

The Alchemical Code in Marvell's
'To His Coy Mistress'

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Amongst the most striking allusions in 'To his Coy Mistress' are those to 'the lovers and the tomb' and to the 'amorous birds of prey', both well known images of the alchemical union of man and woman, and two of the most memorable emblems in the visual representation of the alchemical process. The union of man and woman in alchemy signified the magical moment of the *coniunctio* or chemical wedding in which opposites were united to form an integrated whole (fig. 1). In treatises such as Mylius' *Philosophia reformata* (1622), which describe and represent the progress of the *opus* with a sequence of dramatic emblems, we encounter a whole series of male and female couplings and copulations. These emblems symbolized the union, at certain stages, of various substances and qualities such as sulphur and mercury, hot and cold, dry and moist, active and passive, and fixed and volatile. In his *Lexicon of Alchemy* (1612), Ruland defines the final 'union of man and wife' as the 'copulation of the congealed spirit with the dissolved body'.¹ From the chemical union of the congealed spirit with the purified body came the precious Philosopher's Stone, the third principle or divine knowledge which arose at this resolution of opposites. The Stone was poetically referred to as the 'son' or 'child' of the copulation of male and female, and was capable of converting lead into gold, and base man into the divine. But while male and female were kept apart, this crucial generation of the 'son' or Stone could not occur and so the *opus* was unable to proceed. The state of the matter in the alchemical vessel before the 'copulation' was said to be in a state of 'separation'.

It is thus appropriate that Marvell should apply the language of alchemy to the art of seduction. In 'To his Coy Mistress', the central preoccupation of the poem is with ending the state of separation and bringing about the union of male and female. The male lover begins by playfully engaging the mistress's attention with a witty verbal seduction. He urges her to unite with him



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: *Union of the lovers in the alembic Pretiosissimum Donum Dei (per) Georgium Anrach, 17th century, Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, Paris, MS 975, reproduced in Jacques van Lennep, Alchimie: Contribution à l'histoire de l'art alchimique, Brussels: Crédit Communal de Belgique, 1985, p.135.*

Figure 2: *Lovers and the tomb Johannes Mylius, Philosophia reformata, Frankfurt: Lucas Jennis, 1622, p.281. Bodleian Shelf-mark BB 33 Art.*

Figure 3: *The lovers and the tomb with Saturn Mylius, Philosophia reformata, p.243.*

Figure 4: *The lovers and the tomb The Rosary of the Philosophers (1550), ed. Adam McLean, English translation of Ferguson MS 210, Edinburgh: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1980, p.39.*

Figure 5: *The am'rous birds of prey 'The Book of Lambspring' (1599), Hermetic Museum, ed. A. E. Waite, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974, I, p.291.*

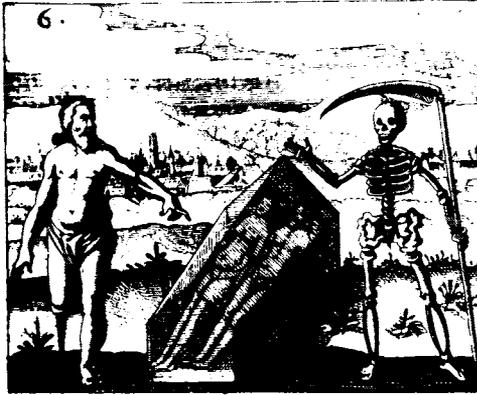


Figure 3

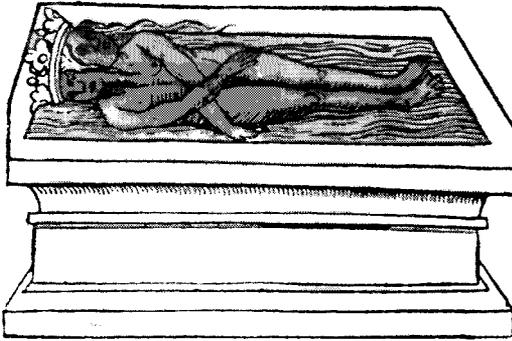


Figure 4



Figure 5

now as there is not enough time to waste in refusing and being coy. This coyness will only keep them separate:

Had we but World enough, and Time,
 This coyness Lady were no crime.
 We would sit down, and think which way
 To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.
 Thou by the *Indian Ganges* side
 Should'st Rubies find: I by the Tide
 Of *Humber* would complain.² (ll. 1-7)

A similarly lamented separation is recounted in Herrick's alchemical poem 'To the King and Queene, upon their unhappy distances' where the parted 'Man and Wife' are compared to separate streams: 'Like Streams, you are divorc'd: but 'twill come, when / These eyes of mine shall see you mix agen' (ll. 5-6).³ The image of the lovers vastly separated on the shores of the rivers Ganges and Humber in 'To his Coy Mistress' is analogous to Herrick's man and wife who are separated streams. In alchemy, the image of the two rivers or streams referred to the dual male-female nature of the mercurial waters or transforming *arcanum*. These two aspects, says the *Rosary*, have an opposite chemical action: one water congeals while the other dissolves. The 'Hermetis Trismegisti Tractatus Aureus' states that 'there are two Stones of the Wise, found in the Shores of the Rivers' which are 'Male and Female'.⁴ The *coniunctio* was sometimes described as the union of the separated waters, and Herrick's poem illustrates this with the comparison of the male and female to 'divorc'd' 'streams' which will 'mix agen' in chemical union.

