

Spring 2015

Not (Just) Donne: Alchemical Transmutation as Immortality in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Brandi L. Moody

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moody, Brandi L., "Not (Just) Donne: Alchemical Transmutation as Immortality in Shakespeare's Sonnets" (2015). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1315.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1315>

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

NOT (JUST) DONNE: ALCHEMICAL TRANSMUTATION AS IMMORTALITY IN
SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

by

BRANDI MOODY

(Under the Direction of Mary Villeponteaux)

ABSTRACT

Shakespeare, in his sonnets, employs alchemical references in the sonnets that ultimately fail, in order to show how fruitless it is to pursue immortality. The poet urges the fair friend, who himself is like the self-consuming ouroboros, to father a child that will continue his legacy and allow the fair friend to live on via the child. Language associated with the child is alchemical, referencing distillation, vials, flasks, and the renewing power of the philosopher's stone. The dark lady, the opposite of the fair friend in every way, can be explained as fulfilling alchemy's union of opposites needed for a philosopher's stone to be created. However, when the fabled medicinal baths cannot cure the poet of the ill love he has contracted from the dark lady, it becomes clear that, just as there is no philosopher's stone, there is no immortality.

INDEX WORDS: Shakespeare, sonnets, alchemy, immortality, Donne, dark lady, ouroboros, union of opposites, grave, alembic

NOT (JUST) DONNE: ALCHEMICAL TRANSMUTATION AS IMMORTALITY IN
SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

by

BRANDI MOODY

B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2012

M.A., Georgia Southern University, 2015

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

© 2015

BRANDI MOODY

All Rights Reserved

NOT (JUST) DONNE: ALCHEMICAL TRANSMUTATION AS IMMORTALITY IN
SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

by

BRANDI MOODY

Major Professor: Mary Villeponteaux

Committee: Candy B.K. Schille

Julia Griffin

Electronic Version Approved

Spring 2015

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, who managed to live with me while I wrote this. Thank you all for giving me the space, support, and encouragement I needed; you are my panacea.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would also not have been possible without the support of my chair and my committee, who read this at lightning speed while also continuing to give amazing feedback and invaluable insight. This has been a wonderful journey.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PRINCIPLES OF ALCHEMY.....	2
ALCHEMY AND DONNE.....	7
ALCHEMICAL CRITICISM OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS.....	14
ALCHEMICAL REFERENCES IN THE SONNETS.....	19
REFERENCES.....	37

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: [<i>Cabala Mineralis</i> Embryo from Paul Backer's <i>Shakespeare, Alchemy and Dao (Tao)</i>]	34

Not (Just) Donne: Alchemical Transmutation as Immortality in Shakespeare's Sonnets

"To the onlie begetter of these insving sonnets... All happinesse and that eternitie promised by our ever-living poet" –Thomas Thorpe

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Shakespeare and literary criticism, enough critical ink has been spilled to deter entire semesters of graduate and undergraduate writers seeking new ground on which to plant their own flags. This is not to say that Shakespeare's works have been exhaustively searched for new material to write about, or that new avenues of critical exploration don't exist. For example, little has been written on alchemical references in Shakespeare's sonnets. Yet especially for writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, alchemy is an important part of their history. At first simply the process of gilding for decoration, alchemy reached Europe and became a way of thought that was sometimes a means for achieving the mystical and sometimes a proto-science that eventually became the forefather of what we know as chemistry today. Like Shakespeare's, alchemy's influence is pervasive, but unlike Shakespeare's influence, it has received comparatively little critical attention. Such critical inquiries as exist are mostly focused on his plays, in particular *Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, and the *Henriad*. Alchemical criticism of the sonnets usually consists of scant remarks secondary or tertiary to the real focus of the critic's work. This stands in direct contrast to the critical attention lavished on alchemical imagery in Donne's poetry.

One cannot do much research without finding criticism that analyzes references to alchemy in Donne's poetry. However, as we shall see, not all the alchemical criticism of Donne's poetry distinguishes clearly between religious concepts of redemption and purification and actual alchemical references, making the pool of alchemical criticism seem larger because

critical attention is often given to metaphors that may be only religious in nature, not alchemical. Shakespeare's sonnets, however, also contain alchemical references, specifically to the making of gold through transmutation as a metaphor for gaining immortality through reproduction. At the beginning of the sequence, the speaker urges his "fair friend" to have children in order to immortalize himself. The fair friend has not fathered a child because he has not completed the critical union of opposites that alchemy demands in order for transmutation to take place. This union of opposites is also frequently evoked in the sonnets through references to the ouroboros, the hermaphrodite, and later to the dark lady's relationship with the fair friend. The union of opposites as it is presented in the sonnets is a concrete alchemical reference, as are the images used by Shakespeare to describe the fair friend's future child: gold, summer, and money. The use of gold and money as symbols for the child harkens back to one of the central aims of alchemy, which was to create gold by transmutation. That the child of the fair friend provides immortality also suggests the philosopher's stone, which could prolong life and cure all sicknesses as well as transmute objects into gold. The child and the fair friend's youth are likened to summer as well as to gold (one of alchemy's most important goals), but none these alchemical references and strategies ultimately provide immortality. Shakespeare deploys them ironically and with a healthy dose of skepticism, allowing the promise of transmutation through the attempted fathering of a child to fail, just as any real-life attempt at using alchemy, or any other means, failed to produce immortality.

PRINCIPLES OF ALCHEMY

In an age where science is (generally) considered an authority, alchemy is largely viewed as a fool's errand and the pastime of charlatans. What most people know of alchemy is its pursuit of the philosopher's stone, an item that was said to grant rejuvenation or immortality, and

the pursuit of gold through transmutation of metals and other materials either by being exposed to a philosopher's stone, or by being transmuted directly by the alchemist. As Margaret Healey writes in "Shakespeare, Alchemy, and the Creative Imagination," alchemy began in Egypt, deriving its name in English from the Arabic name for the country meaning "al Khem," or dark soil (Healey 14). Beginning in Arab culture as the fairly mundane process of gilding objects naturally or artificially for decorative purposes, by the twelfth or thirteenth centuries it had spread to Europe where alchemists were less concerned with using a veneer of gold as a decoration than they were with transforming an entire substance into gold, according to Ronald Gray, whose critical book on Shakespeare will be discussed more below (6). Healey asserts that alchemy reached Europe through the translation of Arabic texts into Latin, such as Robert of Chester's *Liber de compositione alchemiae*, or *Book of the Composition of Alchemy*. England's proximity to Moorish Spain (particularly Toledo, a major center of learning) and the intersection of Christianity with Islam by trade and other means also facilitated the spread of alchemy to England and Continental Europe.

Its origin in Islamic ideas and Arabic culture initially tainted alchemy in the minds of Christians, but Healey says this also came with a healthy dose of admiration for the craftsmanship produced by Easterners, especially concerning crafts that were a product of practical chemistry, such as making glass, dyeing and tinting, and metallurgy (14). Perhaps in an attempt to make alchemy more compatible with the culture and religion at hand, some believed that alchemy's prevalence in a myriad of cultures pointed to its origin in a common ancestor: Atlantis. John Read charts alchemy's spread from the cradle of civilization, Mesopotamia, along trade routes to Egypt, Greece, China, and India, and this shared knowledge is part of the basis for the theory about Atlantis as the cradle of alchemy (14).

