemical experiment (Abraham 76). And in fact, only a true adept or expert can “master” its secrets. Instead, the young man wastes his fuel (semen) in masturbatory acts, “making a famine where abundance lies” (7). The waste of his semen becomes a rash act of onanistic self-consumption, prompting the poet to attempt a coup d’état of the youth’s reproductive potential.

The youth’s misuse of such an important bodily fluid would have certainly caused consternation in many of Shakespeare’s readers. Regulation of one’s semen was vital to maintaining one’s homeostatic balance in the Galenic-Hippocratic model. Lisa Wynne Smith reminds us that excess ejaculation was a symbol of a lack of self-control and signaled the inability to govern one self and thus others (29). Men who governed were also required to

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63 In the context of the alchemical metaphors filled with images of procreation, I read line 5 as an instance of the young man’s refusal to participate in a patriarchal economy of heterosexual union.

64 Semen also had an alchemic counterpoint in the word “seed.” Seed was categorized as the “life spark, thought to be inside the hard shell of metals, from which gold could be generated. This seed of metals was thought to consist of an interior heat, named philosophical sulphur, and a moist spirit, philosophical argent vive” (Abraham 180). Reading sonnet 129, Richard Halpern establishes that semen is aligned with “spirit,” and that this association “impl[ies] a sodomitical waste of the male seed” (28). Even in portraying the very maleness of the addressee, Shakespeare manages to emphasize the binary gender of the youth, thus multiplying the young man’s erotic potential.

65 Practitioners of humoral theory thought that a healthy person kept their bodily flows in check. Men were seen as more efficient in keeping their fluids in check. However, by masturbating constantly, Shakespeare’s youth could be seen as out of control and even effeminate, or feminine. Having said that, I suspect that this roundabout portrayal of effeminism in the youth is quite intentional as the youth is later realized as the sexually, ambiguous hermaphrodite in sonnet 20.

66 David S. Katz’s investigation into early modern theories of Jewish male menstruation (“Shylock’s Gender: Jewish Male Menstruation in Early Modern England,” 1999, 445-452) adds the dimension of “otherness” to the youth’s deliberate loss of biological fluid. Katz demonstrates that an uncontrolled outpouring of body fluids could mark one as feminine, but more importantly for Katz’s construction, Jewish and therefore inalienably other.
control themselves, especially as heads of the household. Moreover, male semen was believed to be crucial to the sexual satisfaction of women, and of course, necessary for conception. Therefore, the young man’s masturbatory inclinations and lack of offspring disrupts gendered expectations of sexual behavior and calls into question the received patriarchy of the time.

Furthermore, the image of the young man consuming himself with his “self-substantial fuel” only reiterates the poet’s charges that the addressee needs a true expert to carry out the work. For all that, the youth’s refusal entrenches him in his unnatural act, and his erotic narcissism foreshadows not the “gaudy spring” but the “grave” (10,14). Grave is a well-known alchemical symbol for the adept’s retort or the secret vessel where the alchemical experiment took place. As we have seen in other chapters another name for this vessel is the alembic. Recall that the alembic is the glass used in alchemy to hold material while it is being distilled to its essential nature. And in this sonnet the right type of fire is needed for the experiment to reach its full conclusion. Therefore, by signaling the grave as his potential “due,” the speaker admonishes the young man to adopt the right type of fuel or fire, and this fire is of course the speaker himself. Consequently, I believe that the alchemical metaphors that run throughout sonnets 1-14

67 In terms of early modern ideas of sex and reproduction, the importance of the young man’s semen cannot be overstated. Sarah Toulalan verifies the perceived importance of seminal fluid in the seventeenth century. She avers that the seventeenth century “was also a time of high infant mortality: one child in four died before reaching the age of nine” ("The Act of Copulation" 523). Therefore, “increase in pregnancies” was seen as highly desirable in “order to ensure the survival of more children into adulthood” ("The Act of Copulation" 523). Conception was thought to occur at the moment of intense sexual pleasure ("The Act of Copulation" 523). And this sexual pleasure was thought to be dependent on the presence of semen, “because [. . .] semen is required to bring on the supreme female physical pleasure” ("The Act of Copulation" 524). Having noted the importance of male semen, we can now understand the urgency of the speaker’s admonitions to procreate. In a strange twist of irony, scientific research is beginning to prove that the timing of women’s orgasms does matter. The chances for conception increase significantly when women’s orgasm occur one to forty-five minutes after their partner’s ejaculation (Beth Livermore, 1994).
(the procreation sonnets) signal the poet’s initial attempts to immortalize the young man through the poet’s own verse.68

While sonnet 1 alludes to Shakespeare’s alchemical knowledge, both sonnets 5 and 6 articulate a more direct expression of Shakespeare’s intimate erudition with the “great art.” In sonnet 5, the speaker warns the young man about time’s encroaching ravages. And the speaker attempts to frighten the young man with images of “hideous winter.../ Sap checked with frost” (6-7).69 Shorn of summer’s “gentle work” (1), the sonnet is “bareness everywhere” (8). Everywhere that is except for the promise of “flow’rs distilled” (13). Here at the turn of the sonnet, the speaker offers the addressee the promise of immortality through the act of procreation, and the speaker likens this deed to the alchemical process of distillation: “But flow’rs distilled, though they with winter meet. / Leese but their show, their substance still lives sweet” (13-14). These are not “odious comparisons.” In alchemy the process of distillation allowed the true quintessence of a matter to appear or to be more exact, to be born. Therefore, the poet’s suggestion for the young man to engage in an act that will ultimately lead to a quintessence of his true self is in fact quite apt.

If we accept Stephen Booth’s invitation to read sonnets 5 and 6 as if they were in fact one poem (141), we can begin where we left off. The language of alchemy initiated in sonnet 5 comes to full fray in sonnet 6: “Then let not winter’s ragged hand deface / In thee thy summer

68 The theme of the poet’s verse as an immortalizing distillery recurs throughout the sequence. See especially sonnets 17: “But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme” (13-14), 18: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (13-14), 19: “Yet do thy worst, old Time: despite they wrong, / My love shall in my verse ever live young” (13-14), and 60: “And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand, / Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand” (13-14). Although sonnets 17 and 18 are not explicitly alchemical, they do rehearse the subject of the poet’s war with Time which is in fact alchemical. I discuss sonnets 19 and 60 in detail in the chapter.

69 The phrase “sap checked with frost” is an optical foreshadowing of the young man’s seminal ruin due to his own mishandling of his “treasure” and of course the onslaught of Time. As stated earlier, semen was thought to have special reproductive powers, so when the “sap” is “checked with frost,” his reproductive potential has been literally frozen by Winter who is an agent of Time. Sonnets 33 and 34 attest that the sun is also an agent of time.
ere thou be distilled: Make sweet some vial; treasure thou some place / With beauty’s treasure
ere it be self-killed (1-4). “Vial” here in line 3 of sonnet 6 echoes lines 10 and 11 of sonnet 5: “Then were not summer’s distillation left, / A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass.”\(^{70}\) Abraham confirms that in the alchemical experiment glass and vial (viol) are the same and both are referred to as the alchemical limbeck (85, 209). Booth suggests that “vial” is a reference to womb or impregnating a woman (141). Interestingly, the earth or grave can also refer to the womb or alembic where the chemical wedding takes place. A final consideration should be the image of leaves in sonnet 5. Summer has been quite confounded and is “Sap checked with frost” and his “lusty leaves” are “quite gone” (7).\(^{71}\) Leaves in the Renaissance is commonplace for books, verse, etc. Taken together with the “lusty leaves” in line 7 of sonnet 5 and the aforementioned symbolism, I can’t help but read these sonnets as the poet’s attempt to distill the young man in his own poetic still or verse. Simonds also finds in alchemy a poetic counterpart suggesting that in these two sonnets, “Shakespeare is continuing here the analogy between alchemy and poetry that he began in Venus and Adonis” (“Sex in a Bottle” 102).

Just as sonnets 5 and 6 are thematically linked to the speaker’s quarrel with Time, so too are sonnets 15 and 16.\(^{72}\) The speaker’s war with Time is the main focus of sonnets 15 and 16; nonetheless, sonnet 15 begins with a different alchemical reference: “When I consider everything that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment; / That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows, / Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;” (1-4). Here the poet presents the world

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\(^{70}\) Many scholars such as Halpern read the distillation imagery in the sonnets as the process of perfume making, and places the process within a Freudian network of sublimation. On the other hand, Wendy Wall makes a distinction between alchemy and distillation, and she reads the “distillation” imagery as part of a network of women’s work.

\(^{71}\) With the lust of the leaves quite gone, the poet wrongly, or perhaps erratically, implies that his writing or his power has faded too.

\(^{72}\) Taking our cue from Burrow, we can read sonnets 15 and 16 as one poem. Indeed, the contestatory nature of the speaker’s consociation with time is repeated in sonnets 15 and 16.
as a stage. This metaphor is commonplace in the Renaissance and is echoed by Jacques in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Scholars such as Burrow support the conventional reading of sonnet 15 as the picture of a stage-world that eventually comes to ruin. Notwithstanding, I would like to add another dimension to the traditional interpretation of this poem. I do agree that lines 1-4 are correlated to the stage. However, I believe that the reference is to another kind of stage— the theater of alchemy. Abraham points out that:

Alchemy and theater were closely associated. Many alchemical treatises, like other Renaissance works, were entitled ‘theaters’ meaning ‘a book giving a view or conspectus of some subject’. [Furthermore], the alchemists viewed their alembic as a theater in which the miniature creation of the Stone imitated the creation of the greater world in microcosm. The alembic was the theater in which the cycle of solve et coagula, beheading and renovation, melting and recasting was faithfully re-enacted. (199)\(^73\)

Therefore, when the speaker states “that this huge stage presenteth nought but shows” (4), he is reminding us that he, like the alchemist, has the ability to recreate the young man into a sexually receptive creature capable of mating with men or women. We will later see that this creature is the sexually transgressive hermaphrodite. So in sonnet 15, Shakespeare has to present himself as the master alchemist in order to challenge Time. The poet, to steal Andrew Marvell’s expression, hearing “time’s winged chariot” reminds the young man, that “wasteful time debateth with decay / To change your day of youth to sullied night,” (11-12).\(^74\) Here the speaker’s words become

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\(^73\) Implicit in the presentation of the alembic as the alchemists’ theater is the notion of the poet as the master creator or the *deus ex machina* of the poem. Theseus’s speech in act 5 scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Prospero’s magic and his correlatory final incantation in *The Tempest* readily come to mind. Both men epitomize Shakespeare’s presentation of the poet as creator-incarnate, poet in the flesh.

