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Sugimoto, Miho
Graduate School of Letters, Kyushu University : Doctoral Program

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Alchemy and Poetic Redemption in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*

Miho Sugimoto

Introduction

The diversity of Donne's employment of alchemy and the adaptability of this body of knowledge in his poetry have been closely studied by many critics as a central source of his poetic subject matter and modes of expression. Joseph Anthony Mazzeo takes notice of the analogy of the stance of alchemists to that of lovers : 'Both the lover and the alchemists are chasing a will-o'-the wisp and only succeed in finding a substitute with which they must content themselves.'¹ T. Kawasaki, citing Eliot's phrase that Donne was 'more interested in ideas themselves as objects than in the truth of ideas,' affirms that any thought including the principles of alchemy should attract Donne for its own specific interest rather than its trueness.²

As the above critics espouse, Donne adopts alchemy as a specific inspiration for the language of his strikingly metaphysical conceits. Alchemy is a rich legacy for Donne, containing a macrocosm and a microcosm and their correspondences, that is, part and parcel of the Elizabethan sense of values ; however, we should not overlook that in some of his poems alchemical principles and terms minutely form the inevitable images of the poem's redemptive subject.

Stanton J. Linden analyses the versatility of Donne's literary uses of alchemy into the following four categories, which he adds should not be

regarded as mutually exclusive : ‘(1) poems treating alchemy satirically ; (2) poems that reveal alchemical ideas about the nature, attributes, and production of gold ; (3) poems that make reference to the types of equipment, materials, and procedures that alchemists used in their experiments ; and (4) poems especially concerned with transmutation and the making of elixirs and philosopher’s stone.’³ In this logical examination, as the exemplification of the fourth category Linden takes “The Canonization,” and explains ‘the phoenix’ and ‘mysterious transformation of lovers’ in connection with the death-resurrection motif in alchemical symbolism.

My interpretation of the cited poem, which I will also analyse later, is similar to Linden’s ; however, it must be necessary to attach importance to the analogy of alchemical redemption to the Catholic concept of redemption, where the crucial prerequisite should exist which Donne as a poet must employ especially alchemy. In this study, I will demonstrate a new aspect to Donne’s alchemical expressions that some poems possess the esoteric purpose of creating a microcosm connotative of the poetic redemption which is identical with the Eucharistic significance in Catholicism.

I. Alchemical Symbolism and Catholicism

Alchemy which originated from the sphere of metallurgy possessed basically two essential phases : one was a technical realm including natural science, chemistry and medicine, and the other a philosophical and metaphysical one. It contains the major principle that the transmutation of substances or objective world corresponds to the transformation of the mind or man’s subjective world. In other words, not merely does an alchemist pursue chemical changes of materials but also regards the process of transmutation from base metals to precious metals as the

metaphorical process of his soul's successive improvement.⁴

This parallel between the alchemical act and the moral intellectual transformation of a man's mind, which appears to be diffused throughout the intellectuals of those days, is further suggestive of two different but correspondingly identical functions : one is through the chemical process the redemption of base metal's spirit⁵ which is imprisoned in its material ; the other is through the spiritual process the redemption of man's soul which is imprisoned in his or her body. While in the Christianity man is the one to be redeemed, in philosophical alchemy man acts as the redeemer. In the former case man attributes the need of redemption to the autonomous divine figure ; in the latter case man takes upon himself the duty of carrying out the redemptive work in both chemical and spiritual scopes.⁶

Here with a view to explicating Donne's perspective on redemption in his alchemical contexts, we need to consider carefully as Donne's creative background the severe oppression of Catholics in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period.

Donne, who was born Catholic in 1572 and raised by an ardent and strict Catholic family, hesitated for three years before being ordained in 1615 as a deacon and priest of the Anglican Church and a month later was appointed as a royal chaplain. Behind his long hesitation and stressful conversion, under the stern realities of supporting a large family with no practical occupation that he had been financially embarrassed and troubled, there existed politically complicated religious circumstances.