Marvell's witty parody of poetic love conventions continues:

I would
 Love you ten years before the Flood:
 And you should if you please refuse
 Till the Conversion of the *Jews*.
 My vegetable Love should grow
 Vaster then Empires, and more slow. (ll. 7-12)

If there were 'World enough, and Time', he would certainly woo her over an infinitely long period extending backward into the distant past ('before the Flood'), and forward into an apocalyptic future ('the Conversion of the *Jews*').⁵ It is possible that Marvell is here playing on the meanings of 'conversion'. The

'conversion of the elements' into a state of union is a phrase commonly met with in alchemical texts, and is another way of expressing the process which the 'union of male and female' symbolizes. Margarita Stocker has argued that the sexual union in Marvell's poem is an image for the apocalyptic idea of the conversion and renovation of man by Christ. Certainly we find that in alchemy the regeneration of man is frequently seen as analogous to the purification and conversion of metals. In his sermon for Easter Monday of 1622, Donne stated: 'God can work in all metals and transmute all metals: he can make ... a Superstitious Christian a sincere Christian; a Papist, a Protestant'. Likewise, an anonymous volume of alchemical writings collected by Sir Hugh Platt (1522-1611) clearly parallels 'the conversion of a sinner' to Christianity with the conversion of base metal into gold, stating that they have like degrees of preparation and operation. This same comparison runs as a leit-motif through John Everard's Commentary (1640) on the *Emerald Table*.⁶ Marvell's lines may be interpreted in the following way: if the mistress refuses until the conversion of the Jews, the union of male and female (or 'conversion of the elements') and the consequent fulfilment and transmutation will vanish rapidly into mere hypothesis. The conversion *cannot* take place until the lovers have united.

The lover's 'vegetable Love' which would 'grow/Vaster then Empires, and more slow' also alludes to alchemical theory. The alchemists held that the world was a living organism with metals growing inside its crust like living vegetables or plants, multiplying branches within the earth. It was thought that metals were gradually generated through the action of the warmth of the sun's rays penetrating into the substances in the earth.⁷ The 'imperfect' metals such as lead, copper and tin were imagined as striving within the earth's mines to eventually become the perfect metal gold. This idea occurs in Dryden's 'Annus Mirabilis' where the miners are described as leaving the 'unripe veins' in the earth 'Till time digests the yet imperfect Ore' which 'will be Gold another day'.⁸ 'Time' is a key word. If the metals, growing organically like great vegetables in the earth, were left there long enough, they would eventually mature or 'ripen' into gold. But since the generation of metals into

gold took thousands of years to come about naturally, the alchemist aimed at hastening the process of nature 'artificially' in the laboratory. 'That which the heate of the *Sunne* doeth in a hundred yeeres in the Mines of the Earth for the generation of a *Mettall*', says Artepheus, 'our *secret fire* ... worketh in a short time'. In another place he writes:

we may afterwards in a short time, in less than *one houre* of the day, doe above ground, which Nature wrought underground in the mines of the Earth in a *thousand yeeres* which is as it were miraculous.⁹

It is clear that in attempting to hasten the extremely slow growth of nature the alchemist's task was, in part, that of conquering time. It was also a task of working 'against nature'. In the movement of the alchemic wheel 'backwards' to the source of creation to obtain the *prima materia*, the alchemist was going *against* the outward thrust of nature's growth. This work was termed the *opus contra naturam*.

The lover in 'To his Coy Mistress' is like the alchemist who wants to hasten what would normally be a lengthy process. If he were to allow events to progress in the natural way it would take thousands of years:

My vegetable Love should grow
Vaster then Empires, and more slow.
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.
Two hundred to adore each Breast:
But thirty thousand to the rest.
An age at least to every part,
And the last Age should show your Heart.
For lady you deserve this State;
Nor would I love at lower rate. (ll. 11-20)

If he fails to seize the day and accomplish in a brief time that which should 'naturally' take aeons, the lover's 'vegetable Love' would grow as slowly and as vastly as the 'plant' of metals within the earth. His most pressing desire, then, is to hasten the process and outwit time, a desire which is contrary to natural growth, 'vegetable' growth. Louis Martz has observed that, in contrast to Marvell's poem, Herrick's *carpe diem* poem

'Corinna's going a Maying' presents love as a *part* of nature, not something contrary to it: 'emphasis falls upon the beauty of the natural process, Herrick's poem is in tune with nature, but Marvell's poem is at war with nature'.¹⁰ Marvell's lover, like the alchemist, is involved in a kind of *opus contra naturam*.

In his bid to conquer time, the alchemist set up laboratory conditions in which the generation of metals could take place. This generation, which 'naturally' occurred in a process of 'vegetable' growth, was 'artificially' accomplished by taking the male and female 'seeds' of metals and uniting them to produce the Stone. Unlike vegetables, which were thought to 'multiply within themselves',¹¹ the Stone could be propagated only through the union of male and female. Basil Valentine writes: 'as the male and female seed jointly represent the principle of propagation, so also the sperm of the matter out of which our Stone is made can be sown and increased'.¹² While male and female were kept apart, a sterile, barren condition reigned and the Stone could not be generated.

In 'To his Coy Mistress', the 'vegetable Love' can be allowed to grow slowly, occupying vast spaces and endless time, and multiplying within itself as it was believed plants do, but while this continues, the 'vegetable' lover cannot perform the essential generative alchemy in which male and female must unite. The state remains barren, unconsummated. The hollowness of eternal separation resonates in the image 'Desarts of vast Eternity', and vanishes into the cold silence of the 'marble Vault' where the poet's 'ecchoing Song' shall sound no more:

But at my back I alwaies hear
 Times winged Charriot hurrying near:
 And yonder all before us lye
 Desarts of vast Eternity.
 Thy Beauty shall no more be found;
 Nor in thy marble Vault, shall sound
 My ecchoing Song; then Worms shall try
 That long preserv'd Virginitie:
 And your quaint Honour turn to durst,¹³
 And into ashes all my Lust.
 The Grave's a fine and private place,
 But none I think do there embrace. (ll. 21-32)

The lovers' separation is no longer the subject of light play or amusing hyperbole. The tone has become urgent, and the imagery macabre. No longer does the lover envisage time lazily multiplying into thousands of years of adoration and praise. Suddenly, with 'Time's winged Chariot hurrying near', the vision of his own life-span rapidly contracts into the cold inevitability of the marble vault. Even so the lover is still enough in control to use this momentary frisson of horror as material for the persuasion of his mistress, wittily side-stepping the grave to come up with an ironic epitaph: 'The Grave's a fine and private place,/But none I think do there embrace'.