As it was adopted by different countries along trade routes, alchemy was also appropriated by existing culture and traditions. One notable example is the influence of Daoism in China, which eventually led to the vital “union of opposites” so important in alchemy. In Europe, Hermeticism helped influence alchemical schools of thought particularly important in the Renaissance. Hermeticism was concerned with refining nature to produce works like gold and the *lapis philosophorum*, or philosopher’s stone. The *Hermetica*, a collection of works attributed to the mythical figure Hermes Trismegistus, was one of the prime alchemical texts read during the Renaissance, considered “parallel to the revealed wisdom of the Bible, supporting biblical revelation and culminating in the philosophy of Plato, Plotinus, and others in the Platonic Tradition” (Copenhaver 2). Arabic alchemists also used these writings passed down in the *Hermetica* to inform their pursuit of alchemy (44). Much later, according to Nicholas Clulee, John Dee’s movement towards scientific thought came on the wings of his occult beliefs inspired by cabala and hermetic philosophy, and these sources “emphasized an operative magic as the key to understanding nature” (57). Dee believed in the fruitfulness of alchemical endeavors even as he pursued scientific knowledge more familiar to modern people (Yates 97). According to Paul Backer and other scholars, Aristotelian philosophy, Neoplatonism, as well as certain occult movements, were also gradually incorporated into alchemy; hermetic philosophy also greatly helped shape some of alchemy’s principles.

However, as it stood by the time of the Renaissance, alchemy was beginning to sustain heavy criticism as unscientific and the stuff of deceptive magicians rather than learned men of science. Still, alchemy did play a role in the genesis of modern scientific inquiry. Alchemy has been the primordial pool for many of today’s sciences, including chemistry and psychology. As Feingold puts it, “[s]cholars... have redirected our attention to the importance of the ‘occult

tradition' in generating and disseminating the new scientific modes of thought" and even though modern science has led many to mock alchemy, now scholars are increasingly forced to acknowledge it as one of the forefathers of modern science (73). In his doctoral dissertation "Shakespeare, Alchemy, and the Dao," Paul Backer asserts that "the current variety of literature examining esotericism, Daoism and alchemy is a rapidly expanding [field of] interest [in] scholarship in comparative philosophy, religion and aesthetics" and this has helped shed light on alchemy as a cross-cultural movement as well as the origin of some of alchemy's most important tenets, such as the union of opposites (76).

The principles of yin/yang as expressed in China, or *coincidentia oppositorum* (union of opposites) in the Western theological tradition, or even of dialectics in philosophy, teaches humans that when one moves far in one direction, soon one will feel the pull in the opposite direction. (Backer 101)

For practitioners of alchemy, this balance achieved by uniting opposites is critical for any work they do. Mercury and sulphur are the most-mentioned substances in alchemical practice since they are considered opposites, and combining them effects change in a substance as part of the alchemical process. Usually these are also linked to the creation of gold as parts of that lengthy and complicated process, and are the fluids in the archetypal flask imagery used by alchemists in their illustrated texts. Mercury and sulphur were also the two materials represented by the twin snakes of the caduceus and analogous to the yin and yang of the ouroboros, a serpent that both consumes and gives birth to itself. During the process of creating gold, mercury was evaporated from cinnabar, the result of its combination with sulphur, and collected in a gourd-like container, likely similar in shape to a womb (267-270).

For alchemists, opposites like mercury and sulphur were not things whose very nature prevented unity; rather, it was their differences that allowed them to unify so well to create something greater than themselves. This is also why sexual copulation is so frequently depicted and referenced in alchemical texts. The union of two opposites, here male and female, creates a new substance (the fetus) from preexisting material through gestation, just as alchemists believed metals were gestating in the womb of the earth until they reached their perfect state, otherwise known as gold (Healey 15). This also explains the image of the baby in the flask sometimes used in alchemical texts, since the baby and gold are analogous and created from essentially the same process.

This process is transmutation, or the process of moving one substance toward its perfect final form. Alchemists believed that all natural things were moving towards perfection, but most had not matured into gold and might not within their lifetime. The solution was to simulate these natural processes in alchemists' laboratories (such as exposing the materials to mercury and sulphur), but at a speed that would yield gold in a human's lifetime (Smith 174). The ideal way of doing this was first to purify oneself and then to create a philosopher's stone that would cause the materials to undergo true transmutation and become gold. Some less ethical alchemists produced the illusion of transmutation by stirring a melted base metal with a hollow, gold-filled wand whose plug could easily be melted by a hot material. However, true transmutation was only considered to be achieved when a base metal was sprinkled with a particular powder or exposed to the philosopher's stone and immediately turned to gold. This is not the same as merely heating a metal to separate it into gold and not-gold; the metal itself must be changed, not separated or decreased by the process (Smith 176).

Alchemy itself, however, was not monolithic, and the means to achieving gold differed. Some sought to turn base materials directly into gold, while others believed a philosopher's stone must first be made, then base metals could be exposed to the stone and transformed, while still others believed that alchemists must first purify themselves, then create the philosopher's stone, which would then create gold as well as an elixir that could prolong life and cure all diseases, known as the panacea. Of course, creating the philosopher's stone was no casual process. It involved the twelve gates, or steps, including separation, conjugation, and multiplication, which would ultimately purify the alchemist and allow him to create a true philosopher's stone. The enigmatic details of this process, as well as the difficulty, probably prompted alchemists to create much less labor-intensive counterfeit products or seek ways to bypass the process, but the creation of a true philosopher's stone to transmute gold was the ultimate goal. Alchemists also sought to purify and refine themselves through connection to the Divine and gain immortality, either physically or spiritually. The gold of the alchemists, physical gold aside, also included "Our Gold," a more divine connection with the cosmos (Backer 267). The more occult and mystical side of alchemy dealt frequently with purifying and strengthening the inner self, seen as a necessary process to prepare the alchemist to refine nature. So while alchemists sought to refine natural materials into gold, they also sought to purify themselves so that they could create a philosopher's stone that could work true transmutation on natural materials to achieve true gold.

Eventually, however, alchemy gave way to more modern scientific thought and the hollow-wand alchemists gave way to chemists. Perhaps because of what it shares with other philosophies, or because of the difficulty in gathering its complex ideas and ideologies into something easily understood, alchemy has only begun to engage scholarly investigation within

the last century as literary critics search Donne's works and Shakespeare's plays for alchemical references once entirely passed over.

ALCHEMY AND DONNE

Much critical attention has been focused on the role of alchemy in Donne's works, and this criticism is far more plentiful and easy to find than alchemical criticism of Shakespeare's sonnets. It is true that a fair amount of critical attention has been paid to the alchemical references contained in Shakespeare's plays, but especially by comparison to Donne, little has been written. This may be because Donne's interest in science and alchemy was well-known to his contemporaries and historians. Donne's use of alchemical references, sometimes portraying alchemical ideas positively, stands in contrast to negative portrayals that, according to Linden, deride alchemy as the pursuit of (at best) the misguided and (at worst) charlatans and deceivers of the innocent who sought their services (105).

Linden also writes that, during Donne's life, alchemy experienced two literary movements: the first movement tended to be more critical about alchemy, taking satirical aim at both alchemists and the victims of their schemes. However, Linden claims that even though this satirical tradition continued into the early seventeenth century, in the late sixteenth century writers began to use alchemy to symbolize "change, growth, purification, and regeneration" (105). At times Donne's treatment of alchemy can be satirical and derisive, such as in his portrayal of alchemy as false wealth in "The Sunne Rising" or the disgusting "medicine" the alchemy apprentice believes he has produced in "Love's Alchemy" (109). However, Linden also asserts that Donne writes kindly about alchemy, using it to symbolize very real renewal and resurrection, such as the grave in "The Elegy on the Lady Marckham" which functions as a limbeck (or distillation device) that sends her through putrefaction and regeneration (Linden

110). Although Linden does not explicitly state it, these are steps in alchemy's twelve gates that purportedly lead to gold or the philosopher's stone. Linden writes that Donne "tend[s] to use alchemy with an awareness and understanding of its full range of denotations, connotations, and associated nuances" and I find this is to be a particularly fitting way of describing Shakespeare's use of alchemical references as well (109).