\(^74\) Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.”
more urgent. The young man has to act soon and procreate or he will become the figure of summer in sonnet 5, a useless old man, “sap-checked with frost” (7). The speaker’s battle with Time may seem overwrought, but the intensity of the speaker’s emotions justifies this constant reiteration. In fact, at the sonnet’s turn, the speaker explicitly tells us that he is in definitively engaged in a campaign against Time: “And, all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new” (15-16). It is obvious that Time is determined to win the battle over the young man’s reproductive and erotic existence. And as the speaker reminds us, Time will not make the young man new, but will transform him into a creature of barren, near-dead sexuality. The sonnet’s end bears witness to the speaker’s bravery. Delusional thinking aside, the speaker is determined that no matter what Time does to the young man, he will “engraft” the young man “new” (16).

For all that, in sonnet 16, the speaker’s bravado wavers. He recognizes the youth’s recalcitrance, and the speaker senses that he is losing his verbal barrage against Time. He even acknowledges that his “rhyme” is not enough to outdo Time. For this reason, he urges the young man to “Make war upon this bloody tyrant Time, / And fortify yourself in your decay / With means more blessed than my barren rhyme” (2-4). “Barren” is a reference to sexual infertility, and as Burrow rightly glosses, “It shockingly denies the vitality implicitly granted to verse by engraft” in sonnet 15, line 14” (412). The speaker’s about-face is a result of the young man’s rebellion, and now the speaker has lost faith in his verse (his alchemical theater) to stave off Time’s effect on the youth and consequently “engraft” him new. Thereupon he employs another tactic; he seemingly concedes to Time’s power but equalizes both of their abilities, or rather their inability, to transform the young man. He declares: “time’s pencil or [his] pupil pen / Neither in inward worth nor outward fair / Can make you live yourself in eyes of men:” (10-12). Here it
seems that both Time and the speaker have the power to “draw” or paint the young man. Yet neither Time nor the speaker can make the youth immortal. Burrows explains that in the Renaissance “pen describes the inward, and . . . pencil . . . depicts the outward, . . .” (412). So, Time’s outward control over beauty and the body, and the speaker’s authority over the youth’s inner self, is nonetheless unable to thwart the supremacy of decay and a sinful world. Therefore, he urgently reminds the youth to propagate to achieve this elusive immortality: “To give away yourself keeps yourself still, /And you must live drawn by your own sweet skill” (13-14).

These last lines have been correctly read by scholars as the speaker’s final reminder for the youth to produce offspring. And as I have already noted, the sonnet palpitates with reproductive imagery. But at the turn of sonnet 16, there are alchemical seeds which bear fuller fruit later in sonnets 19 and 20. At the turn of sonnet 16, the speaker uses the word “still” to arrest the addressee’s movements and to impress upon the addressee the seriousness of the situation: “To give away yourself keeps your self still, /And you must live drawn by your own sweet skill”(15-16). It is noteworthy that “still” is an allusion to the youth’s body, and as we have already seen, the “still” in alchemy was often referred to as the body.

Could the speaker be suggesting that the young man is also an alchemist? Unfortunately, the sequence doesn’t bear out such a conclusion. Even so, the alchemic flutters in lines 15 -16, emphasize Shakespeare’s familiarity with, and use of alchemy in the sequence. Besides, the alchemic registers function as expressive indices to the speaker’s wavering emotions. These emotions as we will see in sonnet 19 and 20 waver from calm to fury when the speaker decides to recapitulate his battle with time.

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75 As previously observed, still is an alternate name for the alembic or the limbeck, the vessel where the alchemical experiment took place.

76 Bearing in mind the alchemic link with poetry, and the association of “still” with the body, books, and leaves, I believe that the speaker is reinforcing his alchemic imagery here.
Sonnet 19 begins with the speaker’s assertion that “Devouring Time, [should] blunt thou the lion’s paws, / And make the earth devour her own sweet brood, / Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger’s jaws, / And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood” (1). The imagery of Time as a devourer of everything is Ovidian (Burrows 418). And in the first four lines Time is so powerful that it destroys everything that a Renaissance audience would have thought of as indestructible (Burrows 418): Time can dull the lion’s paws, remove the tiger’s teeth and scorch the Phoenix to death (1-4). Additionally, lines 5-8 continue Time’s mastery over the seasons and the world. By the time we get to the middle of the sonnet, it would appear that Time is unconquerable, and the earlier representation of the Phoenix “burning” as we will momentarily see is especially salient.

Nonetheless, Time’s invincibility is not enough to stop the poet from “forbid[ding]” Time from “carving” “hours” on his “love’s fair brow”(9-10). In spite of this, right at the sonnet’s turn, the poet finally accepts Time’s supremacy and partially submits: “Yet do thy worse, old Time: despite thy wrong,”(13). If the speaker smacked of delusion heretofore, he now clearly recognizes that he can never halt Time’s effects. Moreover, his battle with Time, reiterates my earlier claim that Time is the poet’s alchemical rival. Therefore, faced with an onslaught from a master alchemist, he has to turn to the superior alchemy of his verse in order to grant the youth immortality: “My love shall in my verse ever live young” (14). The speaker had formerly labored under a misapprehension, but now he begins to live in reality. We may dismiss his claims that he will immortalize the young man, but he has clearly done so. I would like to submit here that his success in eternalizing the young man is due in part to the alchemy of his verse.

Let us return to the image of the Phoenix. As stated earlier, the Phoenix was a popular Renaissance symbol of indestructible immortality. Thus when Shakespeare claims that Time can
destroy the Phoenix, it is not entirely true. The Phoenix always rises from the ashes of destruction. However, the Phoenix’s presence in sonnet 19 holds even more significance than an opponent equal to Time. The Phoenix in sonnet 19 is unequivocally alchemical. In alchemy the Phoenix denoted “renewal and resurrection signifying the [achievement] of the philosopher’s stone” at the end of the alchemical process (Abraham 152). Moreover, as Abraham explains, “The Phoenix is also a symbol of alchemical ‘multiplication’, where the quality and quantity of the elixir are infinitely multiplied by dissolution and coagulation” (152). Abraham’s account of the Phoenix in alchemy stresses its importance in sonnet 19. The Phoenix embodies a process of constant alchemical renewal. Therefore, Shakespeare’s placement of this mythical bird in the sonnet is no coincidence. Despite Time’s powerful machinations, and the youth’s eventual death, the youth will “ever live young” (14), constantly brought back to life by the limbeck of Shakespeare’s verse. In fact, we are implicated as co-creators or co-authors in the poet’s alchemical process. Every time we read the sonnets, we fulfil the poet’s incantation in sonnet 18 that “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (13-14). Each reading of the sonnets is a personal act of resurrection of the young man and subsequently a triumph for the speaker.

As part of my thesis, I have stated that the alchemy found in the sequence indicates the speaker’s vacillating emotions toward the youth. This vacillation is more self-evident when we move from sonnet 19 to sonnet 20. In sonnet 20, the speaker reproaches the young man and blames nature for thwarting his sexual intentions toward the youth. His anger toward the young man is so patent it may lead one to question whether this was the speaker of sonnet 19. Dr. Roberts suggests that these emotional fluctuations are symptomatic of “crazy, internal longing” (private conversation with Dr. Roberts- May 21st). This “crazy, internal longing” is embodied in
the figure of the hermaphrodite, a creature of illicit and transgressive intersexuality. Shakespeare’s sonnetic hermaphrodite is appropriately binate and indeterminate, because it emphasizes the speaker’s sexual frustration while underscoring the collapse of the speaker’s alchemic scheme to joining sexually with the young man. In “The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe,” Leah DeVun historicizes the place of the hermaphrodite in the middle ages and in the early modern period. She notes that in the medieval tradition “hermaphrodites were neither male nor female, but an intermediary sex that combined male and female characteristics in equilibrium” (196). David S. Katz also defines a hermaphrodite as a male who menstruated (456). These characteristics of femininity and fluidity call attention to the youth’s sexual allure. At this point I ask us to recall Thomas Laqueur’s articulation of the Renaissance one-sex model. I do believe that Shakespeare exploits this contested model of Renaissance physiology in his depiction of the young man in order to allow for the gender play so necessary to his construction of the alluringly androgynous youth. Nonetheless, I affirm that the sonnets are primarily hermaphroditic. There was also another tradition which saw hermaphrodites differently. This model thought of hermaphrodites “not so much as an intermediate sex as the product of doubled or superfluous genitalia” (DeVun 197). Regardless of the model, hermaphrodites were thought of as “monstrous births” (DeVun 197). Other discussions of hermaphroditism during the period placed hermaphroditism “within the context of sodomy or sexual deviance, or they attempt[ed] to fix the ‘true’ sex of a hermaphrodite in terms of sexual activity and passivity (DeVun 197). These are the traditions


78 Monstrous births were defined as “birth defects” (DeVun 197).
that Shakespeare has inherited when he addresses the young man in sonnet 20. Of necessity, I quote the sonnet in its entirety:

A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion
A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted with shifting change as is false women’s fashion
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she pricked thee out for women’s pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy love’s use their treasure. (1-14)

The sonnet begins with a conflicted declaration of admiration to the youth. These declarations aren’t merely decorative. They outline the speaker’s inner battle and resonate with the duality that he ascribes to the young man. Tellingly, this duality is unmistakably hermaphroditic. The young man has a “woman’s face” and a “gentle woman’s heart,” but “an eye more bright than theirs” and even more importantly, “less false in rolling” (3-5). He is also a “man in hue, all hues in his controlling” (7). Both Burrow and Booth identify the Renaissance meaning of “hue” as “form, shape, complexion and appearance” (Burrow 421, Booth 163). And
both affirm that “hue” as used in the sonnet is significant. Hue’s multiplex meaning of “form, shape, complexion and appearance” also carry with it the embedded idea that hue refers to “a man in form who, is able by nature to adopt the perfect colouring of any complexion, including that of a woman’s; a man in form, who is able to control all appearances and to make all succumb to him” (Burrows 420). This explication aligns with the historical ideas of the alchemic hermaphrodite. Abraham clarifies that this “complete, undivided unity, known as the rebis or hermaphrodite, is the perfect integration of male and female energies” (98). Booth also states that “hue” signifies “A man in appearance, he is capable of presenting any appearance he chooses” (164). Finally, Kathleen Long concludes that “The very existence of the hermaphrodite challenges the neatly delineated dual-sex system, according to which one has to be either male or female” (1). It goes without saying that the young man is neither sex or more transgressively, he is both sexes. His neither / nor and either / or status is troubling. He can be whatever sex he chooses at any moment. He does not have to specify his preference, and as we have already discovered, medical hermaphrodites were pressed into selecting their “gender.” But I submit that the poet is inclined to keep the youth in this perpetual illicit, liminality. By keeping his love interest in this threshold of neither / nor and either / or, the poet has the possibility to engage in intercourse with the youth. Scholars have debated the sexual significance of the relationship in sonnet 20. Many shy away from suggesting that it is of a homosexual nature. But I assert that

79 Booth’s elucidation of “hue” is highly apposite to my theory for sonnet 20 so I will note more fully part of his explication here. According to Booth, “Since the word hue is repeated, the permutations of overlapping meanings and suggestions in the line are too numerous to spell out; however, these are a few: (1) A man in form, all forms (i.e. people of both sexes), are subject to his power (see line 8); (2) A man in complexion, he has power over all other complexions (i.e. causes people to flush or grow pale); (3) Although he has a man’s complexion, it challenges all others; [...] (5) He has a man’s complexion, but can have any complexion he chooses (suggesting a capacity for the cosmetic deceit denied in line 1); [...]. and perhaps (5) A human being in form, he has [magical] power over phantasms” (164).

80 Although I have conflated the poet, speaker and Shakespeare as one individual, my reading of the relationship between the speaker and the young man is strictly limited to the world of the sonnets. Booth also finds biographical
it is. The hermaphroditic and alchemic overtures clarify the relationship between the speaker and the young man. In terms of the association between sodomy and hermaphroditism, DeVun maintains, “In order to avoid engaging in sodomy, the hermaphrodite must perform sexually as either a man or a woman, but never as both” (198). The young man in the sonnet does perform as both, or rather, the poet paints him as potentially acting in both sexual capacities. We can imagine hermaphroditism in a more sodomitical context if we weigh Traub’s analyses of sodomy:

Renaissance sodomy was a diffuse yet flexible prohibitive category, available for deployment in an array of discursive contexts . . . The human adult marital body is recognized as the only appropriate erotic object; penetration is recognized as the only appropriate activity; the penis . . . the only appropriate instrument; the vagina . . . the only appropriate receptacle. In the early modern period, sodomy exists as an imaginary structure whenever these recognitions are violated, wherever the boundaries and systems of alliance they attempt to enforce are crossed and confused. Sodomy thus includes, but is not limited to, all sexuality that does not have procreation as its goal. (“Sex Without Issue” 432, emphasis Traub)

The frisson of sexual pleasure generated by this hermaphrodite / sodomite in sonnet 20, stems from its “imaginary structure” and its lack of a defined and consistent procreative sign. I concur that the sonnet’s final lines may appear to offer a critique to my claim. Nonetheless, a sonnet is inherently cyclical, and each re-reading situates it one of John Donne’s “pretty rooms.”

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impositions on Shakespeare based on this sonnet problematic: “On grounds of its vocabulary--- though not of its final statement--- this sonnet has been carelessly cited as evidence of its author’s homosexuality” (163).

81 John Donne’s “The Canonization.” When confronted with the possibility of being a social outcast, the speaker in “The Canonization” boldly declares: “And if unfit for tombs and hearse / Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse; / And if no piece of Chronicle wee prove, / We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms; (29-32).
result, we re-read ad infinitum, and find ourselves lingering over the first twelve lines. The turn provides structure to the poem, but we must also look at the overarching world created by the other lines. Shakespeare builds an impenetrable “room” where a hermaphrodite and the potential for infinite pleasure hold sway. But this pleasure isn’t merely hedonistic. Shakespeare’s hermaphrodite in sonnet 20 may choose to give or to receive pleasure as either a man or a woman. Thus, the possibility of pleasure, and in fact, pleasure itself, disrupts the construction of gender. Shakespeare’s alchemical hermaphrodite embodies the unintelligibility of sexuality and desire. Sex is abstract, and we give meaning to its practices. Subsequently, the presence of the penis, the “thing” of sonnet 20, [“one thing to my purpose nothing” (12)], is also a “nothing,” and not solely a feminized “nothing.” “Thing” may appear to be a definitive sign of sexuality, or an emblem which elucidates the procreative zeitgeist. Howbeit, this alchemical “thing” / “nothing” does more, it is a sign of disruptive and transgressive pleasure. The procreative discourses observed earlier are merely closets in the sonnet’s room. More importantly, DeVun reminds us that “hermaphroditism was also readily associated with sexual practices considered deviant or undesirable, such as masturbation or sodomy” (198). And DeVun’s statement is a strong aide memoire of the masturbatory waste witnessed in sonnets 1, 5, and 6.

Having fashioned the youth into his sexual partner, the poet moves to sonnet 54 where he reinscribes his poetic prowess and the power of verse to transmute matter. The speaker recalls the nomenclature of the rose, and likens the young man to that flower albeit with the warning that the youth should allow himself to be distilled in the speaker’s laboratory. In fact, sonnet 54 attests to the possible truth of the poet’s verse as the alchemical still. And although sonnet 54 differs in theme with sonnets 5 and 6, sonnet 54 is linked to sonnets 5 and 6 by the poet’s treatment of alchemy and verse. The poet ends the sonnet with the claim that his poetry will
distill the young man’s essence: “Sweet roses do not [fade]; / Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made: / And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth: When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth” (11-14). The only challenge to the speaker’s claim of distilling or bestowing immortality on the young man is the figure of Time, a matter to which I shall return later.

In many ways Sonnet 69 begins to answer the implicit question posed in sonnet 54 and elsewhere in the sequence: is the poet able to distill the young man’s essence in order to allow for a sexual union? Considering the poet’s success in immortalizing the youth, it is not surprising that any striving for a conclusive answer provides a bit of a critical disjuncture. Our way out then lies in remembering the “in-betweenness” of the hermaphrodite. Accordingly, I propose that Shakespeare’s distillation of the youth culminates in a dance ambivalence. What I mean to say is that on the one hand he is able to distill or immortalize the youth through the power of his verse; yet conversely, he is eternally unable to sexually penetrate the young man. Consequently, the speaker’s frustration boils over. He bemoans the fact that admirers of the young man are unable to see the youth’s inner self, and that they gaze lovingly at the youth’s

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82 Burrows notes that “by verse” seems to be the correct reading as opposed to “my verse.” Yet, he does note that “by” could be emended to “my” which would “anticipate the confidence of the following poem” (489). Thus I read the sonnet with the emendation of “my.”

83 In sonnet 54, ironically it is Time which reveals the true beauty of the “sweet roses” (11) which are likened to the spirit of the young man.

84 I coined this phrase to signify the infinitely equivocal nature of the relationship between the speaker and the young man, as well as the perpetually contradictory results of the speaker’s attempts to distill him. The speaker successfully distills / memorializes the young man but he is effectively impotent in his sexual transformation of the youth. No matter how many times the speaker transacts his experiment, the youth remains perennially unavailable. The speaker fails at the process of distilling the young man because the youth’s “odour matcheth not [his] show”(11). In alchemy the final process of distillation would remove the fetid smell of the alchemical experiment. Since the young man retains his “odour,” the poet has not been able to complete his alchemical work or chemical wedding with the young man. Furthermore, to use Dr. Roberts’ language, there is now “nothing special” about the young man because he “dost common grow” (14).

85 I do not mean to privilege penile penetration as the quiddity of sexual intercourse. Rather, I would like to stress its importance in determining the potential transgressiveness of any sexual encounter between the young man and the speaker.
deeds unaware of the foulness within: “Then, churls, their thoughts (although their eyes were kind) / To thy fair flower add the rank smell of weeds / But why thy odour matcheth not thy show, / The soil is this, that thou dost common grow” (11-14). Finally, the unfulfilled craving and sexual desire in sonnet 69 exposes the language of alchemy in the sonnets addressed to the young man as sexual, and more specifically, homosexual. The poet has attempted to mate with the young man, but the young man’s “rank” odor and his concomitant commonality, bear testament to the speaker’s disappointment in attaining his desire.

Ironically, the speaker’s failure is vivified by the image of the limbeck in sonnet 119:

“What potions have I drunk of siren tears, / Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within, / Applying fears to hopes, and hopes to fears, / Still losing when I saw myself to win?” (1-4).