At the narrative level we are presented with a wry piece of persuasion communicating the lover's quite natural desire to unite with his mistress before they die. At the same time the lines resonate with alchemical overtones. The *opus* consisted of a continuing series of 'separations' and 'unions', and at one point in this cycle, the 'union' which had to precede the 'separation' was symbolized by the lovers uniting *before* they enter the grave. Once the *opus* was underway it was vital that this union occurred before the dissolution or 'death'. And so, in alchemical terms, it is not only desirable that the lover in 'To his Coy Mistress' overcome the separation and unite with his lady, but it is also crucial that this union occur before time and death overtake them. Marvell has used the alchemical concept of the union which must take place before death, in 'Upon the Death of the Lord Hastings'. In this instance the *opus* has failed because the sequence of 'union' and 'death' has been reversed. Michael Gearin-Tosh has noted that alchemy is one of the themes of this poem, but has not discussed the alchemical significance of the fact that the young Hastings has died the day *before* his intended marriage to the daughter of Turquet de Mayerne, Paracelsian physician and alchemist.¹⁴ Here the 'death' has fatally preceded the *coniunctio* of male and female. Mayerne, like 'some sad *Chymist*' whose vessels have broken, has failed to produce the alchemical life-giving elixir which might have cured Hastings and made 'immortal' the race of Mayerne and Hastings.

For this alchemical reason the lover and mistress in 'To his Coy Mistress' must enact the *coniunctio* before they enter the

grave. The macabre image of 'the lovers and the grave' is one of the most striking emblems to be found in the alchemical treatises (figs 2, 3, 4).¹⁵ Alchemical emblems of the *coniunctio* frequently show the male and female figures accompanied by symbols of death – the coffin, grave, winged angel of death, and Saturn (or Time/Kronos) with his deathly scythe.¹⁶ These symbols indicate not only the 'death' of the differentiated state before the union, but also the fact that the 'separation' or 'death' follows fast on the *coniunctio*. In the 'putrefactio' which succeeded the death of the lovers the vessel was referred to as the 'tomb' or 'grave'. Ruland calls the vessel the 'Sepulchre and Tomb' and also the 'Grave'. Pernety writes that the alchemists 'ont aussi pris le *tombeau* pour le vase'. And Donne equates alembic and grave in 'Elegie on the Lady Marckham' (1609).¹⁷ The alchemical 'grave' was obviously a place of death and corruption, but because the Stone was conceived there it was simultaneously a place of conception and generation. In alchemical theory, conception required a 'death' or stage of putrefaction, and so the tomb or grave in the great world was seen as analogous to the womb in the little world. Marvell's 'grave', it will be noted, is also associated with the womb – he describes the grave as a 'fine and private place' with a sexual play on 'private place' (l. 31).¹⁸

The sixth emblem of Mylius' *Philosophia reformata* (fig. 3) shows the lovers no longer embracing, lying in the tomb, with Saturn and a skeleton holding a scythe standing by. Saturn signified the 'death' of the bodies in the vessel and their dissolution into the *prima materia*. Artephius speaks of the 'corruption of the *body*, which is by wise men called *Saturne*'. In some cases Saturn becomes identified with the *prima materia* itself.¹⁹ As 'old man Time' with scythe and hourglass, he stands at the point in the *opus* when the old form has dissolved and the creation of new form is about to occur – in other words he stands at the end *and* the beginning of time. Nicholas Flammel's *Exposition of the Hieroglyphical Figures* (1624) describes such a figure. Behind Mercury

there came running and flying with open wings, a great old man, who upon his head had an *houre-glasse* fastened, and in his hands a hooke (or sithe) like *Death*, with the which, in

terrible and furious manner, hee would have cut off the feet of
Mercury.²⁰

In this image of Mercury pursued by winged 'Time', Saturn, 'Death' and 'Time' are synonymous.

The image cluster of the lovers, the grave, time and death which occurs in Mylius' emblem, comes alive in the central stanza of Marvell's poem. The lovers, the deathly 'grave' and 'marble Vault', and the image of 'Time's winged Charriot' cluster together to form the well known alchemical emblem.

The lover at this point embarks on the third and final part of his argument:

Now therefore, while the youthful hew
Sits on thy skin like morning glew,
And while thy willing Soul transpires
At every pore with instant Fires,
Now let us sport us while we may; (ll. 33-37)

This reading of the 1681 Folio is emended in the Bodleian copy (MS.Eng. poe.d.49) to:

Now therefore, while the youthful glew
Sits on thy skin like morning dew

And the 1672 Haward manuscript (Bod.MS. Don.b.8.pp.283-4) reads:

Now then whil'st y youthfull Glue,
Sticke on your Cheeke, like Morning Dew

Although all the seventeenth-century versions contain the word 'glew', Thomas Cooke and most subsequent editors have emended 'glew' to 'dew'. Exceptions are George de F. Lord, James Reeves and Martin Seymour-Smith, who retain the 1681 Folio reading, and Elizabeth Story Donno, who uses the Bodleian emendation.²¹

What is 'morning glew'? On the most obvious level 'morning glew' combines the idea of fresh early morning exudations from plants with that of youthful human sweat. Pliny refers to a hive cement which bees make from the gluey resin of leaf buds: they produce 'bee-glew from the droppings of the gum-producing trees – the sap, the glue and resin of the willow, elm and reed'.

However, 'glew' referred not only to plant gums, but also the sweat of lovers, as in Donne's 'The Extasie': 'Our hands were firmly cimented/With a fast balme, which thence did spring' (ll. 5-6).²² Thomas Clayton has written of Marvell's 'glew':

The major claims for 'glue' against 'dew' seem to me to be that 'glue', as modified by 'morning', contains lively, specific, appropriately sensuous ... properties relating at once to sweat, to aromatic gums and incense, and to an ostensibly 'fixed' condition that are wanting in the tepid 'morning dew'.