Anglicanism, which possessed theologically Protestant doctrines and ritually Catholic forms, was commonly regarded as a middle-of-the-roader or 'a compromising product.'⁷ The Forty Two Articles as the summary of the Anglican creed was established in 1553 by Henry VIII (reign 1509-47). Though first assuming a relatively generous attitude towards Catholics, Elizabeth I (reign 1558-1603) radically changed her

attitude when Pope Pius V (reign 1566-72) expelled her in 1570. In 1571, she excluded the three articles written reservedly for the Pope for establishing the Thirty Nine Articles, and then commenced oppressing recusants exhaustively, as Catholics were dubbed.⁸

In 1581, the Act to Retain the Queen's Majesty's Subjects in their Due Obedience was enacted, where those who attempted to convert people to Catholicism were put to death ; in 1585 Catholic priests were all put to death by hanging and later torn into pieces ; and in 1587, in addition, the penalty not to attend the Anglican church was increased from a shilling a month to twenty pounds a month, four hundred times as much.⁹ Finally in 1593, Elizabeth enacted the Act Against Recusants.¹⁰

In 1593, Donne's younger brother Henry died of plague in Newgate, arrested for harbouring a Catholic priest, William Harrington. Since in the south and east part of England the Catholic power was originally rather weak, there were only a few ardent Jesuits such as Donne's brother who dared to run the risk of losing his life by accepting a Catholic priest who worked as the center of a mission.

James I (reign 1603-25), who first took a rather generous attitude to the Catholic policy, also began severely oppressing Catholics after a shocking intrigue, the Gunpowder Plot, was revealed beforehand in 1605, in which recusants attempted to assassinate the King and the leading people of the government.¹¹

Under this financially and politically distressing conditions, many Catholics, who perfunctorily belonged to the Anglican Church, maintained their faith still more firmly. Since generally they had to avoid negating the authority of the Anglican Church, they reconciled themselves to the Book of Common Prayer only for the reason that the Catholic prayer book was the model for it.

Catholics and Anglicans, however, held a sharply divided interpretation on the Eucharist. For Catholics, who believed in transubstantiation,

the bread and wine of the Eucharist were exactly equal to Christ's body and blood : the presence of Christ on the sacrificial altar was objective and real.¹² On the other hand, Anglicans including Lutherans and Calvinists, who agreed to believe in the omnipresence of Christ, just accepted the symbolism of bread and wine but denied the transubstantiation.

A Swiss religious reformer and a rationalist, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), whose point of view supposed to be taken by the first Anglican archbishop Thomas Crammer¹³, attached great importance to the faith of believers on the controversy of the Eucharist, and asserted that only through the contemplation of faith Christ would be their salvation. In those days, however, this mutually uncompromising interpretation remained unquestioned.

I will further examine the Anglican position through the analysis of the Twenty Eighth Article, the article of the Eucharist in the Thirty Nine Articles.¹⁴

The supper of the Lord . . . is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death : insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ. (Para. 1)

The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.

(Para. 3)

While the first paragraph subtly emanates Catholic nuances, as if the body and blood of Christ were to be partaken, the third paragraph,

however, takes a new turn and clarifies the point that the whole matter shall be experienced in a spiritual manner through faith, where we can observe the stance of the Anglican Church that negates transubstantiation as other Protestants do.¹⁵

It is natural to suppose that Donne as a born Catholic should perceive with a keen insight the analogy of the transmutation in alchemy to the transubstantiation in the Catholic Eucharist. In order to avoid mentioning the illegal doctrine of the Catholic Eucharist, Donne must have chosen alchemical symbolism suggestive of the transubstantiation and the redemptive effect of its due consequence.

II. Poetic Redemption

Out of many poems which include Donne's most complex and original uses of alchemy, I will take as my first example the third stanza of "The Canonization," in which the poet employs his cherished 'phoenix.'

And we in us find the eagle and the dove.
The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us ; we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.¹⁶

The phoenix image, which had been used in Sicilian poetry and later by Francesco Petrarch (1304-74) and by many Petrarchans, was inherited by many English sonneteers as in a sense Donne's precedents.¹⁷ Theodore Redpath concludes that 'Donne's brilliant originality lies in using the bird to mean both the lovers, and making it hermaphroditic.'¹⁸

For fuller understanding of this stanza, however, it is necessary to

interpret all three birds such as eagle, dove and phoenix, and their interaction. In alchemy, the union of two superlative opposites such as in this case 'eagle' for masculine strength and 'dove' for feminine gentleness was called 'the marriage of man and woman,'¹⁹ since alchemists always employed anthropomorphical metaphors for their terms for the purpose of concealing their art.