Here, we find the limbeck personifying the speaker’s grief and in fact the nigredo stage of the alchemical opus. And there is an additional problem. Instead of translating the young man into a sexually appropriate receptacle, the speaker is himself commutated and his resultant anguish is made manifest through the dark symbolism of the magnus opus. Simonds states, “Siren tears in alchemy are condensed drops of distilled mercurial water on the side of the alembic and are both dangerous and purifying at the same time as strong purgatives” (“Sex in a Bottle” 101). These expressions of erratic thinking are not unique to the sonnet sequence. But in this sonnet the alchemical metaphors intensify the image of sickness and the symptomatic “madding fever” that accompanies the speaker’s disease (8). As Simonds verifies, the speaker’s tears are dangerous (“Sex in a Bottle” 101). The “condensed drops of mercurial water” do have the potential for salvific effect. But for our speaker the limbeck is “foul,” (2) and no good can come from any distillation within. Is it any wonder that by the end of the sonnet we find the speaker teetering on the verge of insanity? He has been drinking the distillation of the youth’s equivocating poison.
Consequently, what should have been a transformation of the young man is now a harmful alteration of the poet. His eyes have been opened and he is now aware that his love for the young man is toxic. Reflecting on the loss of his sanity, his health, and his time, the speaker marshals the prepatent essence of the alchemic metaphors: “O benefit of ill, now I find true / That better is by evil still made better” (9-10). Once again we return to still, and here the speaker is forced to acknowledge that his own body has become the still of the youth’s poisonous rejection. Still also echoes the limbeck of line two, with the references to fever and heat invoking the heat of the alchemical laboratory.

The entire sequence to the young man ends with the figure of Time in sonnet 126. This sonnet is the last warning to the young man to procreate. Ironically, it is the figure of Time that finally exposes the true nature of the young man (although the speaker refuses to accept it). The speaker begins by suggesting that the youth has Time in his hands. Yet if we follow the sonnet to its conclusion we can see that such an assertion is patently false; perhaps the speaker’s initial statement is borne out of his emotional volatility. The first four lines fully develop the speaker’s unrequited longing: “O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy pow’r / Dost hold Time’s fickle glass, his sickle, hour; / Who hast by waning grown, and therein show’st / Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow’st—” (1-4). Let us pause for a moment to examine the above images. The speaker claims that the youth has time on his side or literally he is holding time in his hands. But if we look at Time we can see that Time itself has the mastery. Time is still present with all his attendant machinery. Devices such as his “fickle glass,” his “sickle,” and his “hour” pervade the next two lines with their power. Because the young man lovers’ “wither” while he merely “grow’st” it may appear that the young man will escape Time. Not so. He still “grow’st.”

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86 It is interesting that while fever is symptomatic of a throbbing desire, it is also the indicia of the diseased fulfilment of that desire both in sonnets 119 and 147. Recall the first three lines of sonnet 147, “My love is a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease, / Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill” (1-3).
is movement on the young man’s part and as he “grow’st” he deteriorates. Moreover, we should know better than to trust Time as the poet himself tells us that Time is fickle. The changing nature of Time is matched only by the mercurial characteristics of the youth and the “dark lady.” We can safely conclude that Time in sonnet 126 serves to highlight the speaker’s mood swings and the young man’s progress toward decay.

Although space does not allow me to comment on the sonnets to the dark lady, I would like to conclude this chapter by looking at sonnet 154 which is the final sonnet in the entire sequence. The final image of the poet is that of a diseased man, racked by the effects of syphilis, and so he attempts to “Grow[ ] a bath and healthful remedy / For men diseased;” (11-12). The supposed cure at the time was various administrations of mercury, and the bath is one form of the cure that we see the speaker partaking of in sonnet 154. He is a “thrall” to his current mistress, and so he seeks “a cure” for his mental enslavement and physical ruin (12-13). Mercury may have been the received cure, but this bath is primarily alchemical. All of the alchemical imagery up to this point has been those of a sexual nature. It is only fitting then that the speaker is himself substantiated in the final alchemical metaphor of the sequence. He has now become the “object upon which it gazeth” and he discovers himself in a double-limbeck: the limbeck of the alchemical bath, and the limbeck of his verse. Nonetheless, this limbeck offers no cure. In fact, it only offers a cruel insight for the speaker: “Love’s fire heats water; water cools not love” (14). If the poet had hoped to transform either the young man or his mistress, his work has been for naught.

The epistemological but painful gain provided by the poet’s alchemical attempts reflects the woe of many actual alchemists: the alchemical experiment was often long, costly, and fraught

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87 In an upcoming article titled “The Nigredo Stage: Race, Sexuality and Alchemy in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” I discuss at length, the racialized metaphors used to describe the nigredo stage and the corresponding references to the dark lady or the speaker’s mistress.
with danger and missteps. Therefore, what many alchemists gained at the end of their experiments was only the knowledge of how to fail. They were not triumphant in attaining either the gold or the healing elixir that was so highly sought after. Yet their discourse and their failure provide us with unique ways to examine early modern concepts of sexuality. Sanctioned sexuality was marital heterosexuality, and according to Traub, erotic “penetration of others” was the barometer of a sexual act (“Sex Without Issue” 433). Shakespeare tries but fails to circumvent these dictates when he attempts to metaphorically “penetrate” the young man in the limbeck of his sonnets, or perhaps his verse, or even his “will.”

Nevertheless, the erotic aesthetic of the sonnets implicitly argues against the latent if not discriminatory sentiment of the period: “True” alchemy is heterosexual, penetrative sex, and “false” alchemy is any sexual activity which falls outside of those authorized grounds. As a result, Shakespeare’s inability to distill or sexually procreate with the young man is the boon that allows us to safely participate in the alchemic experiment again and again and again.

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88 Shakespeare uses “will,” a common metaphor for penis several times throughout the sequence. For a philological deconstruction of the sexual variations of will see Kathryn Schwarz’s “Will in Overplus: Recasting Misogyny in Shakespeare’s ‘Sonets.’”

89 I draw this conclusion based on the overwhelming metaphors of marriage, sexual union and resultant offspring so prevalent in alchemical discourses and literature. I also recall Traub’s definition of sodomy as any sexual behavior that cannot be sanctioned within the confines of a heterosexual and reproductive paradigm.
CHAPTER FIVE

“THUS HATH MY PENNE PRESUM’D TO PLEASE MY FRIEND”: ALCHEMY AND THE SENSUOUS PRODUCTION OF LABOR IN THOMAS CAREW’S “A RAPTURE” AND THOMAS NASHE’S “THE CHOISE OF VALENTINES.”

Both Thomas Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines” and Thomas Carew’s “A Rapture” share the distinction of being famous for their sexual notoriety. Interestingly, both poets share the distinction of having quarrels with their patrons, and this is especially true in the case of Nashe courting controversy. And both Nashe’s “Choise of Valentines” and Carew’s “A Rapture” have engendered interesting scholarship that discusses the poets’ treatment of sex and seduction. For example, in reference to “A Rapture” Renee Hannaford finds that “the poem’s twin contexts of sexual play and sociability in its deployment of political language suggests a concern for social disorder that moves beyond a witty display of sexual politics”(34). Going a bit further, Laura Alexander Linker interprets the poem as “one that presents sexually assertive libertine women who not only participate in a decidedly masculine tradition of libertine behavior, 

90 Stephen S. Hilliard states that after the attacks on Nashe by Gabriel Harvey “The popularity of Pierce Penniless had turned to notoriety; it and his other works were searched for topical allusions and condemned as arrogant”(6). Hilliard also claims that although “Valentines” circulated only in manuscript it “tainted” Nashe’s “reputation” nonetheless (6). Unfortunately, Nashe “never again received regular patronage or achieved a popular success” (Hilliard 6). After 1594 “his publication career was in decline (Hilliard 6). Carew seems to have suffered a similar fate of disgrace. Having quarreled with his father over Carew’s mishandling of his powerful patrons Lord and Lady Carleton and Sir Dudley, Carew was according to Anthony Low “cut off permanently from his own extended family”(97). Low believes that the “evidence suggests a complete break between Carew and his family. The result of his slip was to drop him clear out of the patronage network” (Low 97).

91 Raymond-Jean Frontain reads “A Rapture” as an “attempt to enact an erotic spirituality” (53) with the biblical Songs of Solomon “providing Carew with the model for how divisiveness [could] be transcended (57). Moving to the more overtly explicit, M.L. Stapleton reads “Choise of Valentines” as an instance of pornography rescued from mere venality by its comedic elements and imitation of earlier authors such as Ovid, Chaucer and Spenser (35). On the other hand, Ian Frederick Moulton finds in “The Choise of Valentines” “sites of particularly naked social negotiation, addressing issues of gender identity, moral corruption and sexual power” (61).
beliefs, and values, but challenge even undermine, the misogynistic expectations attached to this culture” (1). Linker also maintains that the poem “engages new literary and social conventions [. . .] reconfigured from earlier literary models” (1). In a similar vein, although we will now shift to “The Choise of Valentines,” Danielle Clarke rightly maintains that “‘The Choice of Valentines’ is a difficult text to categorize, not only because of its tangential relationship to a canon of less explicitly sexual poetry, but because Nashe’s poem itself refuses to align neatly with any clear-cut strand of convention” (110). Taking a different approach, Valerie Traub finds that, “. . . Nashe’s verse conveys, albeit comically, a cautionary tale to men, while also assuaging male anxiety about erotic performance by displacing any blame for male inadequacy onto the frivolous woman who would make use of such ‘unantural’ devices (Renaissance of Lesbianism 97). All these readings of Nashe and Carew are fruitful. Nevertheless, I would like to extend our understanding of these poems by suggesting that we consider the alchemical gestures in the poems. These alchemical moments facilitate the poems’ language of seduction and by extension, labor. Alchemical discourse by virtue of its discipline is secretive. And Charles Nicholl confirms the obfuscation that is preeminent in alchemical discourse: “There is in all this an element of code, the ‘cloudie voyce’ as a veil against the impure and unitiated” (91). However, as Nicholl’s rightly notes, there were numerous elements of expressive storytelling contained in alchemical disquisitions: “. . . there is also a tremendous quality of drama, an envisaging of chemical action as a series of internecine struggles, predatory feedings, phantasmagoric copulations, deaths, entombments and rebirths. All these took place within a vessel which could become a castle, a bed, a garden, an oven, or a grave according to the chemical events within it” (91). It is my contention that both Carew and Nashe exploit the dramatic elements of alchemic composition while relying on its obscure aesthetics to circumscribe their intended male audience as a
privileged coterie.\(^{92}\) Therefore, I situate my own reading of the poems within an alchemical scheme. I believe that the alchemical allusions that are present provide a context or framework for understanding the eroticism of the poems. As such, I read the poets as figurative alchemists attempting to transform poetic seduction and sex into labor and value.