Clayton points out that united lovers were often described as being 'glued' together, as in Shakespeare's *King John* (II.4.61-7) and *Venus and Adonis* (II. 545-6). This usage is also found in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*: 'these eyes/Have seen her glued unto that piece of cedar;/That fine well-timbered gallant' (IV.5.122-4), and 'my substance shall not glue you, nor screw you, into a family' (V.12.87-8).²³ Similarly, Herrick writes in his epigram 'A Kisse':

What is a Kisse? Why this, as some approve:
The sure sweet-Sement, Glue, and Lime of Love.

'Glew' had a specific alchemical meaning. In an alchemical reading of Herrick's 'A Kisse', Musgrove has observed that 'Cement' and 'lime-glue' are tenacious substances used in the distillation process. As with the lovers' hands in 'The Extasie', the 'glueing' suggests that there is a chemical reaction taking place.²⁴ Indeed, the OED records that in the seventeenth century 'cimented' had an alchemical meaning: 'Cimentation (is) the process by which one solid is made to penetrate and combine with another at high temperature ... without liquefaction taking place'. In this definition, the idea of a union or penetration is combined with the event of chemical change. Ruland's *Lexicon* defines 'Cimentare' as 'to unite', and it was said that this union of opposites took place by means of a third substance, a medium of conjunction.²⁵ This medium was Mercurius, and in this role he was variously described as the bond, cement, ligament, gum and glue. He was the 'priest' that tied the knot at the wedding, the glue that bound man and woman. In metaphysical terms he symbolized the 'soul' which united the separated 'body' and 'spirit' (male and female) in the alembic.

Happelius' 'Aphorismi Basiliani' (1659) defines Mercurius as the 'life-giving power like a glue, holding the world together and standing in the middle between body and spirit.'²⁶ Jung writes of the marriage gum or glue:

It is probably no accident that the treatise of Maria deals with the theme of the *matrimonium alchymicum* in a dialogue with the philosopher Aros, from which comes the saying, often repeated later: 'Marry gum with gum in true marriage'. Originally it was 'Gum arabic', and it is used here as a secret name for the transforming substance, on account of its adhesive quality ... This substance ... is likened by another commentator, to the 'glue of the world' (*glutinum mundi*), which is the medium between mind and body and the union of both ... (it is) the one and only *aqua mercurialis*.

This mercurial glue, which was such an essential factor in the joining of male and female (or 'body' and 'spirit'), was also known as the 'essence or "seminal matter" of both man and woman'. Vaughan calls it 'the true sperm of the great world' and 'this blessed cement and balsam', recalling the lovers' hands in Donne's 'The Extasie' which are 'cemented / With a fast balm'.²⁷

In 'To his Coy Mistress' it is appropriate that the 'glew' sits on the mistress's skin ready for the joining of man and woman:

Now therefore while the youthful hew
Sits on thy skin like morning glew,
And while thy willing Soul transpires
At every pore with instant Fires,
Now let us sport us while we may; (ll. 33-37)

Certainly some kind of chemical reaction is beginning to take place. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'transpire' (of a volatile substance) as 'To pass as vapour through pores; (of a liquid) to escape by evaporation; and (of a body) to emit vapour or perfume; (of the animal body or person) to give off moisture through the skin; to perspire (obs.) now only of plants'. Marvell compacts into a single conceit the idea of exuding aromatic gums and incense (like Herrick's 'Amber-greece and Gums' which 'transpire' in ev'ry Thicket'²⁸); the sweet youthful sweat of the young lady; and the transpiring, distilling alchemical vessel on the fire emitting vapour. Transpiring sweat on a young lady's

hand occurs in an alchemical context in Cleveland's 'Fuscara, or the Bee Errant'. The bee, whose 'suckets are moyst *Alchimie*' lands on the lady's hand: 'The next he preys on is her Palm, / The Alm'ner of transpiring balm'.²⁹ And in *Paradise Lost*, Milton compares the transpiring, angelic transubstantiation of food to the alchemical transmutation. Raphael eats

with keen dispatch
Of real hunger, and concoctive heat
To transubstantiate; what redounds, transpires
Through Spirits with ease; nor wonder; if by fire
Of sooty coal th'Empiric Alchemist
Can turn, or holds it possible to turn
Mettals of drossiest Ore to perfect Gold
As from the Mine. (V.436-43)

In Marvell's poem, the 'morning glew', the transpiring Soul, and the 'instant Fires', together strongly suggest that an alchemical experiment is underway. Clayton comments on these lines with alchemical accuracy:

It is to a considerable extent the forces of 'transpires' that give a particular appropriateness to 'glue'. Together they fetch in the natural processes of exudation, coagulation, dissolution, evaporation, and perhaps – through 'instant Fires' – igniting and explosion.³⁰

Certainly, Marvell employs sensuous, tactile, and 'chemical' language to communicate that the mistress is, at this very moment, in perfect readiness for amorous 'sport' (l. 37). The fresh 'morning glew' on her skin seems to exude as her 'willing Soul transpires / At every pore' awaiting union. This recalls Mylius' words on the alchemical 'glueing' or 'cementation' where the body and congealed spirit (male and female) penetrate each other's 'pores' at high temperature: 'for then the body becomes well able to enter and penetrate through the pores of its own substance, and through the pores of the spirit which has been congealed.'³¹ The 'instant Fires' of the Soul suggest not only the fire under the alembic, but refer even more specifically to the alchemical 'scintilla' or fiery 'little soul-sparks'. These 'fiery sparks of the World-Soul' were thought to exist in the *prima materia* at the beginning of the creation, or

at the point of conception when male and female united. Jung writes: 'From the (nuptial) impact between the two the spark is struck'.³²

These lines may also suggest that Marvell's transpiring, sparking mistress can be identified with the alembic and its bubbling contents, its rising vapour. Musgrove has argued that Herrick's poems to his mistresses Julia and Anthea in *The Hesperides* were praises and invocations to his alchemical vessels.³³ The vessel was often spoken of as the 'womb' from which the Stone was generated. Donne, for example, refers to the alchemist's vessel as the 'pregnant pot' and the 'Lymbecks warme wombe'. Jung explains that the vessel was a 'kind of matrix or uterus from which the *filius philosophorum*, the miraculous stone is to be born'.³⁴ It is easy to see how the alchemists came to personify the alembic as a woman. Whether or not, however, we can identify the mistress with the alembic in Marvell's poem, the lover's description of her at this point is charged with the chemistry of immanent union.