The phoenix was also the most distinguished alchemical metaphor for the Philosopher's Stone. The Stone was the final product for all the alchemists to achieve because it was regarded as the source of life with the very function of transmutating base metals into gold as well as releasing man from his or her decaying body.²⁰ The Stone was also frequently compared to Christ for the analogy of the death-resurrection motif.²¹

In the close examination of alchemical provenance in Donne's poetry Linden provides as indirect evidence of the third stanza 'a relatively rare instance' of all three symbolic birds present in a single design as in Figure 1,²² where the phoenix sits on the sphere, cremating itself at the top of the design and from it gold and silver dove-like birds are released into the clouds as a sign of multiplication; and "G," near the middle of the large sphere and to the right, identifies a triple-headed eagle and also the queen in the top sphere strokes a silver or white eagle standing by her.²³ While recognising the importance of the alchemical signification of these birds, Linden discusses the subject of the partners' identities as follows:

[I]f a love relationship is to be worthy of "canonization," all inherently opposing qualities in the partners -- even those that confer their individual identities -- are destructive and must be removed because they prevent the unified transcendence that is the heart of canonized love.²⁴

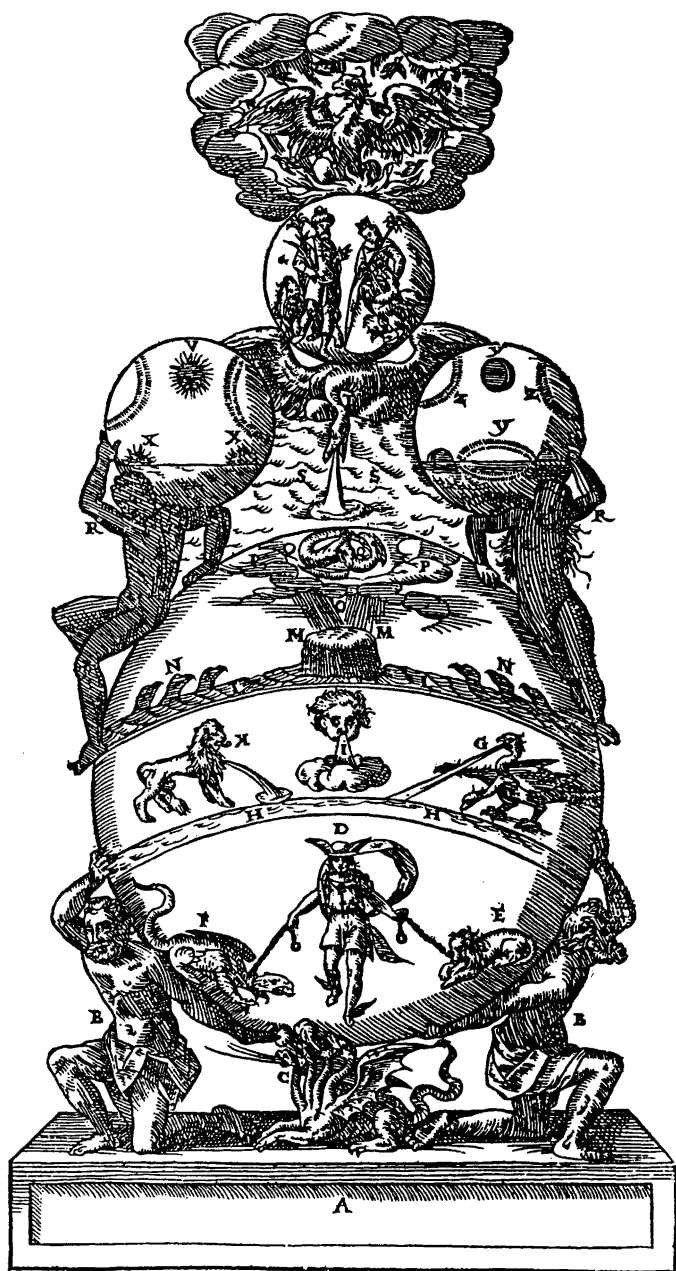


Figure 1. The Sequence of Stages in the Alchemical Process.
Andreas Libavius, *Alchymia* (1606).

His stress on 'one-ness' instead of 'two-ness,' however, seems to be crushed by the lover poet, who stating 'we two being one,' continues in the following stanzas to employ the pronoun in the plural such as 'we' or 'us' but not another in the singular as a third new identity to indicate the union of the lovers' souls: 'We'll build [our legend] in sonnets pretty rooms,' or 'all shall approve / Us canoniz'd for Love.'