Donne's interest in alchemy was rooted in his interest in the health and balance of the human body: he was fascinated with theories set forth by the sixteenth-century alchemist and physician Paracelsus that dealt with the mythical agent called *balsamum* (Shams and Anushiravani 57). The *balsamum* was believed to be a balm produced naturally by the human body, capable of preserving it and curing it of ailments, and Shams and Anushiravani claim that throughout his career Donne sought such a universal medicine to cure all physical diseases (57). This is the panacea of alchemy by a slightly different name, and Donne believed this universal medicine could only be produced in the human body when a perfect harmony of elements within it was achieved; he frequently used alchemical imagery to depict the purification process necessary to achieve this harmony (57). It may seem strange that Donne satirized alchemy while also practicing it, but it may be that he simply believed his way was supported by science, unlike other ways of practicing alchemy that dealt with heavenly bodies and ethereal beings. Donne's treatment of alchemy, first in satire and later in seriousness, may also demonstrate his conflicted ideas about it.

Alchemy as a regenerative and cleansing process lends itself well to both natural and religious imagery, and Shams and Anushiravani note that Donne uses this imagery himself in "A Litany" where the sin-ridden one "is attracted to a god who has the capacity to re-create the sinful speaker, clean him, and prepare him for salvation before he dies" (58). The speaker asks

God to “purge away/ All vicious tinctures, that new fashioned/ I may rise up from death, before I am dead” (161). Although Shams and Anushiravani are correct that purification was valued by some alchemists and purification imagery is sometimes used when writers employ alchemical imagery, they do not remark on the use of the word “tincture” here. A common pitfall when writing about alchemy is that it shares many ideas with religious theories of redemption, especially the idea of purification to construct a more holy self in order to interact with divine beings or powers. This distinction between alchemy and religion can be made clear when a critic or an author focuses on the additional parts of alchemy that are distinctive, particularly ideas about the philosopher’s stone, gold, transmutation, and uniting opposing forces. A better example can be found in Shams and Anushiravani’s examination of Southwell’s “The Burning Babe” where a baby in an alchemist’s furnace is meant to represent Christ who presents himself as an alchemical process leading to redemption (57). The use of the baby in a furnace is a stronger indication of alchemy since a baby in some sort of cooking or transformative device is typically seen in alchemical symbol books and art.

However, there is much scholarship concerning Donne’s use of alchemical references in his religious prose that relies on stronger examples than the poem “A Litanie.” According to Keller, for quite a while scholars were not aware of how much alchemy had influenced Donne’s religious writing because they had not looked beyond his use of alchemical imagery in his poetry, but once they did, they discovered that it had permeated his theological prose as well (486). He primarily used alchemy to clarify or exemplify religious principles; Donne compares Christ’s mediation to the philosopher’s stone that can transform something into its most pure and complete form (487). This can be seen most obviously in some of his sermons, particularly “Death’s Duel,” the last sermon Donne gave before his death. This sermon says that death has a

place in life as much as birth, and what should matter to us is not the hour of our death, but how we live our lives.

Keller asserts that in “Death’s Duel” Donne uses Christ’s blood as a metaphor for the balm he believes the human body naturally produces that keeps it healthy. This better explains Donne’s use of the word “embalm” in the sermon, pointing to the universal balm rather than a funerary practicality: “Donne speculates that it is the spirit of God in Christ’s blood that sustained him (‘embalmed with divine nature’), and, possessing the qualities of the balm that ‘incorruptible blood’ becomes a... health to the world” (Keller 488). This embalming preserves Christ in the sermon just as Donne believed the balm would preserve the health of real human bodies and just as the divine blood of Christ preserved him in the tomb. Keller links this portrayal of Christ to Donne’s alchemical beliefs. Christ’s unity with God in this example mirrors the unity human alchemists sought to have with the universe at large, the unity Donne believed would stimulate the production of real-life balm in the human body, thus sustaining it just as God in Christ’s blood sustained him.

It isn’t surprising, then, that Donne uses the grave as an alchemical stew pot in “Death’s Duel,” listing off the horrors the decomposing body goes through as “corruption and putrefaction, and vermiculation” in a list of actions that closely resemble the twelve gates of alchemy, among which were steps like conjugation, putrefaction, and so forth (Donne, *Devotions* 127). Jesus is also able to unite within himself the opposites of manhood and godhood, making him at once man and not-man (128). Donne writes that through “his hypostatical union of both natures we see that Christ did die; for all his union which made him God and man, he became no man” (Donne, *Devotions* 127-128). Jesus’s union with the divine elevates him from mere mortality to the state of “no man,” presumably immortality of his own since man is mortal.

Donne pursues the metaphor of the grave as an alchemical vial again in “Resurrection Imperfection” when he describes the resurrection of Christ and redemption of sinful humanity.

Keller quotes part of this poem, and part of the selection he chooses is particularly striking.

Donne writes that Christ,

Whose body, having walk'd on earth, and now

Hasting to Heaven, would (that he might allow

Himself unto all stations and fill all)

For these three days [became] a mineral.

He was gold when he lay down, but rose

All tincture, and doth not alone dispose

Leaden and iron wills to good, but is

Of power to make even sinful flesh like his (9-16).

Keller is correct when he states that Christ is transmuting base humanity into something more holy and pure here (489). According to the footnote by the collection editor, Dickson, “The poem embodies an alchemical conceit: at the Resurrection, the Son, who was *gold* before, becomes a *tincture* able to transform and resurrect even sinful flesh” (147). The juxtaposition between the sinful leaden and iron wills and the goldenness of Christ is clearly alchemical: lead and iron were immature, impure forms of gold and alchemists sought to convert them to real gold either through an alchemical refining process, or by first creating a philosopher’s stone to transmute the gold. Christ acts in a similar way here, being able to transform the sinful soul (likened to lead or iron) to a saved soul, which is likened to gold. However, Keller devotes

relatively little attention to unpacking this part of the poem, returning instead to a discussion of “Death’s Duel.”

In “Love’s Growth,” Donne does explore the beneficial union of man and woman in a way that begins to resemble Shakespeare’s use of alchemical references. Here the poet reflects on his love for his mistress, calling the love imperfect since it has no quintessence (perfect form). He asserts, however, that his love will continue to grow no matter what winter or hardship it might encounter, and that his mistress is at the center of this growing love. In their discussion of “Love’s Growth,” Shams and Anushiravani chart the use of the union of man and woman in love as a metaphor for this process of perfect harmonization and creation of the philosopher’s stone, a material capable of producing the balm (or panacea or *balsamum*) that Donne sought in his studies (59). Donne uses the speaker, a man, as “the Philosophical sulphur, and the Woman as Philosophical Mercury, and love as Philosophical salt or quintessence” (59). Using man and woman as sulphur and mercury makes Donne’s use of circles and spheres in the latter part of the sonnet seem almost like alchemical vials:

If, as in water stir’d more circles be
 Produced by one, love such additions take,
 Those like to many spheres, but one heaven make,
 For they are all concentric unto thee;
 And though each spring do add to love new heat
 As princes do in time of action get
 New taxes, and remit them not in peace,

No winter shall abate the spring's increase (20-28).