The lover presses on with his persuasion:

Now let us sport us while we may;
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,
Rather at once our Time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r. (ll. 37-40)

These lines contain one of the most dramatic emblems of the alchemical *opus* – that of the 'am'rous birds of prey'. This emblem colourfully expresses the interpenetration and mingling of male and female, body and spirit, at the *coniunctio*. The alchemical union with its attendant 'death' is admirably portrayed by the image of the two birds who, as they copulate, devour one another in a cannibalistic merging. Basil Valentine writes of this event: 'you must join husband and wife together, that each may feed upon the other's flesh and blood, and that so they may propagate their species a thousandfold'. And Don Parry Norford writes that 'the awakening antagonism' between the two 'involves their mutual transformation and interpenetration, so that ultimately they are united, like man and woman in the "Chemical Marriage"'.³⁵

The eighth emblem of 'The Book of Lambspring', which

depicts the amorous birds of prey (fig. 5), is accompanied by the epigram: 'Here are Two Birds, great and strong – the body and spirit; one devours the other'. The verse with the seventh emblem says of these birds:

The one that is below holds the one that is above,
 And will not let it get away from the nest,
 As a husband in a house with his wife,
 Bound together in closest bonds of wedlock.

The copulating birds of prey are also the subject of an emblem in Mylius' *Philosophia reformatata*. This emblem is accompanied by the words: 'There are two birds, joined together below, and the male holds the female's tail in his beak, when he has mounted her'. A slightly different version of this emblem is found in another of Mylius' works, the *Anatomia auri* (1628). Here the male and female figures stand facing each on separate mountains with their feet revealed to us from underground as the claws of birds of prey. Pernety says of the copulating birds that one comes from the East, the other from the West, calling to mind Marvell's lovers separated at the Ganges and the Humber.³⁶

A variant of the bird emblem can be seen in 'The Hunting of the Greene Lyon', where the ingestion metaphor is enacted by the mercurial lion swallowing the sun at the *coniunctio* of male and female:

And yet full quickly can he run,
 And soone can overtake the Sun:
 And suddainely can hym devour.

Another variant, occurring in the *Mutus Liber*, depicts the mercurial child being swallowed by Saturn/Kronos.³⁷ In both cases the concept of 'devouring Time' is present. It makes good alchemical sense, then, that the allusion to the *coniunctio* of the amorous birds in 'To his Coy Mistress' occurs in association with a reference to devouring Time:

Rather at once our Time devour,
 Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r. (ll. 39-40)

Again the lover stresses the absolute necessity of overcoming the inexorable menace of 'Time'. Instead of allowing Time to devour us, he says, let *us* rather devour *it* and be like amorous birds of

prey – let's get on with this coupling. Here Marvell has wittily reversed the conventional Renaissance emblem of cannibalistic Time,³⁸ and substituted for it an alchemical emblem – the amorous birds of prey who themselves devour Time (as is made clear in the variant representations). The poem is offering an 'alchemical' alternative to the inevitability of death and decay. Again, the *opus contra naturam* – the work against the natural processes of time – is alluded to. If the lovers remain separate, languishing in the endless course of wooing, the slow growth of the 'vegetable Love', they well almost certainly be devoured by Time and enter the grave *before* they embrace. Rather, the lovers must, as in the *opus*, reverse the process and work against time to unite in the alchemical *coniunctio*.

The movement of the *opus contra naturam* was described by the alchemists as a turning, rolling, or circular movement. Philaletha speaks of the impetus 'that turns the wheel (of the *opus*), and rolls the *Axis* into a compass of circuit'.³⁹ The final lines of the poem describe such a movement:

Let us roll all our Strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one Ball.
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.
Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run. (ll. 41-6)

The two lovers united will combine the male and female qualities of 'Strength' and 'sweetness' into 'one Ball'. Certainly the 'one Ball' is an image of union, of wholeness – a wholeness underlined by Marvell's repetition of the word 'all' and echoed in 'Ball'. Many suggestions have been made concerning the precise symbolism of the 'Ball', and the alchemical meaning is closely allied to some of these.⁴⁰ In alchemy, the union of the lovers and the birth of the Stone was symbolized by the sphere, the ball, or circle. This indicated that wholeness or perfection had been attained. The *Rosary* instructs the alchemist: 'Out of man and woman make a round circle ... and you will have the philosophers' stone'. This saying is re-iterated by Maier in Emblem XXI of *Atalanta Fugiens* (1618). The 'Verses Belonging to an Emblematicall Scrowle' attributed to Ripley,

says of the Stone/Elixir: 'In the World it runneth over all,/ And goeth round as a ball'. And in his 'Cantilena', Ripley recounts that even the 'bed' in which the lovers unite is transformed into a globe: 'from ... the Bed a globe is made'.⁴¹

But while the alchemical 'ball' may be an image of wholeness, it paradoxically comes into being through a process of strife. The *coniunctio*, represented as a strangely cruel and cannibalistic coupling, is often described as the 'reconciliation of Foes' and 'the union of warring opposites'.⁴² Thus, in an alchemical context, Marvell's lovers can strive to unite their strength and sweetness 'into one Ball', and yet, at the same time, behave like antagonistic birds of prey who 'tear' their 'Pleasures with rough strife'.