On the surface the opening lines of “A Rapture” promises mutual sexual enjoyment for the speaker and his addressee, “I will enjoy thee now my Celia, come” (1-2).\(^{93}\) But a closer reading reveals the self-reflexive imperative which governs the poem, “I will enjoy thee now” (1). Celia’s admonition to “come” seems belated, occurring at the end of the first line. The speaker wishes to take Celia to “Love’s Elysium” (1), a locus amoenus. No doubt “come” is over-determined. But its precarious placement at the end of the line hints at the precarious sexual subject-position of the poem’s addressee, Celia.\(^{94}\)

The opening lines of “The Choise of Valentines” also perform a similar yet different type of foreshadowing. In the dedicatory preamble or prologue, the speaker begs the gods of poetry to “pardon” him for presenting them with a “wanton elegie,” an “elegie” of such “loose unchastitie” that it eventually stands in for his addressee, Francis.\(^{95}\) Francis’ subject-position in

\(^{92}\) I insist on reading Carew’s and Nashe’s poem within the context of a male prerogative. In reference to Nashe’s “Choise of Valentines,” M.L. Stapleton emphatically declares that, “Like almost all pornography, the poem is written for men, to be enjoyed by men” (34). Ian Frederick Moulton also avers that Nashe’s poem is intended for a male audience: “. . . it places Tomalin’s shame before an audience of (male) peers. By thus making public Tomalin’s private weaknesses, the specter of male inadequacy can safely be exorcised. . .” (67).

\(^{93}\) Carew has a later poem called “The Second Rapture.” The poem is cited in The Poems of Thomas Carew (1957) edited and introduced by Rhodes Dunlap.

\(^{94}\) Celia is a conventional name used by many Renaissance poets. In several of his poems, Carew also uses “Celia” to denote his addressee.

\(^{95}\) Nashe’s poem is indeed wanton and it has prompted scholars such as Robert P. Merrix to read the poem as an instance of pornography: “While The Choice of Valentines, with the curvacious Mistress Francis (an Elizabethan Marilyn Chambers) is far better than most contemporary examples of pornography, it is still hard-core. Far more popular for the Elizabethan was the soft-core pornography, using the more subtle expressions of sexuality such as metaphor, hyperbole---even fantasy” (5). Merrix’s argument is compelling, but I am not convinced. The poem does not quiver with the voyeurism or role-play so replete in Spenser. Furthermore, I am not so sure that Elizabethans made a distinction between hard and soft-core pornography.
the poem is also precarious yet different from that of Celia. As we shall eventually see, Francis’ subject position is the inverse of Celia’s but Francis is nonetheless vulnerable. The rest of this chapter will engage these differences and the link the poems to labor, sexuality and alchemy. I do not mean to abandon my earlier promise to map the alchemical moments that highlight the poems’ eroticism, but first I do want to illuminate how the poems’ eroticism is predicated upon the sexual vulnerability of the addressees.

To begin, I situate my reading of “A Rapture” and “The Choise of Valentines” within the discourse of labor and value. I use the definition of labor as the actual activity or effort of producing goods and services. I have kept my definition basic because I am cognizant of the complications that arise when trying to precisely historicize the term “labor” in early modern England. Michelle Dowd illuminates this difficulty and suggests we alter our focus from discussions of consumption to considerations of production (“Shakespeare and Work” 186). Consequently, this chapter explicitly endeavors to analyze Carew’s and Nashe’s “work” within the framework of production. So then we must inquire what good and or service is being produced and for whom? To answer this we must return to the poems. In “A Rapture” the speaker convinces Celia to “enfranchise” his hand thereby giving him access to her body. She must do away with any covering:

No curtain there, though of transparent lawn,

Shall be before thy virgin treasure drawn,

96 Situating the nebulous nature of the term “labor” Dowd declares, “A belief that labor is not only mutable but fundamentally historical (rather than unchanging or universally transparent) characterizes recent studies in the field, which build on the methodological frameworks supplied by Marxism, feminism, theater history, ethical studies, and post-colonialism, to name but a few of the most prominent. This scholarship shifts focus from the analysis of consumption, which has long dominated economic and materialist criticism in Shakespeare studies, to production. In doing so, it turns needed attention to the working men and women who labored to produce the material goods that were increasingly becoming part of the daily life in early modern England and on the Shakespearean stage” (186). Part of my thesis is that Carew and Nashe produce pleasure for their male readers.
But the rich mine to the enquiring eye
Exposed, shall ready still for mintage lie,
And we will coin young Cupids. (31-35)

The language of currency that describes their first encounter is no accident and is apt for the speaker’s purpose. So let us pause for a moment to examine it in some detail. “Curtain” in line 31 evokes a would-be sense of privacy. Nevertheless, the speaker dispenses with this privacy. But “curtain” also conjures up the specter of the reader as a voyeur prying into the intimate moments shared by the speaker and Celia. It is rather odd that at the moment of his mistress’ naked vulnerability he invokes the presence of the reader. Earlier he had promised Celia privacy from society or in his terms “honor” or the “monster’s head” (3, 23). But now before her “virgin treasure drawn / the rich mine to the enquiring eye exposed, / shall ready still for mintage lie” (32-33). The link between alchemy and mining is not overtly established in the poem, but as Tara E. Nummedal demonstrates, there was a strong link between mining and alchemy in the late sixteenth century. She states, “A number of central European princes saw even more potential in practical alchemy and understood it as a solution to the financial and mining crises afflicting their territories in the second half of the sixteenth century” (210). Nummedal affirms that several European princes held an “interest” in mining operations, and employed practical alchemists to ensure and shore up their profits (210). And “for these princes, practical alchemy was intimately related to the pursuits of profits through mining” (Nummedal 210). Considering the close affiliation that alchemy had with mining, it is no wonder that Carew employs the metaphor of mining to strengthen his image of Celia as piece of land or property that can only be accessed with the right knowledge or mining proficiency. Indeed, Nummedal asserts that, “Alchemical expertise, particularly that of Scheidekunst, or smelting, could be extremely useful in mines.
where difficulties in extracting precious metals from ore had caused a decline in productivity” (210, emphasis Nummedal’s). This somatopian viewpoint of Celia’s body as a mine in need of plundering can only be fully realized within an alchemical context. In fact, in many alchemical discourses, mining is inextricably linked to alchemy. And only through the operations of the alchemical opus can one successfully excavate ores. Considering the alchemical / mining backdrop of “A Rapture,” the speaker’s use of the article “the” instead of the possessive pronoun “my” to describe his enjoyment of her beauty is resolved. This “the” in line 33 distances him from the object of his affections and invites the voyeuristic gaze of the reader. With the reader / audience present, Celia is exposed and ready for “mintage”(34). The economic discourse makes clear that their lovemaking is not in fact private but rather the state’s business. At the transaction’s end they have to “coin” or produce “young Cupids” (35).

So let us go back to our earlier question. What service or good is being produced and for whom? The answer to this is multi-layered. I venture that the service being produced is visual and erotic pleasure for the presumably male reader. In addition to visual pleasure for the reader the service being produced is insight into women’s sexual pleasure and offspring for society.

97 I have borrowed the term somotopian / somatopia from Darby Lewes. Lewes coins the term in his article, “Utopian Sexual Landscapes: An Annotated Checklist of British Somatopias” (167). He defines a somatopia as “a pornographic text which presents women’s bodies (or more accurately, a generalized female body) as a site of male pleasure: a utopian sexual landscape” (167). He goes on to explain that “Like virtually every term that has anything to do with utopian study, it is slightly ambiguous: technically, a ‘body-place’ could be either a place composed of a body, or designed for a body (as in providing bodily pleasure). In this case, however, the term works both ways, since the places are at once composed of bodies (female) and designed for bodily pleasure (male)” (167 emphasis Lewes). Lewes delineates six categories of somatopias: “agricultural, aristocratic, historic, imperial, architectural and synechdochic” (167). Although I use Lewes’ term I am not implying that Carew’s or Nashe’s poems are pornographic.

98 I refer to a portion of Alexander Lauterwald’s poem Colloquium Philosophicum cited in Nummedal’s article. In the Colloquium Philosophicum, Lauterwald personifies alchemy as the maternal / natural personage of Chimia; in addition, Chimia is capable of making all distillations and mining processes possible. In her review of the challenges faced by miners and their oft times recourse to alchemy, Nummedal exhorts us to, “Recall Chimia’s claim in Lauterwald’s text: ‘The minerals must choose me as well / When they want to separate themselves from others” (Nummedal 210).
This visual service opens up women’s bodies and reveals their sexual desires. Furthermore, the labyrinthine nature of the poem and by extension Celia’s body reinforces the laborious connotations of sex with women. Thus we have cause for my initial reading of the poet as an alchemist revealing the secrets of women.