Donne uses the imagery of the man and the woman within a sphere to reinforce the alchemical imagery and to further the conceit that the love produced by them in harmony is capable of self-reflexively improving itself and their union as a whole, according to Shams and Anushiravani (59). This makes sense since, as I discuss above, alchemy must combine the ingredients for the philosopher's stone in a flask, just as Shams and Anushiravani claim the man and woman are being combined in the poem. In "Love's Growth" love cannot be the panacea when alone, but rather it must be combined with the man (sulphur) and the woman (mercury) in order to become a panacea (59). To complete this universal cure, male and female must come together just as sulphur and mercury must come together to make the philosopher's stone, which can then truly transmute something into gold or create Donne's balm.

Alchemical Criticism of Shakespeare's Sonnets

While most of Donne's use of alchemical imagery revolves around growth, salvation, and rebirth, Shakespeare's use of it is far less spiritual and far less recognized in his sonnets. Shakespeare uses alchemical images not to express metaphysical and religious ideas, as Donne does, but rather to suggest different pathways to attaining immortality. Many critics, when looking at alchemical images and ideas in the sonnets, tend to note isolated instances without connecting them to a larger, more unified reading. Even critical essays dedicated to alchemy in Shakespeare focus almost exclusively on his other works, leaving only scattered and tangential nods to the sonnets.

This is where I hope to explore a previously underdeveloped vein of criticism by offering not only a deeper reading of the alchemical references in the sonnets at length, but by also discussing

reasons for their inclusion. I propose that Shakespeare introduces several recognizable alchemical images, such as the ouroboros, the distillation, the union of opposites, and the healing springs, but never allows these alchemical images and processes to defeat the power of mortality; although the sonnets strive to preserve the fair friend's beauty and virtue, there is still no immortality for him. Shakespeare ultimately allows all the alchemy to be for naught, just as the search for the philosopher's stone and quests for immortality came to nothing in the end.

Linda Carney explores Shakespeare's use of alchemy in *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and others in "Alchemy in Selected Plays of Shakespeare," though she says very little about the sonnets. For Carney, alchemy provides a "dramatic and poetic complex of ideas suggesting the possibilities of renewal" in these works (iii). She suggests that alchemy was used this way most often in his tragedies and histories, often presented as a curative measure against the ills of man, whether physical or spiritual (47). In her discussion of *Julius Caesar*, she notes the use of the lion in relation to the strange happenings that disturb Casca, who thinks the gods are at work; an alchemical emblem, the lion symbolizes the penetrating fire of sulphur that helps create the philosopher's stone (48). However, Cassius asserts that these strange events are because Rome's morality is diseased. Carney asserts that Brutus will heal Rome, Cassius refining and grooming Brutus as an alchemist transforms his base material (49). Carney calls Brutus "the perfected material," while "Cassius is the motivating force," and together they can figuratively turn blood into medicine; Casca even refers to Brutus's countenance as "richest alchymy" (I.iii.159). Ultimately, Carney says, Brutus will use the blood of Julius Caesar as a tincture to cure the sickness of the Roman state (53). Carney says that "the conspirators must think of themselves as alchemists," even if it seems Casca is the alchemist while Brutus functions more as a philosopher's stone that transforms the blood of Casca into a healing tincture (49-50).

Blood is treated similarly in *King John* as Carney points out the gilding property of Frenchmen's blood on the soldiers' armor (58). Likewise, she claims the sun performs a gilding role at the marriage of Blanche and Lewis. She also notes in *Macbeth* that the critically troublesome "golden blood" of Duncan would have been understood by Shakespeare's audience as a powerful transmuting agent (58). Carney also notes the transformative power of love and the similar power of the sun in both *King John* and Sonnet 114, stating that in the sonnet the poet cautions that one must "take care that love's transformative power is not false alchemy" (75). Like alchemy or love, Carney claims the sun can transform a person's world, either bathing it in light or plunging it into darkness (59). However, her remarks on Sonnet 114 are the last time she mentions the sonnets.

Paul Backer does not discuss the sonnets at all, despite spending extensive time making the connection between Daoist concepts, alchemy, and Shakespeare's plays. According to Backer, alchemy and Daoism share a great many principles, such as their "materials, cosmology, and worldview" (xviii). Backer seeks to explore the meeting place between alchemy, Shakespeare's plays, and Daoism, elaborating in great detail on both the concepts of Daoism and alchemy, the latter of which is discussed above. Backer asserts that the "nothing" in *King Lear* is a Daoist concept Romanized as "wúyǒu," or "non-being" (592). Frank Vulpi also asserts *King Lear* has Daoist influences, and Melvin Sterne likewise links elements of the tragedy to Buddhism. As for *Hamlet*, Backer asserts that Hamlet goes through his own alchemical, transformative process over the course of the play (618). Backer examines it through Chinese Daoist concepts, calling Hamlet a *neidan* or alchemical apprentice, and he asserts that Hamlet eventually reaches non-being by the end of the play (620). Backer eschews exploring this,

however, and instead moves on to further explore the intersection between Daoist and alchemical terminology; he does no work with the sonnets.

Healey does work slightly more extensively with the sonnets in her book. In this, she discusses how Shakespeare treats the inner self or mind in the same manner that alchemists treated base metals, bringing them from the dark depths of the earth (or unconscious, the case of the mind), purifying them, and transforming them into very different things (1). Healey acknowledges that alchemical language fills Shakespeare's sonnets; she argues that such language usually goes unrecognized "because we no longer imagine ourselves in this way, and are unfamiliar with chemistry's archaic lexicon" (3). She posits that this is the reason critics have missed the significance of the tiger and phoenix imagery in Sonnet 19, and that alchemical references explain the often-mentioned child the poet desires the fair friend to have, or "burgeoning babe" as Healey calls it, seen in many of the sonnets (3). Healey then goes on to discuss the spiritual-alchemical references in some of the sonnets, noting in particular the way 24, 27, 29, 30, and 31 deal with spiritual wealth and the refining of the mind through memory and recall. In Sonnet 24 in particular, Healey points out the way the poet paints the fair friend in his mind an example of the human mind working with memories to enrich itself in the sonnet (5). She focuses on the word "meditation" in Sonnet 27 and the way the poet, remembering his love, seems to have "the potential to be spiritually uplifting" (5). She then moves on to chart the spiritual wealth of Sonnets 29 and 30, claiming that working with the memories mentioned in the sonnets above has uplifted the poet and allowed him to refine and better his mind and spirit, just as alchemists refined and bettered base materials while seeking gold, or bettered and refined themselves while seeking a purified self (5). Healey's focus on the sonnets is more substantial than that of most critics who deal with alchemy; she analyzes specific sonnets as opposed to

giving broad-stroke and vague acknowledgement that alchemical references exist in them.

However, while she examines the sonnets from a psychoanalytical perspective that deals with memory and the mind, I seek to chart a narrative of alchemical references that deal with the quest for immortality as it might be achieved through progeny or poetry.

Another good example of alchemical criticism on the sonnets is *Shakespeare on Love* by Ronald Gray. Published in 2011, it charts the ways in which Shakespeare writes about love and analyzes the schools of thought that influenced the language of the sonnets, noting Plato's *Symposium* and the *Song of Solomon* as particularly influential to them. Specific references to alchemy are scarce in Gray's book, making up a scant seven out of a hundred pages. Even as Gray discusses the lack of alchemical criticism of Shakespeare in the preface, his book features only slightly more than those who have written before him.