Here in order to solve the problem of identities, we must reconsider the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, in which even though asserting the transubstantiation of bread and wine, Catholics never admit the change in material quality in either object. After the transubstantiation of bread and wine, a piece of the bread representing Christ's body is mingled with the wine significant of his soul and establishes the unity of Christ the Savior; they undoubtedly distinguished the bread and the wine and believe in all the material identities. The 'invocation' to the lovers in the fifth stanza, as Redpath mentions, 'conforms to the Roman Catholic doctrine that men pray to saints to pray for them.'²⁵ Similarly under the guise of alchemical symbolism Donne must apply the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist to the central subject of the poem.

My second example is "The Ecstasy," in the last part of which one of the most controversial issues lies: the section where a single 'abler soul' after the spiritually idealistic union returns to their bodies. Opinions on the plea of its return, according to Redpath's summary, are mainly divided into two: one interpretation is, as claimed by many critics including Pierre Legouis and Robert Ellrodt, that 'the lovers after their spiritual union in the ecstasy should in future . . . have sexual intercourse, rather than content themselves with spiritual union'; the other is, as Helen Gardner holds, that 'the lovers' souls should return from their ecstatic communion to reanimate their bodies.'²⁶ While Redpath's own opinion is affirmative to the former, my interpretation is rather similar to the latter, since the poem mentions only the inevitability

of the souls' returning to the bodies, but no plea suggestive of coitus.

Closely examining some stanzas in the latter half, I will discuss the determinant of the soul's return, from the viewpoint of alchemical principles, including the interaction of the opposing two and the Philosopher's Stone as its product of the perfect union.

When love, with one another so
Interinanimates two souls,
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls. (ll.41-44)

The souls of the lovers, which are first compared to the 'Mixture' (l. 33) are through the spiritual union transformed into a reborn and 'abler soul,' where we can observe again the alchemical principle of transmutation.

The poet lover then claims that not only the 'new soul' can surpass various 'defects,' but also should be the one that 'no change can invade.'

We then, who are this new soul, know,
Of what we are composed, and made,
For, th' atomies of which we grow,
Are souls, whom no change can invade. (ll.45-48)

While Redpath doubts the grounds for the immutability of the new soul,²⁷ it is naturally understandable in alchemical interpretation that since the perfect union of the superlative opposites suggests the Philosopher's Stone as the final stage of transmutation, the new soul could have no further possibilities to change.

The return itself follows the alchemical principle that 'the soul released at the 'death' is reunited with the dead body and brings about its resurrection,'²⁸ namely, the two bodies which are left by their souls and lie in a

sense dead for a time, should be revived to be a 'book' as a demonstrative evidence of the souls' death-resurrection itinerancy.

To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love revealed may look ;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book. (ll.69-72)

And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change, when we're to bodies gone. (ll.73-76)

The last subtle and elusive line also connotes Donne's esoteric use of alchemical concepts. In order to examine carefully the exquisite nuances with which the phrase 'Small change' endows the poem, we need to argue first Donne's uses of gold. Donne frequently uses the metaphor of gold for depicting the ideal soul like Elizabeth Drury²⁹ in "An Anatomy of the World." In alchemy there is supposed to be two kinds of gold : one is the most perfect metal in nature ; the other a transmuted gold with the power, like the Philosopher's Stone, of transmutating base metals into gold as a precious metal. The gold which Donne employs in praise of Elizabeth surely indicates the former one. As to the phrase 'Small change,' this notion of two kinds of gold seems to be applied ; that is, the immune new soul as transmuted gold possesses the power to change the body as base metal into gold, which is in quality slightly different from the transmuted one, but is still gold. Donne, who is fully conscious of the above notion, dares to choose in the end the phrase 'Small' change but not 'no' change.

Taking account of the matter that the change in quality reminds

responsive readers of the concept of transubstantiation, Donne as a poetic redeemer creates the poem with the redemptive motif of transubstantiation, which suggests the possibilities of salvation. He claims that human love should realise the purification of a soul through spiritual union and its resultant transmutation, and therefore lead to reactivate the person as a whole being.

