Shakespeare’s Sonnets and *A Lover’s Complaint* constitute a rich tapestry of rhetorical play about Renaissance love in all its guises. A significant strand of this is spiritual alchemy: working the ‘metal’ of the mind through meditation on love, memory work and intense imagination. Healy demonstrates how this process of anguished soul work – construed as essential to inspired poetic making – is woven into these poems, accounting for their most enigmatic imagery and urgency of tone. The esoteric philosophy of late Renaissance Neoplatonic alchemy, which embraced bawdy sexual symbolism and was highly fashionable in European intellectual circles, facilitated Shakespeare’s poetry. Arguing that Shakespeare’s incorporation of alchemical textures throughout his late works is indicative of an artistic stance promoting religious toleration and unity, this book sets out a crucial new framework for interpreting the 1609 poems, and transforms our understanding of Shakespeare’s art.

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SHAKESPEARE, ALCHEMY AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

The Sonnets and *A Lover's Complaint*

MARGARET HEALY
## Contents

*List of illustrations*  page vi

*Acknowledgements*  viii

*A note on the texts*  ix

### Introduction

1 Alchemical contexts  14

2 Lovely boy
   - Part I Love, marriage and alchemical procreation  57
   - Part II ‘Suttill numbers’: ‘conjunctio’ by arithmetic, music and divine geometry  77

3 The dark mistress and the art of blackness
   - Part I In praise of blackness  98
   - Part II Will’s dark mistress  115

4 *A Lovers Complaint* by William Shake-speare  131

5 Inner looking, alchemy and the creative imagination
   - Part I The inward turn: doing ‘mind’ in ‘character’  157
   - Part II The alchemical ‘making’ mind  174

6 Conclusion: Shakespeare’s poetics of love and religious toleration  195

*Notes*  211

*Index*  253
Illustrations


List of illustrations

8(a) The Drake Jewel, front cameo view: ornate gold and coloured enamel, rubies, diamonds, pearls, sardonyx and cameo of a man and woman in profile. © Private collection; loaned to Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

8(b) The Drake Jewel, back view: opened to show miniature painted in watercolour on vellum of Elizabeth I and a phoenix by Nicholas Hilliard. © Private collection; loaned to Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
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A note on the texts

All references to Shakespeare’s Sonnets and A Lovers Complaint are to Colin Burrow (ed.), The Complete Sonnets and Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Throughout my text I have used the original 1609 quarto versions of the titles. Shake-speares Sonnets suggests the playful character of the sequence, conveying a hint of the Herculean task confronting the poet, while the absence of an apostrophe in A Lovers Complaint appropriately allows the possibility of one and/or multiple lovers, capturing the poem’s chemical fluidity.

After a first full note, all references to primary works are given in parentheses in the text of the book. Where citations are from early printed books, the original spelling and punctuation have been preserved, although the short ‘s’ has in all cases been substituted for long, and omitted letters from contractions and suspensions have been inserted. Any emphases in early books are indicated by italics in my transcription.


The following editions of frequently cited sources are used throughout the book:


Marsilio Ficino, Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love (De amore), trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications Inc., 1988). This work is cited throughout the text as De amore, with page number.

A note on the texts