“Celia” to be sure is a conventional stand-in for the typical, unattainable Petrarchan mistress much as “Laura” is. Nonetheless, the name heralds the status of the poem’s addressee. We can infer that Celia is middle to upper-class and most importantly, virginal. Indeed, the extent to which Carew’s speaker has to go in order to ensure the success of his venture highlights Celia’s class position. What I mean is that he has to take her outside of their normal environment. Seducing a mistress in a locus amoenus is a convention too, but the convention is useful in marking the subject position of women. Not surprisingly, Celia herself is transformed into a locus amoenus or an idealized somatopia. Nonetheless, this transformation foregrounds her vulnerability, highlighting the fluid yet dangerous sexual class positions of women. Celia is transformed into a somatopia in lines 64-78 of the poem. In these lines, her breasts are changed into various delicacies found in gardens which include, “cherries,” “apples” and “berries.” And her vagina becomes a “grove of eglantine” (74). These descriptions are innocuous in and of themselves. But what we should observe is that at this point in the text, the speaker is himself transformed into an alchemist, “Where [he] will all those ravished sweets distill / Through love’s alembic, and with chemic skill / From the mixed mass one sovereign balm derive / Then bring that great elixir to [her] (75-78). Again, his transformation into an alchemist is not troublesome. But taken together with the fact that he immediately has Celia performing sexually explicit acts (in lines 87-89 he tells her to guide his penis into her vagina), and that he enjoins her to learn from infamous pornographers such as Aretino and Lais (115-18), I find that Carew’s speaker
converts Celia from a virgin to a prostitute within a few lines. By way of comparison, in Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines,” Francis the prostitute is the one who takes Tomalin’s penis into her hands and she is the one who guides the dildo into her vagina.99 I do not mean to imply a prudishness, but I wish to explore the implications of such a move for an early modern young woman / Celia. By using alchemy to convert Celia into a prostitute, the speaker makes Celia available to the male reader for pleasure. Nonetheless, what I want to note here is how sexual availability destabilizes the subject-position of women. Michelle Dowd informs us that “Women from nearly all ranks of society worked as servants in domestic settings, ranging from scullery maids to ladies-in-waiting.” (“Desiring Subjects” 132-33).100 Yet, as Dowd continues to explain, their position in the “hierarchy” was not always secure or safe: “. . . despite their ubiquity, female servants were not always easily absorbed into social hierarchies, largely because the nature of those hierarchies was changing as England moved toward a more widespread wage-based system of labor” (“Desiring Subjects” 133). Further in her essay Dowd details the sexual advances propagated against these women-servants and the oft-times terrible consequences that would follow if they refused their master’s propositioning. Women’s easy conversion into prostitution is also remarked on by Jean E. Howard. The menace of prostitution was growing in London. And as Howard states, “A subset of whore plays, however, make that threat a reality. They highlight the conversion of chaste women into whores, and vice-versa” (125). More


100 Commenting on popular city comedies and the shifting roles of women and the ease with which they could be associated with prostitution Jean E. Howard stipulates that “In Northward Ho, any house might be a covert whorehouse, a place where loose women perform versions of respectable femininity in order to conduct their trade. In such a world the place of prostitution is potentially everywhere. This fantasy occurs repeatedly in popular pamphlets and city comedies. It emerged in tandem with specific changes in the city in the later sixteenth-century that facilitated the spread of prostitution and fostered fears that ordinary women might become involved ”(122).
importantly, Howard points out that, “In these plays, narratives in which a possible fall is averted
give way to the uneasy thrill of watching a seeming absolute alteration in a woman’s sexual
status. Either a chaste woman gives in to a life of debauchery or an unchaste woman eschews
whoredom for a newly found probity” (125). This vicarious “thrill” of watching Celia turn
“whore” is what Carew’s speaker produces for the male reader. 101 Nevertheless, the endeavor
fails and thus we see the aesthetic failure of the poem, which I will discuss in more detail in the
conclusion.

Nashe’s “The Choise of Valentines” is also predicated on producing pleasure for the male reader. At the end of his encounter with Francis, Tomalin secures the reader’s tacit acceptance
by declaring, “Thus hath my penne presum’d to please my friend, . . / Forgive me if I speake I
was taught, / A lyke to women, utter all I knowe, / As longing to unlade so bad a fraught”
(Epilogue 1, 6-8). 102 As we see from Tomalin’s tongue-in-cheek apology to “Ovids wanton
Muse” (4), Tomalin’s aim is to reveal all that he knows about women. This allusion to Ovid and
nature of the encounter in the poem clarifies that this knowledge is sexual. So we should be
careful to take Tomalin at his word. Like Carew’s speaker, Nashe’s speaker goes into great

101 In his essay, “Carew’s A Rapture: A Paradoxical Encomium on Erotic Love,” Noel Blincoe suggests that “The
use of the word ‘whores,’ rhyming with ‘adores,’ as the very last word in “A Rapture” has the effect for the reader
of inverting the poem from being an encomium on an erotic love that is wild and free into a satire against a love with
no limits. The lover has been deriding honor and chastity in grotesque images throughout the poem, but, in the final
couplet, we find that he confesses to Celia that the world adores honor, and also suggest by his use of the word
‘Whores’ that he in fact believes that women without honor are bad (229-30). Noel Blincoe, John Donne Journal

102 In Renaissance literature, pen and penis are often deliberately conflated. This syntactical slippage is part of the
groundwork of my thesis for this chapter. The conflation of pen and penis underscores the self-reflexive nature of
Carew’s poem. Moreover, it also underscores that the poem is addressed to a male coterie. Bruce Thomas Boehrer
also recognizes the self-reflexive nature of Nashe’s poem, and categorizes the poem as participating in and mocking
a specific literary tradition of sexual anxiety because the poem “collocates the processes of coition and composition,
and it illustrates the degree to which both may be seen as anxiety-provoking, given a model of sexual and literary
behavior that equates authority to self-assertion” (173). He also states that “what Nashe inscribes as the central
gesture of his poem— is in fact not act at all: the penis’s (and the pen’s) passivity” (173). Although Boehrer astutely
notes the codification between Nashe’s pen and his penis, I disagree that Nashe’s pen is passive. On the contrary, it
is precisely his pen that so ably reproduces the spectacle of female pleasure that Nashe must deliver to his male
audience / coterie.
detail about Francis’ body and her sexual pleasure. In fact, throughout the poem, the images of sex are closely tied to images of labor. Early in the poem Francis is compared to a “hackneis” or horse “let out to hire” (26). The language of economy further dominates as he and the madame haggle over Francis’ price (60-74). To illustrate my point I shall quote the encounter in some detail. The madame begins the conversation:

As yow desire, so shall yow swive with hir,
But think your purse-strings shall abyde-it deare;
For, he that will eat quaile’s must lavish crown’s;
And mistris Francis in her velvet gonne’s,
And ruffs, and periwigs as fresh as Maye
Can not be kept with half a crown a daye.
Of price good hostess, we will not debate,
Though yow assize me at the highest rate;
Onelie conduct me to this bonnie bell,
And tenne good gobs I will unto thee tell
Of golde or silver, which shall lyke thee best,
So much doe I hir companie request.
Awaie she went: So sweete a thing is golde,

Contrary to this coarse language of sexual bartering the poem begins with the language of courtship. In fact, the poem is juxtaposed by two sonnets. Sonnets were a generic convention typically associated with love poetry. Moreover, Tomalin has to search for Francis. We are told that she was “compell’d for Sanctuarie / To flye unto a house of venerie” (23-24). Clearly, prostitution was not Francis’ first choice. How then can we account for her shift into such a state? Howard surmises that unemployment for women and overpopulation in London led to the proliferation of bawdy houses. Howard states, “London’s population doubled between 1550 and 1600; migration from the provinces exploded, and many of the migrants were women. In straitened times—many of these women lost or never found positions in service. They drifted out of legitimate employment, in and out of thieving and prostitution. They had neither a ‘fixed’ social identity nor a fixed and certain line of work, especially since they were excluded from most forms of labor in the guilds. Clients were plentiful. London had a ratio of 113 men to 100 women” (122).
That (mauger) will invade the strongest holde. (60-74)

Initially, Tomalin states that he will not “debate” or argue regarding Francis’ price. Yet his desire for Francis holds sway and he finally concedes. Furthermore, he has to surrender at the highest price. And he must procure for the madame gold or silver.\footnote{In his essay, “‘The Common Market of All the World’: English Theater, The Global System, and the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern Period,” Daniel Vitkus notes the shift from the material currency of gold and silver to the more abstract terms of a developing capitalist global market: “It is true that England’s ambitious new economic efforts retained a feudal conception of imperial aspiration and an ancient lust for gold and silver, as time went on, however, the English upper classes supplemented these older motives for expansion with an emerging understanding of new economic structures and methods---those of emergent capitalism” (23).}

We should note here that in alchemical discourse gold or silver metals held the key to unlocking any barred place whether literal or metaphorical.\footnote{In “A Second Rapture” too gold is invoked just before Celia is completely disrobed (28-29). Gold is also conjured by John Donne who is known for his alchemical conceits. In “The Comparison” Elegy 8, Donne also represents gold as the key to unlocking women’s vagina: “Then like the Chymicks masculine equall fire, / Which in the Lymbecks warm wombe doth inspire / Into th’earths worthlesse durt a soule of gold, / Such cherishing heat her best lov’d part doth hold (35-38).}