Let us now turn to the final couplet:

Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run. (ll. 45-46)

There has been much discussion of the classical and Biblical allusions in this couplet – the allusion to Zeus making the sun stand still in order to lengthen his night of love with Alcmena; the allusion to the sun standing still for Joshua; and to David's sun 'which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race' (Psalms 19, 4-5). But there is, in addition, an alchemical significance in these lines. It will be recalled that the cycle of 'solve et coagula' or 'separation and union' had to be constantly re-iterated throughout the *opus*. For this reason, the *opus* was known as the 'circular work', and the alchemists frequently compared it to the course of the sun's never-ceasing rotation around the earth (in the Ptolemaic view of the universe). Paracelsus compares the work to the 'Sun ... which runs through the streets and houses of all the planets'. The verse to emblem 109 of Stolcius' *Hermetic Garden* advises the alchemist: 'God and Nature have laid down fixed paths for the Sun and the Moon / And it is proper for you to follow them', and Ruland writes: 'It is in this sense that they call their operation the Movement or Revolution of the Heavens, the Circular Revolution of the Elements'. Similarly, Maier compares the *opus* to the rolling of the sun through the heavens:

For while the hero, like a joyful giant, rises in the east and

hastens to his sinking in the west, that he may return forever out of the east, he sets in motion these circulations, depositing in the shining substance of the quicksilver, as in a mirror, forms (wherein) by human diligence the gold may be sought.

Jung comments that the 'wheel' of the alchemists 'turns into the wheel of the sun rolling around the heavens'.⁴³ In this particular image of the *opus*, the night-time was said to signify the period of 'separation', while the day symbolized the 'union'.

The predominant movement expressed in the lines 'Let us roll all our Strength, and all/Our sweetness, up into one Ball' through to 'Thus, though we cannot make our Sun/Stand still, yet we will make him run', is one of circulation, of rolling. In alchemical terms this means that the *opus* is still underway, not yet completed, and so it is vital that the *opus circulatorium*, or rotation of the sun, continue. The cycle of 'separation' and 'union' must not cease. By uniting in the *coniunctio*, by taking the next step in the process, the lovers will cause the circulation of the *opus*, the circulation of the sun, to continue. They will make the sun 'run' its circular course:

Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

And so, while the lovers cannot make their sun stand still like Joshua and Zeus, they can nevertheless engage in the transformational work of the *opus alchymicum*.

'To his Coy Mistress' can be read as a poem in which an alchemical motif has been taken up in the same way as the literary *carpe diem* theme and the syllogistic (enthymematic) framework,⁴⁴ and transmuted to serve Marvell's own parodic purposes. The fact that alchemy uses the copulation of man and woman as an image of 'union' in the *opus* makes it an obvious source for the culling of conceits for such a poem. It is also tempting to make the more specific application that Musgrove makes with Herrick, and see the mistress as a witty version of the bubbling alembic, and the poem as an invocation to his alchemical experiment. This may explain why most readers have felt ambivalently about this poem as a 'love poem'. The most appealing interpretation, however, is that Marvell has

skillfully encoded his anti-Platonic love plea with a series of emblems and conceits conveying a specific alchemic meaning – a meaning which not only enhances the intellectual delight we may take in the argument of the lover, but which has a metaphysical life of its own.

NOTES

- 1 Martin Ruland the Elder, *A Lexicon of Alchemy* (1612), translated by A. E. Waite, (London: John M. Watkins, 1964), p.113.
- 2 All quotations of the poem are from Andrew Marvell, *Miscellaneous Poems* (London: Robert Boulter, 1681) (copy in the Macdonald Collection, Fisher Library, University of Sydney). A facsimile edition was published by Scolar Press, Menston, Yorkshire, 1969.
- 3 Robert Herrick, *The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), p.26. For an alchemical reading of this poem see S. Musgrove, 'Herrick's Alchemical Vocabulary', *AUMLA*, 46 (1976), 240-265.
- 4 *The Rosary of the Philosophers*, ed. Adam McLean, English translation of Ferguson MS 210 (Edinburgh: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1980), pp.15, 36. 'Hermetis Trismegisti Tractatus Aureus' in William Salmon, *Medicina Practica with the Clavis Alchymiae: or Hermes Trismegistus, Khalid Arabs, and Geber Arabs* (London: printed for John Harris and Thomas Howkins, 1691), Bk 2, p.280.
- 5 'The conversion of the Jews' was a topic of much contemporary debate. For a discussion of the historical context see Christopher Hill, ' "Till the conversion of the Jews" ', in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Volume 2, Religion and Politics in 17th Century England* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1986), pp.269-300.
- 6 Flammel describes the 'Conversion of the Elements' thus: 'the foure naturall enemies, the *hote* and *cold*, *dry* and *moist*, begin to approach amiably towards one another, and by means of the *Mediators* and *Peace-makers*, lay downe by little and little, the ancient enmity of the old *Chaos*' (Nicholas Flammel, *His Exposition of the Hieroglyphicall Figures which he caused to bee painted upon an Arch in St. Innocents Church-yard in Paris* (London: printed by T.S. for Thomas Walkley, 1624), p.78. The union of the four elements to produce the Fifth Element or Quintessence is identical with the union of opposites (male and female) from which the Stone arises. Margarita Stocker, *Apocalyptic Marvell: The Second Coming in Seventeenth Century Poetry* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1986), pp.205-220. *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-62), IV, 110. Robert M. Schuler, 'Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth

- Century England', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 41 (1980), 304-6. Of the Sir Hugh Platt collection Schuler writes: 'Most striking here is the strict schematization of the alchemical concepts with corresponding Calvinist dogmas' (p.306). Everard's commentary is printed in Schuler, pp.312-16. For the alchemical metaphor of the refinement of gold used to refer to the testing of the human heart, see Proverbs 17:3 and Malachi 3:2-3.
- 7 George Ripley, 'The Compound of Alchymie' in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652), ed. Elias Ashmole, facsimile reprint (New York and London: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967), p.125 (hereafter referred to as *TCB*). Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist* (II.3.169-70) in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937); cf. Marvell's 'Eyes and Tears': 'So the all-seeing Sun each day/ Distills the world with Chymick Ray' (II. 21-2); John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (III.606-12; IV.479-81) in *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1968).
 - 8 *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), I, 77.
 - 9 Artephius, *His Secret Booke of the blessed Stone called the Philosophers*, bound with Nicholas Flammel, *His Exposition of the Hieroglyphicall Figures*, pp.199, 166.
 - 10 Louis Martz, *The Wit of Love* (Notre Dame and London: Notre Dame University Press, 1969), p.167.
 - 11 Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, cited in relation to Marvell's poem in John Carroll, 'The Sun and the Lovers in "To his Coy Mistress"', *Modern Language Notes*, 74 (1959), 7.
 - 12 Basil Valentine, 'The Golden Tripod' in *Hermetic Museum*, ed. A. E. Waite (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974) I, 317. This process is parodied in Subtle's long speech on alchemical generation in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (II.3.153-75).
 - 13 F. 'durst' is emended by Cooke and subsequent editors to 'dust'.
 - 14 Michael Gearin-Tosh, 'Marvell's "Upon the Death of the Lord Hastings"' in *Essays and Studies 1981* (London: John Murray, 1981), pp.105-22.
 - 15 See Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (Frankfurt: Lucas Jennis, 1622), Emblems 6, 7, and 8. *Rosary*, pp.44, 51. Stolcius, *Viridarium Chymicum* (1624), translated into French with commentary by Bernard Husson (Paris: Librairie de Medicis, 1975), pp.284, 287. Basil Valentine, 'Practica with Twelve Keys', *Hermetic Museum*, I, 324. For a discussion of 'To his Coy Mistress' and its possible allusion to the 'Dance of Death' see Catherine Belsey, 'Love and Death in "To his Coy Mistress"' in *Post-structuralist readings of English poetry*, ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.109-119.

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- 16 Renaissance art identified 'Kronos' or Saturn with the Greek 'Chronos' meaning 'time'. Cf. Panofsky: 'Time, having appropriated the qualities of the deadly, cannibalistic, scythe-brandishing Saturn, became more and more intimately related to Death' (*Studies in Iconology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1939, p.82).
- 17 See Ruland, pp.413, 323; Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermetique*, facsimile reprint of 1758 edition (Milan: Archè, 1971), p.498, 'So at this grave, her limbecke which refines /The Diamonds, Rubies, Saphires, Pearles, and Mines' (ll. 23-4) (*The Poems of John Donne*, p.280). Cf. Donne's lovers in 'The Extasie' who 'like sepulchral statues' lie (l. 18) (*The Poems of John Donne*, p.52). For an alchemical interpretation of 'The Extasie' see Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp.124-35, and Julia M. Walker, 'John Donne's "The Extasie" as an alchemical process', pp.1-8.
- 18 The use of 'die' meaning to 'experience orgasm' was common in the seventeenth century. The idea that conception required a 'death' (upon which alchemy was based) is derived from a model of generation and birth widely held in the Middle Ages — the idea can, of course, be traced as far back as the Biblical phrase 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die' (John 12:24). Fabricius writes that the 'alchemical principle of putrefaction builds on the doctrine that all nature is renewed after dying away, and that in order to grow, an organism must first die' (Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1976, p.17). For a re-iteration of the idea that 'the corruption of one is the generation of another' see *The Rosary*, p.40.
- 19 Artephius, *His Secret Booke*, p.232. For Saturn's identification with the *prima materia* see 'Bloomfield's Blossoms', *TCB*, p.313.
- 20 Flammel, *His Exposition*, pp.11-12.
- 21 See J. Hilton Kelliher, 'A New Text of Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress"', *Notes and Queries*, 7 (1970), 254-56. *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); *Andrew Marvell: Complete Poetry* (1968), ed. George de F. Lord (London: Dent, 1984); *Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. James Reeves and Martin Seymour-Smith (London: Heinemann, 1969). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* notes: 'The text reads "glew", a reading as odious in Marvell's time as in ours' (fifth edition) (New York: Norton, 1968), I, 138.
- 22 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, translated by W. H. S. Jones, H. Rackham, and D. E. Eichholz (London: Heinemann, 1967), XI.5.441. See *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921), p.227, and Robert A. Day, 'Marvell's "Glew"', *Philological Quarterly*, 32 (1953), 344-6. *The Poems of John Donne*, p.51.