NOTES

1. Joseph A. Mazzeo, "Notes on John Donne's Alchemical Image," *ISIS* vol. 48, 2-152 (June, 1957) 121.
2. Toshihiko Kawasaki, *Let the Rose Tell a Tale* (Nagoya UP, 1991) 169-170. See also, T. S. Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," *A Garland for John Donne*, ed., T. Spencer (Cambridge, Mass., 1931) 11.
3. See, S. J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphics* (Lexington, Kentucky : UP of Kentucky, 1996) 156. From the time of Chaucer on, alchemy is used conventionally for the purpose of humour and satire.
4. Shigeo Sawai, *Alchemy : Cosmic Philosophy of Being* (Tokyo : Koudansha, 1998) ch. 1. See also, C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* ed. Sir Herbert Read et al, vol. 12 of the Collected Works of C. G. Jung, (New York : Princeton UP, 1993) 34-37. M. T. Gnudi, "Dorn," *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, ed. C.C. Gillispie et al, (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).
5. Philosophical alchemy is greatly influenced by hermetic doctrines which include the theories of universal magnetism and sympathies seen as aspects of the hylozoism.
6. Jung, 306. Jung's later works are based on profound and lengthy researches into philosophical alchemy and the relationship between alchemy and Christianity, which are of much interest for my study.
7. Virgil K. Whitaker, *The Religious Basis of Spenser's Thought* (Gordian Press, 1960) 7. Here the Anglican creed is considered as a mixture of Lutheranism, Calvinism, and indigenous thought.
8. Catholics against the Anglican Church or the government's policy were called recusants, while Protestants were called dissenters.

9. Hiroshi Imai, ed., *World History Outline, British History II*, (Yamakawa, 1994) 91-2.
10. Masao Hamabayashi, *British Religious History* (Otsuki-shoten, 1987) 125. These acts had originally a limited period of validity, but remained law till the English Revolution (1688-89).
11. Imai, 136.
12. M. M. Ross, *Poetry and Dogma: the Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century English Poetry* (Rutgers UP, 1954) 28.
13. Ross, 58, 49-50.
14. David C. Douglas, gen. ed., *English Historical Documents*, vol. 6 (London: Eyre & Spottis Woode, 1953).
15. Since the Eucharist was usually held only four times a year, it seemed possible for the Catholic gentry and aristocrats to keep their own faith, paying the large amount of penalty and making some excuse for being absent from the ritual. After becoming an Anglican priest, Donne as a public man seems to deny transubstantiation in his sermons. We might, however, suppose that Donne as a poet can follow more truly his emancipated ideas and supply liberal expression to his real voice especially in *Songs and Sonnets*.
16. All quotations of the *Songs and Sonnets* are from *John Donne*, ed. John Carey (Oxford, New York: OUP, 1990).
17. T. Redpath, *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1983) 240.
18. Some sixteenth-century editions of Petrarch showed the poet and Laura on a funeral urn surmounted by a rising phoenix. (Horst Meller, *TLS*, 22 April, 1965). Samuel Daniel (1562-1619) hopes that his verse, phoenix-like, will renew his Delia's life in *Delia* (1592), while Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) refers to Stella as a phoenix in *Astrophil and Stella* (1598). Lisle Cecil John notes that 'almost the only sonnet allusions to a specific bird are those to the phoenix.' L. C. John, *The Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964) 117.
19. Serge Hutin, *L'Alchimie* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1951) Ch. II. See also, Jung, 231. The word 'man' is used for sulfur, and 'woman' is for mercury, and the marriage for its union.
20. Hutin, 98-99.
21. *ibid.*. See also, Linden, 175. In Christian Art in the Middle Age, 'phoenix' was

- one of the most popular motifs. Jennifer Speake, *The Dent Dictionary of Symbols in Christian Art* (London : Dent, 1994).
22. See, Jung, 284.
 23. Linden, 176. See also, Jung, 287.
 24. *ibid.*, 178-179. He claims that 'everything that accounted for their separate identities . . . must be eradicated.'
 25. Redpath, 242.
 26. Redpath, 323. cf. P. Legouis, *Donne the Craftsman* (New York : Russel & Russel, 1962) 68-9. H. Gardner ed., *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1965) 260.
 27. *ibid.*, 223.
 28. Jung, 231.
 29. *The Anniversaries* including *An Anatomy of the World : the First Anniversary* were written to commemorate Elizabeth Drury, the only surviving daughter of Sir Robert Drury of Hawstead, Suffolk, for which Donne succeeded to attract Sir Robert's patronage.