The economic discourse of his encounter with the brothel’s madame later evolves into labor when Tomalin describes his sexual encounter with Francis. Readers familiar with seventeenth-century erotic verse may not be surprised to discover that Tomalin’s penis is described as performing labor.\footnote{In his survey of Renaissance ideas about orgasm, Paul Hartle uses an example from John Suckling to summarize the Renaissance notion of sex as labor: “The woman’s body is a tilth whose fruiting entails labor for both man and woman, his the killing drudgery of orgasm, hers the frequent fatality of childbirth” (85).} When he is finally blessed to have sex with Francis he finds himself embarrassed as his penis “wilt not stand” (131). I use “blessed” deliberately as the poem continuously conflates the sacred and the profane. Tomalin casts himself as a “poore pilgrim” visiting his “ladies shrine” (17). And he describes the money for the approaching financial transaction as an “offertorie”(39). Sensing the loss of her pleasure Francis offers to “. . . rubb and chafe it with [her] hand. / Perhaps [because] the sillie worme is labour’d sore, / And wearied that it can doe no more” (132-34). Tomalin is utterly embarrassed at his perceived
inadequacy and wishes “tenne thousand times, that [he] were dead” (136). Yet there is something to Francis’ diagnosis and cure:

Which saide, she tooke and rould it in hir thigh,
And when she look’t on’t, she would weepe and sighe,
And dandled it, and dance’t it up and doune,
Not ceasing, till she rais’d it from his swoune.
And then he flue on hir as he were wood,
And on hir breeche did thack, and foyne a-good;
He rubd’, and prickt, and pierst hir to the bones,
Digging as farre as eath he might for stones. (139-46)

What is striking about Tomalin’s or his penis’ recovery is how that recovery feminizes both Francis’ labor and Tomalin’s penis. In this episode, both Francis and Tomalin are performing labor, but while working she “weepes,” “sighes,” “dandle[s],” and “dance[s] it up and doune” (140-41). The verbs used to describe her labor are virtues or pastimes associated with women or the feminine. But just as noteworthy is that his penis is “rais’d from his swoune” (142). Why is his penis feminized by the verb “swoune”? I believe that although the encounter here highlights their near equality- they both labor to “availe his recoverie” (138), the true laborer is the dildo. “Swoon” equalizes Tomalin with Francis and their labor acts as a foil for the higher and more able labor of the dildo. Thus the work that Francis and Tomalin perform is hierarchized as lesser. But why? Why is the dildo whom Tomalin berates by calling it “Curse Eunuke dilldo, senseless, counterfet, / Who sooth maie fill, but never can beget,” the superior laborer? The answer to this question requires a brief return to alchemical theory and then a visit to early modern ideas of interest and usury. In a similar manner, David Hawkes recognizes a link between alchemy and
finance. He maintains that, “alchemy paradoxically provided a discursive field in which, during our period, the concept of autonomous financial value was able to take root and flower” (151).

Let us proceed by returning for a moment to lines 145 and 146. At this point in the poem Tomalin is doing his best to restore his manhood, so much so that he compares his exertions to digging for stones: “He rubd’, and prickt, and pierst hir to the bones, / Digging as farre as eath he might for stones”(145-46). I would venture here that the search for stones which will pierce Francis to the bones is akin both to the mining metaphors that we encountered earlier in Carew, as well as to the alchemical search for the philosopher’s stone. In terms of the connection between mining and alchemy, again we return to Nummedal:

Above all, these practioners and patrons viewed alchemy as a means to generate profits, whether through sales of books, recipes, processes, or the application of those processes to large-scale mining enterprises. This was a primarily utilitarian use of alchemy, aimed ultimately less at the production of broad hypotheses about the natural order than at understanding how to manipulate nature in order to make it more prolific. (211)

Tomalin’s efforts to please Francis is laborious and reflects Nummedal’s contention that practical alchemy was more about achieving profits than gaining an understanding of nature. In fact, as we will later see, Francis admonishes Tomalin that she would rather have intercourse with the dildo than with Tomalin because the dildo will not make her pregnant, that is, profitable.

The search for the philosopher’s stone is also encoded in the act of the couple’s lovemaking. The discourse of searching for and finding the ever-elusive philosopher’s stone is also a discourse of discovering taboo and hidden secrets and most importantly the secret to immortality. My assertion here then is that Tomalin is trying to unlock the secret to Francis’
pleasure. Robert P. Merrix sees a similar operation in Nashe’s poetics. Merrix informs us that “Nashe admits that he wishes to broaden the scope of poetry by ‘painting forth things that hidden are’” (4). Nashe has some measure of success but not as complete as the dildo. Let us now compare how the language of laboring for stones is deployed when the dildo is the one that gives Francis pleasure rather than Tomalin. Tomalin grudgingly describes the dildo as one who can decipher any unknown path, enter through any locked gate or defeat any stones: “And often alters pace, as wayes grow deepe; / (For who in pathe’s unknown, one gate can keepe?) / Sometimes he smoothlie slideth downe the hill; / Another while the stones his feete doe kill)” (279-82). This new sexual rhythm is in contrast to the earlier one between the couple.

Tomalin eager to please moves too quickly and thus he is invited by Francis to slow down and be “consumed with one blandishment” (186). Relenting, he tells us, “As she prescrib’d, so kept we crochet-time / And every stroake in ordre lyke a chyme” (187-88). Valerie Traub points out that “crochet-time” is the ideal pace to ensure conception (Renaissance of Lesbianism 95). It is not clear whether Francis desires to be impregnated or if it is just a fantasy of Tomalin’s. What is clear is that Tomalin’s penis fails him and he is replaced by the dildo. Therefore, the poem moves from conception as the justification for pleasure to pleasure for pleasure’s sake. And what is troubling is that Francis controls the pleasure that she receives whether it is derived from Tomalin or the dildo. Elizabeth Foyster explains, “...in the seventeenth-century the key to

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108 It is fascinating that the language of “travail” used here to describe the labors of the dildo echoes the language used by Elizabeth I as she explains her reasons for granting the monopoly of the Levant Company allowing them to trade unencumbered in the “territories of the Grand Signoir of Turkey” (Kaplan 192). Part of the letter states, those who “have travailed, and caused travail to be taken, as well as by secret and good means, as by dangerous ways and passages both by land and sea, to find out and set upon a trade of merchandise and traffic into the lands, islands, dominions, and territories of the great Turk” (Kaplan 228).
male power in the household was thought to be sexual control of women as well as the self” (4). Thus the male pressure to perform sexually was also tied to the social imperatives of reproduction: “For conception to occur, one male medical theory held that both men and women had to produce ‘seed.’ According to this theory, unless a husband could help his wife to orgasm and so release her seed, she would not become pregnant” (Foyster 70). Clearly, manhood was inextricably linked to sexual performance. But despite the patriarchal bent regarding the legitimization of female pleasure, Francis is in charge of the pleasure that she gives and receives. Therefore, the poem challenges reproductive and theological imperatives that seek to inscribe the pleasure-then-conception destiny on women. Ultimately, the poem defies discourses that attempt to limit women to their sexual and procreative functions.

With the dildo Francis’ pleasure is complete. Earlier with Tomalin at the helm the speaker proposes that of Francis’ pleasure “No tongue maie tell the solace that she feels” (202). Now, with the dildo as the architect of her jouissance we are informed that Francis “. . . canst not thow thy tatling tongue refraine?”(290). The dildo then is the superior laborer because it never fails at either giving women pleasure or revealing the secrets of their pleasure. But how can we reconcile such a reading with the early modern imperative of producing offspring? Francis might be happy that it will “never make [her] tender bellie swell” (246), but Tomalin (as we saw earlier) sees the dildo as only a “senseless, counterfet,” who “never can beget” (263-64). Recall that we saw this reproductive imperative in Carew as he urged his beloved to “coin young Cupids” (35). Even in Donne’s speaker’s scintillating seduction of his mistress in elegy 19 (“To his mistress going to bed”), the idea of labor as conception hovers in the background of what is otherwise masterful foreplay. Although Tomalin categorizes the dildo as a “counterfeit” it produces real pleasure and a real service to Francis. Indeed, “it bendeth not, nor fouleth anie
deale" (241) as opposed to Tomalin who “Nature of winter learneth nigardize” (227). The editors correlate “nigardize” with parsimony or meanness. Therefore, it is the dildo and not Tomalin who is the real laborer. The dildo produces no offspring, but it does produce a sign of women’s pleasure. After the woman’s or Francis’ orgasm it is “bedasht, bespurted, and beplodded foule” (287). It is interesting that in a fit of frustration Tomalin resorts to “foule.” In any event, the dildo is a usurper or usurer because it does not rely on male labor or the potential for pregnancy to confirm women’s pleasure. The dildo is self-referential. You only have to look at it for proof. In fact, Francis warns Tomalin of the dildo’s undermining and dangerous potential: “Behould how he usurps in bed and bowre, / And undermine thy kingdom everie howre. / How slye he creepe’s betwixt the barke and tree, / And sucks the sap, whilst sleepe detaineth thee” (249-52). By the end of the poem the dildo has indeed usurped Tomalin. He is completely drained in every sense of the word. He compares his labors to that of Hercules but is found wanting: “I am not as was Hercules the stout, / That to the seaventh joumie could hould out (301-02). Nonetheless, he must pay local taxes for his pleasure and he is taxed to the fullest extent. The editors gloss “I paie our hostess scott and lott at moste” (309) as (local taxes; thoroughly, in full). He is so depleted of all of his resources that he leaves “as leane and lank as anie ghoste”(310). In the caloric economy of early modern medical discourse, many medical texts warn against excessive male pleasure. Gail Kern Paster cites “The Belgian physician Levinus Lemnius [who] warns newly-wed husbands who “with unsaciable beastlynesse and frequencie of couture, thinkce to overcome and tyre their wyiues, whereas they yet remayne still vnsatisfied, and the men vtterly spent and soked” (“Unbearable Coldness” 433). Paster goes on to cite another famous adage “from Avicenna who argues that a loss of seed ‘harmeth a man more, then if hee should bleed forty times as much’” (“Unbearable Coldness” 433). The dildo
suffers no such loss or ignominy. The episode marks then the moment in early modern history when interest or usury begins to supersede the value of money.