- 23 Thomas Clayton, "'Morning Glew" and other Sweet Leaves in the Folio Text of Andrew Marvell's Major Pre-Restoration Poems', *English Literary Renaissance*, 2 (1977), 368-69. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. Philip Brockbank (London: Ernest Benn, 1968), pp.113,152. *OED* 'Glue' 2.
- 24 *The Poems of Robert Herrick*, p.218. Musgrove, 'Herrick's Alchemical Vocabulary', p.258. See John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber, 1981), p.159.
- 25 *OED* 'Cementation' 2 (1594). Ruland, p.105.
- 26 Mylius writes: 'it is plain that there are three components of the Elixir that we have made; the first binds together and the other two comprise the Medicine, and so three are joined in one body' (*The Alchemical Engravings of Mylius*, ed. Adam McLean, translated by Patricia Tahil, Edinburgh: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1984, p.19). For Mercurius as 'priest' see 'The Hunting of the Greene Lyon', *TCB*, pp.279-80. Ruland defines the 'Ligament of Tinctures' as the 'Mercury of the Philosophers, called the *Medium coniungendi* (p.385). In 'Anthroposophia Theomagica', Thomas Vaughan calls Mercurius 'the bond of all nature' (*Works*, ed. A. E. Waite, New York: University Books, 1969), p.21. See also C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p.461, and *Alchemical Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp.213-14. Thomas Vaughan describes the 'glue-like' Mercurial water which is impregnated with the seeds of life as a 'viscous, fat, mineral nature ... bright like pearls and transparent like crystal ... the true sperm of the great world' (*Works*, p.250).
- 27 C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp.160-61, and *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, p.462. Jack Lindsay explains that the alchemical gum 'may be taken as expressing the operative power inside matter through which the constituent opposites Body and Spirit, are linked in the White or Red Elixir. (Atomic valency has been suggested as a parallel in modern chemistry)' (*The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, London: Frederick Muller, 1970, p.318). Vaughan, *Works*, pp.250, 230. Cf. Donne's 'The first Anniversary' where the influence of Elizabeth Drury is described as "The Cyment which did faithfully compact, / And glue all vertues' (ll. 49-50) (*The Poems of John Donne*, p.232).
- 28 'The Apparition of his Mistresse calling him to *Elizium*' (*The Poems of Robert Herrick*, p.205).
- 29 *The Poems of John Cleveland*, ed. Brian Morris and Eleanor Withington (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) p.58.
- 30 Clayton, "'Morning Glew" and other Sweet Leaves', p.371.
- 31 *The Alchemical Engravings of Mylius*, p.8; see also John Read, *Prelude to Chemistry* (London: Bell, 1936), p.140.

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- 32 Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, pp.55-6. Khunrath writes: 'There are ... fiery sparks of the World-Soul, that is of the light of nature, dispersed or scattered at God's command in and through the fabric of the great world into all fruits of the elements everywhere' (*Von hylealischen chaos* (1597), cited in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, p.55).
- 33 Musgrove, 'Herrick's Alchemical Vocabulary', p.405.
- 34 'Love's Alchymie' and 'The Comparison' (*The Poems of John Donne*, pp.39, 90). Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, p.237.
- 35 Valentine, 'Practica with Twelve Keys', *Hermetic Museum*, I, 320. Don Parry Norford, 'The Sacred Head: Milton's Solar Mysticism' in *Milton Studies*, ed. James D. Simmons (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), IX, 68.
- 36 'The Book of Lambspring', *Hermetic Museum*, I, pp.291, 288. *The Alchemical Engravings of Mylius*, p.55. Pernety, *Les Fables Egyptiennes et Grecques*, (1758) (Milan: Archè, 1971), II, 139.
- 37 'The Hunting of the Greene Lyon', *TCB*, p.279. Altus, *Mutus Liber: Reproduction des 15 planches en couleur d'un manuscrit du XVIIIème siècle* (1677), Introduction and Commentary by Jean Laplace (Milan: Archè, 1979), Plate 7. 'Devouring Time' is also related to the symbolic 'uroboros', the serpent which devours its own tail. It is a circular symbol of timelessness, eternity. Claudian's alchemical poem describes a cave 'in whose vast breast/is Time's cradle and tomb. A serpent encloses/ the Cave, consuming all things with slow power ... / Its mouth devours the backbent tail as with mute motion it traces its beginning' (Lindsay, *Origins of Alchemy*, p.267).
- 38 Michael Bauman has noted Marvell's familiarity with the Renaissance emblem of Time: 'That he was aware of the cannibalistic Saturnian features of Time we may infer from line 40 where he mentions Time's "slow-chapped power"' ('Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress"', *Explicator*, 31 (1973), 72). See also John Cleveland's 'To Julia to expedite her promise': 'Not one of all those rav'nous heures/ But thee devoures' (p.80), and John Collop's 'On a retir'd Lady': 'Time is wing'd, and hasts to prey' (*Poesis Rediviva: or Poesie Reviv'd* (1656), facsimile reprint, Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar, 1972, p.84).
- 39 Eyraeneus Philaletha Cosmopolita, *Secrets Reveald: or, an Open Entrance to the Shut-Palace of the King* (London: William Cooper, 1669), p.22.
- 40 Carey lists the meanings of 'Ball' offered by commentators: 'a symbol of eternity, a pomander, a cannonball, a sweetmeat ball, a rubber ball, the lovers' personal sun, Plato's original hermaphrodite, and the egg of myrrh which Herodotus says forms out of the ashes of the Phoenix' (*Andrew Marvell: a critical anthology*, ed. John Carey

- (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p.63). The completed 'sphere' symbolizes marriage in Jonson's *The Haddington Masque* (1608) (ll. 276-83) (*Ben Jonson*, VII, 258).
- 41 *The Rosary* cited in Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, p.128. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens* (1618), ed. H. M. E. de Jong (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), p.167. 'Verses Belonging to an Emblematicall Scrowle', *TCB*, p.376. Ripley's 'Cantilena' in F. Sherwood Taylor, 'George Ripley's Song', *Ambix*, 2 (1946), 180.
- 42 Ruland, p.417. Jung, *Aion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959), p.195. The 'strife' is that of the elements which, while still differentiated, remain at 'war' with one another. When they are united (an event which is synonymous with the union of the lovers), conflict finally ceases and the magical Fifth Element or Stone is produced.
- 43 See Paracelsus, *His Aurora and the Treasure of the Philosophers* (London: Giles Calvert, 1659), p.51. Stolcius, *Hermetic Garden composed of Flowerlets of Philosophy* (1627), ed. with commentary by Adam McLean, translated by Patricia Tahlil (Edinburgh: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1980), p.118. Ruland, p.347. Maier cited in Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, pp.382, 381. Cf. Waller, 'To A. H. of the different success of their loves': 'Fair course of passion where two loves start, / And run together ...' (*The Poems of Edmund Waller* (1645), ed. G. Thorn Drury, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).
- 44 Associate Professor Conal Condren of the School of Political Science, University of New South Wales pointed out that the syllogistic framework of the poem is specifically enthymematic.