Most of Gray's focus seems to be on Biblical language in the sonnets, as well as the influence of Plato. Gray asserts that the *Song of Solomon* had great influence in particular on sonnets 153 and 154, noting that both share the idea of cool water being unable to quench the flame of love (2). This is an interesting reading that I do not dispute, but I also see that Shakespeare has chosen allusions that can be traced back to multiple sources at once, so the spring in 153 and 154 can be both an allusion to the *Song of Solomon* and an alchemical reference. Gray's analysis of the sonnets follows a similar vein, charting influences such as Aristophanes' story in the *Symposium* of how the different sexes and love came about, which shows up in *Twelfth Night* in the image of the cleft apple (5). Gray darts between influences with ease, but alchemy plays no role in his main point here. He does, however, briefly meditate on Shakespeare's use of alchemy in Sonnet 33, where the poet "has had an experience of a kind of vision expressed in terms of being touched by the Philosopher's Stone" (23). However, Gray

maintains that the opposing meteorological forces that occur in the poem *may* be “in accordance with the philosophy of alchemy,” asserting that this “sounds the least likely explanation” (24). This is a surprising assertion since the sonnet seems to imply the river is gilded by the sun’s gaze, which is “kissing with golden face the meadows green/ Gilding pale streams with heaven’s alchemy” (33.3-4). It hardly seems as though “[w]hat impelled Shakespeare to make such a strange combination is beyond guessing” (Gray 24). Interestingly enough, Sonnet 7 also employs sun imagery, the sun’s “gracious light” shining from “the orient” (7.1). Given alchemy’s origins in Egypt and the Middle East, the use of orient here is particularly appropriate as the place the sun is viewed and where he goes on his “golden pilgrimage” (7.8). Gray writes that the sun in Sonnet 33 may be the fair friend, with a gaze that can transmute as it gilds the stream, although he seems to doubt this, stating that there is ambiguity in both this and sonnet 20 in regards to eye-gilding (14). The young man’s gaze in Sonnet 20 also gilds that which it touches, making him like a philosopher’s stone, reputed to turn things into true gold (20.5).

Gray makes good points about the gender ambiguity associated with the fair friend and the famous designation “master-mistress of my passion” (20.2). Many critics other than Gray have noted the mixture of masculine and feminine qualities in the fair friend, but Gray calls attention to role of hermaphroditic images in alchemy. In alchemy, the hermaphrodite was the symbol of the ultimate union of opposites, man and woman (or mercury and sulphur) brought together in a harmonious union (15).

ALCHEMICAL REFERENCES IN THE SONNETS

The fair friend, as I will discuss later, also seems to possess some very striking qualities in common with the ouroboros, or the self-consuming serpent, in his consumption of himself. Both the hermaphrodite and the ouroboros unite opposites: the hermaphrodite combines male

and female; the ouroboros combines creator and destroyer. Shakespeare may well have painted the fair friend in the image of a hermaphrodite who embodies male and female, but he does not allow being a hermaphrodite to make the fair friend immortal. In order to live on, the fair friend cannot be solitary and self-contained; he must unite with an external opposite to create a child, which initially is presented by the poet as the only way to achieve immortality. Ultimately, neither his union with the dark lady nor his state as an ouroboros/hermaphrodite allows him to achieve immortality, no matter how the poet and the fair friend might try.

The poet's attempt to fight the power of time and immortalize the fair friend is one of the most important themes in the sequence. The alchemical images are often employed to represent this quest for eternal life, or to criticize the friend for his failure to pursue immortality. Shakespeare's original audience would have recognized many of these allusions to alchemical processes and known that immortality was their aim. At the opening of the sequence, the poet urges the fair friend to reproduce himself in order to combat time. In these poems (1-17), Shakespeare takes great care to suggest that the production of a child would end the fair friend's profitless usury, and to equate childlessness with death. Gray identifies the fair friend as a hermaphroditic figure with good reason, linking his male and female qualities to the hermaphrodite figure important in alchemy as a symbol for the union of opposites, but the master-mistress imagery is only one of the two veins of imagery consistently associated with the fair friend; the other is self-consumption.

The self-consumptive imagery is not limited to monetary imagery; rather it is also associated with the summer/winter themes and those of crops versus famine, and even the alchemical imagery of the tiger's paw and phoenix blood, as noted by Healey (3). Another alchemical image of self-consumption is the ouroboros. This mythical serpent is, according to

Backer, a creature that represents the need for united opposites in the world as it consumes its tail and gives birth to itself simultaneously (49). Shakespeare strongly evokes part of the ouroboros's cycle in the self-consumptive imagery in the sonnets, but does not allow the fair friend to be a successful or complete ouroboros since to do so would bring immortality, and Shakespeare is critical of this. No alchemical principle will bring the fair friend immortality. Gray may be right that the fair friend can be linked to the hermaphrodite, but criticism should not end there. His hermaphroditic nature suggests a union of opposites in his body, but it is not enough to make him immortal that these opposites are internal; he must be united with an external opposite for a fruitful union in the real world, hence part of the reason why the ouroboros imagery is negative and why the dark lady is written as she is in relation to the fair friend.

The first sonnets focus intensely on the fair friend's destructive self-consumption and his refusal to father a child. These alone do not necessarily characterize the fair friend as a reference to the ouroboros, any more than themes of redemption are not necessarily alchemical references. Indeed, Shakespeare's use of alchemical references in these sonnets is often ironic; every alchemical symbol is not presented seriously. Alone, they can be written off as the skewed perceptions of a jealous almost-lover or an overly concerned friend, but Shakespeare pairs these self-consuming qualities with other alchemical references that are more overt and weaves the problem of being a self-consuming ouroboros into the larger narrative of the poems. If the fair friend were a complete ouroboros who could give birth to himself over and over, or if somehow being both masculine and feminine granted him immortality, then there would be no sonnets urging him to have children and later no sonnets trying to immortalize him when no child is

produced. However, since that is not the case, it is worth looking at the self-consumptive imagery since it is tied to many other alchemical references.

Alone and childless, the friend is scolded by the poet because he is apparently adept at spending himself and wasting his youth in a loveless state. Because of this behavior, the poet calls him a “glutton” that seems to desire only to “eat the world’s due” (1.13-14). The world’s due, according to the poet, is a child fathered by the fair friend so that his beauty can live on and further be enjoyed by the world. However, the fair friend is not compliant, and Sonnet 1 sets the stage for alchemical ideas that will follow him for many of the initial sonnets. In Sonnet 1, readers are confronted with the problem of the fair friend’s feeding his own flames in a self-contained relationship rather than someone else’s, reminiscent of the ouroboros devouring itself. Sonnet 1 asserts that all creatures of the earth desire to create children in order to live on forever through their offspring, yet the fair friend is a strange beast for not wanting to bear children, instead consuming and squandering his irreplaceable youth through being childless. The poet highlights this by uniting marriage and fire imagery in Sonnet 1:

But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
 Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel
 Making a famine where abundance lies,
 Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel (5-8).

Indeed, the fair friend is quite enamored with himself since he is “contracted to [his] own” eyes; “contracted,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, was often used to mean “betrothed” or even “shrunk” from the mid-1500’s the mid-1600’s, further highlighting his self-consuming nature, one that deeply troubles the poet because it means the fair friend will leave the earth

forever when he dies. It seems as though the poet desires for the fair friend to complete the metaphor of the ouroboros, lest he cease to exist without a legacy. Shakespeare's poet frets over the young man's "self-substantial fuel" since the young man is feeding on fuel like a flame, but unlike actual fire, he is feeding on himself instead of on some external fuel as natural fire would (1.6). This fire imagery may also be a subtle nod to the fires that fuel the boiling flasks that alchemists hoped would produce gold or the philosopher's stone. However, the fair friend consumes himself unnaturally and without ever producing anything of value (like a child).

