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978-1-107-00404-7 - Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint

Margaret Healy

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SHAKESPEARE, ALCHEMY AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

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.

MARGARET HEALY is Reader in English and Director of the Centre for Early Modern Studies at the University of Sussex. She teaches many aspects of Renaissance literature, and is particularly interested in the cultural history of the body and the interfaces among literature, medicine, science and art. She is the author of *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics* (2001) and *Richard II* (1998), and the co-editor of *Renaissance Transformations: The Making of English Writing 1500–1650* (2009). She edits the new British Medical Journal, *Medical Humanities*.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>A note on the texts</i>	ix
Introduction	I
1 Alchemical contexts	14
2 Lovely boy	57
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	98
Part I In praise of blackness	98
Part II Will's dark mistress	115
4 <i>A Lovers Complaint</i> by William Shake-speare	131
5 Inner looking, alchemy and the creative imagination	157
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
<i>Notes</i>	211
<i>Index</i>	253

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Margaret Healy

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Illustrations*

- | | | |
|---|---|----------------|
| 1 | Title page, <i>Le Tableau des riches inventions</i> , by François Beroalde de Verville (Paris: Mattieu Guillemut, 1600).
© British Library. Shelfmark 634 K15. | <i>page</i> 40 |
| 2 | Title-page illustration, Esoteric and exoteric alchemy,
Michael Maier, <i>Tripus Aureus</i> (Frankfurt, 1618). © British
Library. Shelfmark 1033 K2. | 42 |
| 3 | Illustration accompanying Emblema XXI, 'Around the man
and woman draw a ring . . . square . . . triangle'. Michael
Maier, <i>Atalanta Fugiens</i> (Oppenheim: Theodor de Bry, 1618).
© British Library. Shelfmark 1033 K7. | 44 |
| 4 | Emblema and Epigramma III, 'Go to the woman washing
sheets, and do likewise'. Michael Maier, <i>Atalanta Fugiens</i>
(Oppenheim: Theodor de Bry, 1618). © British Library.
Shelfmark 1033 K7. | 45 |
| 5 | Illustration accompanying Emblema XXXIII, 'The
Hermaphrodite needs fire'. Michael Maier, <i>Atalanta Fugiens</i>
(Oppenheim: Theodor de Bry, 1618). © British Library.
Shelfmark 1033 K7. | 46 |
| 6 | Illustration accompanying Emblema XXXIV, 'He is
conceived in the bath and born in the air'. Michael Maier,
<i>Atalanta Fugiens</i> (Oppenheim: Theodor de Bry, 1618).
© British Library. Shelfmark 1033 K7. | 47 |
| 7 | Rushton Triangular Lodge, view from the north-east.
Courtesy of English Heritage. | 78 |

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00404-7 - Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint

Margaret Healy

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of illustrations

vii

- 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. 107
- 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. 108

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978-1-107-00404-7 - Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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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.

All references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Complete Works*, compact edition, general editors Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are to the 1599 Geneva Bible, facsimile edition (Ozark, Mo.: L. L. Brown Publishing, 1995).

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

Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek 'Corpus Hermeticum' and the Latin 'Asclepius' in a New English Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

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.

The Letters of Marsilio Ficino, trans. Language Department, School of Economic Science, London, 7 vols. (London: Shephard-Walwyn Ltd, 1975–)

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978-1-107-00404-7 - Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets
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Margaret Healy

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

A note on the texts

Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*, in *Atalanta Fugiens: An Edition of the Fugues, Emblems and Epigrams*, trans. from Latin by Joscelyn Godwin, with an

Introduction by Hildemarie Streich (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Phanes Press, 1989)

Paul Eugene Memmo (trans. and Introduction), *Giordano Bruno's The Heroic Frenzies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964)

Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), in G. Gregory Smith (ed.), *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), vol. 1

Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (eds.), *The Art of English Poesy by George Puttenham: A Critical Edition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007)