I would like to conclude by commenting on the aesthetic failure or success of the poems. Remarking on Carew’s “A Rapture,” Frontain rightly notes that the “success or failure of the speaker’s coaxing” is never made “clear” (51). I would venture to suggest the answer and in so doing outline why “A Rapture” fails both economically and aesthetically and why “Valentines” succeeds at least aesthetically.

The sexual failure of “A Rapture” is signified by the speaker’s thwarted final lines. He grudgingly wonders “why / This goblin Honor which the world adores / Should make men atheists and not women whores” (164-66). The frustrated tone highlights the very strong possibility that apparently Celia does not surrender to his seduction. His failure to seduce Celia extends to his failure to seduce the reader. In “A Rapture,” Celia’s unresponsiveness, that is her almost non-being in the poem leave readers very unsatisfied.

Correspondingly, the image of failure that we get from “A Rapture” stems from the speaker’s inability to rightly represent the jouissance of a woman’s sexuality unencumbered by patriarchal discourses. Carew’s speaker fails because he is unable to incorporate the audience in the sexual jouissance of the female addressee. On the other hand, despite being supplanted by a dildo, “Valentines” succeeds in its efforts to represent the sexual pleasures of women. Furthermore, the dildo, although a troubling sign of economic change, remains uncoopted by patriarchy. Thus, it will never be part of a system that can fully control women’s sexuality or pleasure. In fact, the presence of a rival, albeit artificial lover, and the sexually responsiveness of Tomalin’s paramour allows the reader to voyeuristically enter their tryst. As part of John Suckling’s poetic success, Paul Hartle surmises that: “Suckling represents women as ‘Romances
read’ (20), where textual foreplay is far more profitable than reaching ‘Finis’”(85). Finally we see that Carew’s failure and Nashe’s success are juxtaposed by the act of reading, or specifically, in their case, the act of representation. Carew fails to read or represent women’s pleasure because he has been circumscribed by societal constraints. His lines of lovemaking are explicit but they are nonetheless hemmed in by social taboos. Notwithstanding, Nashe’s speaker fully exposes himself without fear of social censure or derision. His vulnerability and openness grants us full access to Francis’ inner chamber. Representation in Nashe becomes an act of sacrifice while for Carew no such poetic loss is felt. I argued earlier that the dildo was the true laborer. However, Nashe’s unlocking of the veil renders him the true alchemist.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

My dissertation has sought to demonstrate how and why alchemical metaphors were used by early modern poets to sustain their particular engagement with numerous discourses that governed sexuality. These discourses included religion, medicine, and science. Ian Frederick Moulton contends, “The early modern period was a time in which gender roles, family structure, and notions of masculinity were undergoing significant changes, and erotic writing was one of the arenas in which such changes were negotiated and contested” (*Before Pornography* 28). Drawing on Moulton’s assertion and Elizabeth A. Foyster’s work where she demonstrates that manhood and femininity were social and cultural constructions, I have argued that the poems under study negotiate and participate in economies of control and discipline of the human body via their direct and oblique references to alchemical symbolism, metaphor and sexuality. Moulton affirms, “In England, erotic writing played a crucial role in the construction both of gender identity and of authorial power” (*Before Pornography* 28). Ultimately, the poems reveal the ruptures or conflicts between expected patriarchal notions of feminine and masculine behavior and the material reality of people’s lives. By using alchemy as a discursive matrix for the poetry, I have sought to lobby for an understanding of early modern sexuality, though not exactly like our own, but as one that situates that sexuality within the “self” and not as transgressive otherness.

The relative ease with which the poets absorbed alchemy into their poetic canon is explained by Philip Ball: “A belief in magic existed within all social strata” (82). This belief in magic helped to popularize alchemy, and although the church frowned on the practice of
alchemy, in their daily lives many people depended on alchemical potions as sundry cures for
diseases, for help with attracting the attentions of a potential suitor, for aid in childbirth, and
oftentimes for help with various cooking and baking recipes. Christopher Hill declares, tongue-
in-cheek that “If an Elizabethan wanted gold, he could raid the Spanish Main, or he could
practise alchemy: Sir Walter Ralegh tried the one, John Dee the other: Sir William Cecil invested
in both” (88). The poetry of William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Thomas
Carew and Thomas Nashe also illustrate the extent to which alchemy was a part of the popular
culture in early modern England. Nevertheless, the work of these poets isn’t merely a nod to the
social “it” thing of the day. Their work invites us to consider alternate ways of understanding
early modern sexuality. Through their application of alchemical metaphors, we have novel
recourses to change our scholarship on early modern sexuality. Through an investigation of
Shakespeare’s sonnets, we saw that the charge of hermaphroditism was more threatening to the
social order than the libel of sodomy. The taint of sodomy could be seemingly altered with
recourses to patriarchal concepts of heterosexual procreative endeavors. In opposition,
hermaphroditism wasn’t so neatly solved due to its conception as a form of unnatural birth. On
the other hand, we find that in Spenser generic considerations may lead to the obfuscation of a
literary enterprise. Spenser’s formulation of an alchemic poetic passionate discourse elucidates
how alchemy could encourage us to reevaluate our definitions of genre and the literary works of
the English poetic canon. In a similar context, Carew and Nashe’s poetry solicits a
reinterpretation of what is considered canonical. Their poetry was just as overtly sexual as
Spenser’s and Donne’s, yet they find themselves as step-sisters in the English familial canon. I
submit that their poetic marginalization is predicated on how they incorporated or failed to
incorporate religious discourse into their poetry. They were not effluvial with poetic religious
commentary but out rightly challenged patriarchal norms. In other words, they did not “veyle”
their more explicit poetry within religious language. This failure to fuse dense religious
symbolism with their sensual poetry has made it feasible to dismiss their explorations of sex and
sexuality as already transparent and obvious; therefore lacking multivalent substance.
Nevertheless, it is my hope that our delineation of their poetic dexterity will provide a basis for
reconsidering their place in the canon.

Alchemy: One, Dual and Many

Throughout this dissertation, I have chronicled the poet’s multitudinal manifestations of
alchemical conceits. Reflecting on such a diverse practice, albeit in a medieval context, Mark J
Bruhn affirms that: “Alchemy [. . .] was as much a textual and hermeneutic discipline as a
scientific and experimental one. The literature through which the art was transmitted is
enormous, diverse in provenance, rich in ‘auctoritees,’ profoundly intertextual, elaborately
encoded to protect the ‘secret of secrets,’ the recipe for the philosopher’s stone” (292). Thus, the
same secrecy enjoined by alchemical specialists as well as amateurish followers is inherently
mediated in the poems of Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Nashe and Carew. Yet only careful
analysis of their poetry would yield such an understanding.

Correspondingly, Lee Patterson reasons that alchemical literature (again in terms of its
medieval status) “blurred textual boundaries by folding one text into another; it treated
authorship as ex post facto construction rather than a pretextual given; and, above all, it
collapsed an apparently unalloyed truth . . . into a morass of multiplicity” (47). Although
Pattersons’s thesis centers on medieval poets such as Chaucer, the writerly peculiarities that he
describes are also revealed in the Renaissance poets in this study. The poets’ utilization of alchemy helped to substantiate the process of writing as a process of making the self.

Furthermore, as we have already ascertained, alchemy’s history and practice is notoriously multifarious, and therefore, each poetic enthusiast adopted its tropes in order to suit their purposes. George Puttenham’s “The Arte of English Poesie” linked poetry with the operation of the alchemical opus, and subsequently to the poet’s inner mind, “his inward conceits be the metall of his minde” and “as his minde is tempered and qualified, so are his speeches and language” (Puttenham 1904: 154). Puttenham’s metaphor recalls the vocabulary of the alchemist painstakingly at work in his laboratory. H. J. Sheppard famously summarizes this view of alchemy in terms of labor and transformation and subsequently its direct link with the spiritual and the Divine:

Alchemy is the art of liberating parts of the Cosmos from temporal existence and achieving perfection which, for metals is gold, and for man, longevity, then immortality and, finally, redemption. Material perfection was sought through the action of a preparation (Philosopher’s Stone for metals; Elixir of Life for humans), while spiritual ennoblement resulted from some form of inner revelation or other enlightenment Gnosis, for example, in Hellenistic and western practices (16-17, quoted in Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphics*,11).\(^{109}\)

Granted, the enlightenment we gain from our poets isn’t strictly spiritual, but Sheppard’s quote speaks to the multiplicity of interpretation that the alchemical pursuit presents.

Renaissance theorists also had diverse ways of describing the poet’s efforts. Puttenham’s simile is one of many where the poet is lauded as a semi-creator, or God. In fact, in many

alchemical treatises the poets describe themselves as working in cooperation with God to bring about the transformation of man. And an extensive amount of alchemical treatises rendered the philosopher’s stone as a Christ-figure. Stanton J. Linden underscores the ubiquity of the relationship: “In literature of the seventeenth-century, [...] the association of God, Christ or their attributes with alchemists and the philosopher’s stone takes many forms and is expressed in varying degrees of directness or obliqueness” (Eschatology 104). Indeed, the poet’s challenge to an implied ecclesiastical supremacy is implicitly authorized by an innate connection to the divine. Accordingly, alchemy may be the discourse of the many, but its utilization by the poets under study in this dissertation makes clear that its multifarious attributes served one major purpose: and that is an attempt to realize in concrete form, the most immaterial of things: gender, sexuality and desire.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lisa Jennings was born in Kingston, Jamaica and emigrated to the United States during her early teens. She received her undergraduate degree in English Literature from Florida International University, and her Master’s degree in English Literature and Caribbean Literature from Florida State University. Her dissertation examines the ways in which poets such as William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Donne and Thomas Nashe appropriate alchemical metaphors to both represent and challenge early modern concepts of sexuality. Her research interests include Renaissance poetry and prose, twentieth-century Caribbean poetry and prose, gender theory and postcolonial studies.