The fair friend's childlessness is called an "all-eating shame" in the second sonnet and this is like a field furrowed in winter, which naturally cannot produce crops for food just as he does not produce a child (2.8). In this sonnet, the poet warns that time will "dig deep trenches" in the friend's brow, an image picked up in Sonnet 19. In Sonnet 19, the poet makes striking use of consumption imagery in lines 2-3 when he begs that "the earth devour her own sweet brood;/ Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws" rather than drawing lines in his lover's brow. The earth's eating her brood is cannibalistic much like the poet's charge against the fair friend. Without the next step of creating itself, the ouroboros would also simply be a self-cannibalizing snake as well, which at the time of this sonnet is exactly where the fair friend is. The fair friend, therefore, cannot continue on if he merely consumes rather than uniting with a woman to generate a child.

The child of the fair friend is painted as the continuation of the fair friend himself and his youth, and is represented metaphorically as profit, gold, summer, and renewal. Gold is one of the most well-known aims of alchemy, and as referenced earlier, renewal is a theme present in alchemy and also a theme that writers have used alchemical imagery to represent. Shakespeare associates gold and treasure with the child as part of a usury metaphor, but also to suggest that

the child will (metaphorically) provide the gold-creating and life-prolonging effects of the philosopher's stone. If the fair friend does not have a child, he passes from the summer of his life to winter and he squanders the loan of beauty and youth Nature has given him. In order to combat these outcomes, the child must be the fair friend's new youth, and extend his summer. The child must also act as interest on the return of Nature's loan of youth, hence the usury metaphors. To do all these things, the child must act as a philosopher's stone to create the gold/treasure that becomes interest as well as helping to renew the fair friend's vital energy.

If the child is a regenerative alchemical substance like the panacea, then it is no wonder that we find the child in a flask in Sonnets 5 and 6. Sonnet 5 continues the metaphor of the child as a life-preserving substance, focusing more on the preservation of the friend and less on the shame of thriftless spending and subsequent death than earlier sonnets have. In Sonnet 5, the poet compares the fair friend's youth to golden, impermanent summer. "[N]ever-resting time leads summer on/ To hideous winter, and confounds him there," and if the fair friend does not make a "distillation" of himself, his "lusty leaves [will be] quite gone/ Beauty o'ersnowed and bareness every where" (5-9). Here the poet is warning him that if he does not distill himself into a child the way summer distills itself into a concentrated, pure (and presumably long-lasting) form to survive winter, so too will the fair friend die without preserving himself. His beauty will fade as summer must and give way to the ravages of winter, unless there is something to preserve his youth. This is why Sonnet 5 represents the child as a distillation in a flask, one of the most overtly alchemical images in the sonnets, The poet states that summer can only return because it has been made into a "distillation left /A liquid prisoner pent in walls made of glass" (5.9-10). The description of the distillation of summer, here standing in for offspring, can also easily be seen as a representation of the elixir of life, purported to give immortality just as the poet

promises the child will. The negative connotation of prisoner here indicates that the state of being a distillation, even if it brings immortality (or maybe because it *does* bring immortality), may not be a desirable one. This particular image has also been called a reference to the creation of perfume by various editors. Stephen Booth, editor of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, discusses the distilled child in Sonnets 5 and 6 as being like the perfume, which preserves a flower's essence as a child would the fair friend's (141). Wells makes a similar point as editor of *The Oxford Shakespeare*. He calls Sonnet 5's "liquid prisoner" in line 10 a reference to "the constraint of perfume into a bottle" which he says "qualifies the attraction of immortality" (390). The fact that the immortal substance in the flask is represented as a prisoner is at odds with the positive way immortality is usually presented in this sequence; even if Shakespeare does not depict immortality as attainable, its allure to the poet is quite clear. However, Wells does not pursue the idea of immortality farther, and neither he nor Booth makes any references to this as an alchemical process.

A strikingly similar image to the child in a flask imagery mentioned above appears in Paul Backer's book in which a winged baby is shown in a flask filled with liquid; Backer finds the winged baby in a Jewish alchemical text called the *Cabala Mineralis* (1587). Backer notes that "The cosmic egg and the 'birth' of the 'alchemical gold' is often represented by a child being 'born' within the alchemical flask or vessel" (274-275). This child, in the sonnets, would come about if the fair friend united with a woman, and in alchemical imagery, the child represents gold or the philosopher's stone or an elixir of life, all born from the union of mercury and sulphur in the womb of the flask.



Fig. 1 *Cabala Mineralis Embryo* from Paul Backer's *Shakespeare, Alchemy and Dao (Tao): The Inner Alchemical Theatre*.

The image of the youth's immortality distilled in a flask seems to be one associated with the image of the "birth" of gold, then, and so it makes sense for the child, immortality, and wealth (gold) to be all brought together here into one metaphor. If the fair friend's wealth is his youth and he is spending it recklessly in the summer of his life by consuming it himself through being childless, then he cannot achieve immortality unless he creates new gold by fathering a child who will also possess this wealth/attractiveness. "For thyself to breed another thee" is how the poet expresses this idea in Sonnet 6, explicitly stating that the child will be a continuation of the fair friend (6.7).

Sonnet 6 also weaves together the summer/winter and alchemical vial imagery with the idea of bearing a child, closely following the ideas set forth by Sonnet 5. In this sonnet, the poet, as in Sonnet 5, urges the fair friend to distill himself into a child before the winter of old age comes in order to preserve forever the summer of his beauty. If “[i]n [his] summer [...] [he] be distilled,” then the fair friend will live on through his child, just like in Sonnet 5 (6.2). And while in his summer, he risks “winter’s ragged hand” taking away his youth and beauty (6.1). What the sonnets also share, in addition to the summer/winter imagery, is that they represent the child as the contents of a vial or flask. The poet urges the fair friend to “make sweet some vial,” or impregnate a woman with a child, in order to “treasure [...] some place/ with beauty’s treasure” (6.3-4). The child, of course, is the treasure produced by the vial/womb, and the poet even reassures the fair friend that making the child is “not forbidden usury,” meaning that this gathering of treasure or interest is not a moral or religious violation as it would have been for Renaissance Christians.

We first begin to see the language of renewal in Sonnet 2. According to the poet here, a child will make aging noble, whereas a childless old age is “an all-eating shame” (8). The child is treated like an investment he can show off in his old age as evidence that the fair friend was once handsome, as opposed to growing old without proof. His youth is called the “the treasure of [his] lusty days”; a child will “sum [his] count” since having a child that possesses his beauty will repay the loan of beauty nature gave him (6-11). This begins the usury metaphors that will permeate the early sonnets. At the end of the sonnet, however, Shakespeare switches from promising the child will settle his monetary account with nature to promising it will renew his life. This suggests that the child performs the roles associated both with monetary gold (settling his metaphorical account) and alchemical gold (renewing his life).

The child will warm his blood when it grows cold (presumably through aging) and make the fair friend young or new when he has become old. The offspring of the fair friend acts like a philosopher's stone or panacea here, and the fair friend will be "new made when [he is] old,/ And see [his] blood warm when [he] feel'st it cold" (2.13-14). This is a very direct argument for the child giving the fair friend a sort of immortality since his good looks will be passed on to the child who will, presumably, resemble him to a great degree (no mention is made of the mother's contribution) and so make his visage and beauty immortal. The poet makes no distinction between the fair friend himself and his beauty.

This is why Sonnet 2 states more plainly why having a child is so important: if the fair friend bears a child, then that child will resemble the father. According to the poet, age will turn the youth's beauty and appearance to:

a tatter'd weed of small worth held:

Then being ask'd, where all thy beauty lies,

Where all the treasure of thy lusty days.

To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes

Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise (2.4-8).

This passage employs financial metaphors, likening the fair friend's barren old age to thriftlessness and his youth to treasure. The youth's good looks and youthfulness are linked to his worth: since his tattered clothing of old age appears to be fairly worthless, his youth must have value as "treasure" and, like poor money management, his lack of a child is misspent youth and money. Just as he seems to be consuming all of the "treasure" of his youth now, so will he

be consumed by shame and winter when he has spent it all and has no heir to become his new wealth.

A child will “sum [his] count,” returning to the usury associated with spending his youthfulness (2.11). This makes sense if the youth is seen as “spending” his wealth (youth) in a way that will not allow it to return with interest as bearing a child will. The way the poet describes bearing children, fathering a child will take the wealth or youth the fair friend possesses and carry it on, keeping the bounty nature has loaned him and multiplying it (4.3). A child will keep him from having to return the loan so that he is not the “profitless usurer” he is when he remains childless. Bearing a child here is shown as similar in function to a loan bearing interest, the main point of loaning money, just as the poet seems to imply that the main point of youth is to survive through passing one’s good looks on.

Why the fair friend does not do this is never stated in the sonnets. It could be speculated that the friend is infertile, or that he chooses to remain celibate, or even that he simply has not yet met someone with whom he wishes to father children. However, the way the sonnets end with his union with the dark lady hints that he has not found immortality after all. “Opposites attract” is one of the oldest romantic adages, and alchemists believed that opposites not only could unite peacefully, but must do so to achieve a panacea or philosopher’s stone. Even though the poet shifts into providing immortality for the fair friend through his poetry instead, partially fulfilling the role of a generative female, this is not enough to make up for the absence of a true opposite. Perhaps if it had, the poet would not have lost his friend to the dark lady and would not have been excluded from their union. Unfortunately for the poet, alchemy only requires a union of two, not three.

At first, when the poet fills that pseudo-generative female role, all seems well. If the fair friend will not achieve immortality through a child, then the poet will substitute the poems as a way to preserve the fair friend and give him immortality. Although both are biological men and each seems to also be associated with a feminine role (the poet) or attribute (the fair friend), here the fair friend is relatively more masculine in providing the creative seed for the poems to be produced by the poet.

Although the fair friend and the poet are not true opposites, the poet tries to immortalize the fair friend through his sonnets anyway, since it seems to him that the fair friend will not father a child and the poet is possibly in love with the fair friend himself. In Sonnet 17, the poet laments that his work cannot fully immortalize the fair friend and show his true beauty because the fair friend's perfection defies artistic capture. The poet asserts that people will not believe that his poetry accurately portrays the grace and charm of the fair friend, but in the final couplet the poet relents, deciding to try all the same. He asserts that his poetry will have the same effect as a child will. If there "were some child of [his] alive at that time,/ [he] should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme" (13-14). Here the poet claims plainly that whether or not the child provides immortality for the fair friend, the poems he writes will. This claim is repeated in Sonnet 18, which more confidently asserts that the fair friend will be immortalized through the poet's verse. Here summer is likened again to the fair friend's youth, which is "more lovely and more temperate" than a summer's day (2). However, like the summer, the fair friend is not eternal without distilling himself. There are "rough winds [that] do shake the darling buds of May" and "summer's lease hath all too short a date" (3-4). This is in keeping with the imagery of the previous sonnets that warns the fair friend his youth and beauty alone will not grant him immortality. However, the poet goes on to claim that the fair friend's "eternal summer shall not

fade” since the poetry “gives life to [him]” (6-14). Here again the poet will produce work which performs the same function that he claims the child will: preserve the fair friend’s youth and life.

Sonnet 54 blends the ideas of the poet’s verse preserving the youth, and the distillation imagery seen in Sonnets 5 and 6. In this sonnet, the poet likens the fair friend to a rose, warning him that roses that are only beautiful will fade, but roses that produce a sweet scent can be distilled and live on through their distillation. In the earlier sonnets, the poet claimed that summer achieves its immortality through distillation, and he implied that the fair friend could do the same if only he would distill himself into a child. However, by Sonnet 54 the poet is offering to give immortality to the youth himself through the sonnets, and says so very plainly here. As for roses or the youth:

Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made:

And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,

When that shall vade, my verse distills your truth (12-14).

Here the poet is seeking to distill the youth and immortalize him in the same way a child would, by preserving his likeness in something that will outlive him. Giving the fair friend immortality by creating a distillation is a very alchemical idea indeed, conflating the powers of the poet’s verse with the powers of the child, both of which seem to try to perform the same regenerative task as the product of an alchemist’s flask, a philosopher’s stone.

In alchemical terms, however, the poet cannot successfully play the mother to the fair friend’s father because theirs is not a union of opposites; their qualities are quite similar. It is not until the dark lady arrives that the fair friend is faced with a true opposite to himself. The dark lady stands in contrast to the fair friend in not just her looks and morality, but in her masculine

forwardness and alleged promiscuity. She complements the fair friend as his opposite, creating the opportunity for a fruitful union. But like the other alchemical images of united opposites—the ouroboros and the hermaphrodite—this union of opposites will also fail to produce eternal life.

Recognizing that these sonnets contain many alchemical references helps to explain why Shakespeare creates a woman who is the fair friend's opposite in so many respects. One of their key differences can be seen in their sexual appetites. The young man is accused of loving no one, something apparently very plain to the poet, who says "that thou none lov'st is most evident" (10.4). The dark lady, however, is called "the bay where all men ride," a way of calling a woman loose or lascivious (137.5). In fact, alchemical principles are nearly all that could explain their union if the poet's evaluation of the dark lady is taken at face value. Sonnet 137 is dedicated to lamenting how the poet's eyes deceive him when he looks at her, making him believe he sees a good, honest woman when in reality she is far from that, a fact the poet knows and tries to ignore. This makes it all the stranger that a man as choosy as the fair friend would be besotted with such a loose woman.

Their morality, likely linked to their sexual behavior, also stand in contrast in the way outlined above. In Sonnet 144, a sonnet contrasting the fair friend and the dark lady, the poet calls the fair friend a "better angel... a man right fair" and the dark lady "the worser spirit a woman color'd ill" (3-4). "Color'd ill" seems to be a reference to morality as well as the color of her skin, just as the fair friend is "right fair." These two lovers are contrasted by external coloration and interior goodness, harkening back to the idea that alchemists worked with both the external, natural world and their internal, spiritual world when seeking to create the philosopher's stone.

The biggest complication to this union of opposites is gender, and the triad of characters at the forefront of the sonnets have a complicated *mélange* of conventionally-assigned gender characteristics. According to Sonnet 20, the fair friend has a “woman’s gentle heart” that is more constant than a biological woman’s, and his eyes are brighter, “gilding the object whereupon it gazeth” unlike a woman’s roving eyes (3-6). The poet explains this as happening because the fair friend began his “life” at conception as a woman, but Nature so desired him as her own that before his birth from a woman she turned him into a male, making him a biological opposite to herself (20.10-12). This process seems similar to the idea that materials are gestated in the womb of the earth, always heading towards the perfection of gold, and so it seems that as he gestated, Nature intervened and turned him male. This also seems to play on the idea that women are incomplete men and part of her process of perfecting him included adding “one thing to my purpose nothing,” that is, a phallus, which does the male poet little good (20.12). He tries to fill the child-bearing female role for the fair friend by writing the poems, and carries out a love affair with the dark lady in a role later usurped by the fair friend, but in the end he has no place with either of them.

Of course, the natural next question regards the child itself and its existence. Shakespeare never mentions the birth of an actual child, rendering the pursuit of immortality ultimately as hollow as the false alchemists’ wands. Since real alchemy never produced a real philosopher’s stone or a means for achieving immortality, Shakespeare parallels this by never including the philosopher’s stone-like child in the sonnets. This may indicate that immortality is a hollow pursuit and no amount of complicated instructions or mysterious rituals can change the way the real world works or the fact that having a child will not truly grant immortality. This may offer another explanation for the nearly-identical sonnets 153 and 154 that end the sonnet

sequence: the dark lady has given love to the fair friend and to the speaker, but this love is characterized as a disease and although the springs described in these sonnets purportedly are able to cure all ills, they cannot cure the speaker's love for her. In Sonnet 144, the same sonnet that compares the fair friend and the dark lady as angelic figures, good and bad respectively, the poet ends with the suggestion that the dark lady has or will "fire [the] good one out" (14). This, according to Wells's footnotes, may be a suggestion that she has given the good angel (the fair friend) a venereal disease (668). Wells also remarks that hot baths, such as those featured in sonnets 153 and 154, were used to treat venereal diseases, and so it may be that the dark lady has given both the poet and the fair friend such an infection since it seems that the poet is trying to cure himself in those baths (686). These baths are lauded as a "sovereign cure" in Sonnet 153 (line 8) and a "healthful remedy" in Sonnet 154 (11). However, it appears that this supposedly amazing medicinal bath cannot heal the poet: he "found no cure," setting the bath up as a failed panacea (153.13). Shakespeare brings together opposing imagery at the pool as well. It is the maids of Diana (a virgin goddess) who take the sleeping Cupid's brand, quenching the hot brand in a "cold valley-fountain" (153.4). At this spring Shakespeare has brought together the opposites male and female, chastity and desire, and heat and cold; the scene is reminiscent of sulphur and mercury being brought together to create a philosopher's stone. It is ironic that, after Shakespeare sets the stage for the fair friend to need a child to gain immortality and even gives the fair friend a complete opposite to do so with, the result of that union is disease. The failed panacea bath is the final failure of an alchemical idea and the final failed chance at immortality; Shakespeare lets the alchemical imagery fail in order to show the futility of achieving immortality, just as he lets the other alchemical schemes ultimately come to naught.

Alchemy was undeniably present in Renaissance England, and although no historical records show Shakespeare to be interested in alchemy, unlike Donne, his sonnets nonetheless contain alchemical references that help offer a new critical narrative of the sonnets and hopefully inspire even more alchemical readings of his texts. Only a very few critics have rightly noted alchemical references in his work, and far fewer still have bothered to closely examine the sonnets in this light. Although they contain overt references to alchemy, there is not a tradition of searching the sonnets for alchemical references. What I have tried to do is both expound on references to alchemy glossed over by previous critics while also showing how vaguer references work together to support a broader alchemical reading of the sonnets. At the heart of the issue is the role the child plays in the poet's pursuit of immortality for the fair friend and the ultimate failure to achieve it. Reproduction is described as distilling the friend's essence into a flask, and his youth is likened to treasure and money, gold, and summer in many sonnets; this web of ideas is unified in Sonnets 5 and 6 where he is encouraged to distill his youth into a child to achieve immortality just as summer distills itself in a flask to survive winter. This imagery is reminiscent of the depiction of a child in a fluid-filled flask that represents the creation of gold in alchemy. In order to try to create this child, the fair friend must join with a woman that is his opposite, here the dark lady, in order to achieve the immortality the poet longed for him to have. Their union of opposites also demonstrates another key tenet of alchemy, which is that opposites must unite in order to produce gold (or for the couple, a child). Prior to the dark lady, the fair friend is represented as an incomplete ouroboros who needs a woman to complete the union of opposites vital to achieving immortality through fathering a child. The poet paints the fair friend as gluttonous and greedy at first, accusing him of consuming himself and likening that narcissistic consumption to the spending of money thriftlessly without drawing interest on it in order to

multiply rather than simply divide endlessly. Shakespeare also uses consumption imagery other critics have noted as being references to alchemical ingredients or processes, such as the creation of a philosopher's stone. Ultimately, Shakespeare allows all of these alchemical schemes to fail in order to show that, like seeking a philosopher's stone, the pursuit of immortality is a fool's errand.

REFERENCES

- Backer, Paul A. "Shakespeare, Alchemy and Dao (Tao): The Inner Alchemical Theatre." Diss., University of California, Irvine, 2009. ProQuest Dissertation Database. 2 October 2014.
- Bates, Catherine. *Masculinity, Gender, and Identity in the English Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.
- Booth, Stephen, ed. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977. Print.
- Carney, Linda. "Alchemy in Selected Plays of Shakespeare." Diss., Drake University, 1977. ProQuest Dissertation Database. 2 October 2014.
- Clulee, Nicholas. "The occult tradition in the English universities of the Renaissance: a reassessment." *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*. Ed. Brian Vickers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Print.
- Copenhaver, Brian P. ed. *Hermetica*. Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1992. Electronic Book.
- Debus, Allen G. "Renaissance Chemistry and the Work of Robert Fludd." *Alchemy and Chemistry in the Seventeenth Century*. Clark Library Seminar. William Andrew Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles. 21 March 1966. Printed lecture.
- Donne, John. *John Donne's Poetry*. First Edition. Ed. Donald Dickson. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. Print.
- Donne, John. *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions Together with Death's Duel*. Michigan: The Michigan University Press, 1959. Electronic Book.

Feingold, Mordechai. "Analogy versus identity: the rejection of occult symbolism, 1580-1680."

Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance. Ed. Brian Vickers. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1984. Print.

Gray, Ronald. *Shakespeare on Love: The Sonnets and Plays in Relation to Plato's Symposium,*

Alchemy, Christianity, and Renaissance Neo-Platonism. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars

Press, 2011. Print.

Healey, Margaret. *Shakespeare, Alchemy, and the Creative Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 2011. Print.

Keller, James R. "The Science of Salvation: Spiritual Alchemy in Donne's Final Sermon." *The*

Sixteenth Century Journal 1992: 486. *JSTOR Journals*. Web. 3 Jan. 2015.

Linden, Stanton J. "The Breaking of the Alembic: Patterns in Alchemical Imagery in English

Renaissance Poetry." *Wascana Review* 9.(1974): 105-113. *MLA International*

Bibliography. Web. 4 Jan. 2015.

Multhauf, Robert P. "Some Nonexistent Chemists of the Seventeenth Century: Remarks on the

Use of the Dialogue in Scientific Writing." *Alchemy and Chemistry in the Seventeenth*

Century. Clark Library Seminar. William Andrew Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles.

21 March 1966. Printed lecture.

Shakespeare, William. "Sonnets." *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Second Edition. Eds. G.

Blakemore Evans and J.J. M. Tobin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 1843-1869. Print.

Shams, Parisa, and Alireza Anushiravani. "Mystical Alchemy in the Poetry of Donne and Milton." *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 7.3 (2013): 54-68. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 3 Jan. 2015.

Smith, Pamela H. *The Business of Alchemy: Science and Culture in the Holy Roman Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Print.

Wells, Stanley, ed. *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.

Yates, Frances. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. New York: Routledge Classics, 1979. Print.