An Alchemical Reading of Shakespeare’s

*Antony and Cleopatra.*

by

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Image from Johann Daniel Mylius, *The Anatomy of Gold*, 1628
The Nobleness of Life is to Do Thus

The play opens with an objection, ‘Nay, but…’, pitching us instantly into a world of disputation and doubt – a lower world in Plato’s sense of δόξα, of mundane opinion. Our first view of Antony, entirely through Roman eyes, appears damning. He is a dotard in love and a derelict in his duty to the imperium. The object of his misplaced devotion, Cleopatra, is a mere wanton, traduced to a ‘tawny front’:

Philo
Nay, but this dotage of our general’s
O’erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
That o’er the files and musters of the war
Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front. His captain’s heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gipsy’s lust.1  (1.1.1-10)

Many critics have taken their cue from ‘censuring Rome’, but the panoptics of theatre allow such judgements to find their proper level. We would be wiser to take Philo’s advice as Antony and Cleopatra make their first entrance: ‘Look where they come, take but good note … Behold and see.’

The atmosphere transforms. The lovers are in expansive mood, delighting in each other’s company; their exchanges take wing:

Cleopatra:
If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

Antony:
There’s beggary in the love that can be reckon’d.

Cleopatra:
I’ll set a bourne how far to be beloved.

Antony:
Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth.

(1.1.14-17)

1 Here and below, references to Antony and Cleopatra follow the Arden Shakespeare 3rd Series, edited by John Wilders (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).
But the rhapsodic mood is short-lived, abruptly terminated by a summons: ‘News, my good lord, from Rome’ (1.1.18). It is the first of many such interruptions, of messengers bringing ill news, which will set the pattern for the lovers’ ‘fretted fortunes’. But already, underlying Cleopatra’s playful challenge, a key question has been posed: ‘If it be love in deed...’ Restored to its original form, as it appears in the orthography of the First Folio, the question gains an added inflection, suggesting that the truth of their love, its being, can only be proved in its ‘becomings’.

What is the ‘deed’ of love? The question finds a possible answer in Antony’s declaration later in the same scene, when he seeks to reassure Cleopatra with a kiss,2 ‘The nobleness of life is to do thus’ (II.37-8). It is a declaration made under pressure, and in some bad faith, since he is about to abandon her to answer the call from Rome. She is undeceived: ‘Excellent falsehood!’ But in making this claim he professes more than he knows, suggesting if only for a moment that living in service to love could be regarded as a nobler occupation than soldiership in service to the Roman state.

This question of Antony’s true vocation, where his loyalties should lie, has already been framed in terms of his ‘office and devotion’. That he is self-divided, caught between the rival claims of Rome and Egypt, is the dilemma which drives the plot. Cleopatra’s situation is different: while he is conflicted, she is clear: her ‘office’ is queenship, her ‘devotion’ is to love. She swears by her sovereign role, ‘As I am Egypt’s queen’, and places herself among those ‘that trade in love’. While ambivalence attends the reputation of such trade, Enobarbus maintains her profession is ‘holy’, ‘the holy priests bless her when she is riggish!’ (2.2.249-50).

She lives to love and be beloved. Her greatest fears are that Antony should grow cold-hearted: ‘I am quickly ill, and well, / So Antony loves’; that she be ‘all-forgotten’ since ‘my becomings kill me when they do not / Eye well to you’ (1.3.98-9).

Shakespeare plays upon the semantics of become/becoming in their various forms of verb, adjective and noun. His concern is both with the qualities which may grace or seem fitting to a person, and their entelechy, their actualisation and fulfilment. It is a theme announced in the first scene when Antony proposes: ‘Tonight we’ll wander through the streets / And note the qualities of people’ (1.1.54-5). And while Enobarbus is encouraged in his singular exercise of candour: ‘Enjoy thy plainness; It nothing ill becomes thee’ (2.6.78-9), Cleopatra is extolled for her infinite variety of moods:

Antony

2 Although there is no stage direction to this effect, a kiss is surely the gesture implied by ‘thus’. John Walsh, in an opinion piece on the play, referencing the 2010 RSC production, specifically refers to Antony kissing Celopatra at this point. (The Independent, 16 March 2016).
Fie wrangling queen!
Whom everything becomes, to chide, to laugh
To weep; whose every passion fully strives
To make itself, in thee, fair and admired!

(1.1.49-52)

In sharp contrast to such plenitude of being, Lepidus falls disastrously short. His failure to live up to the company he keeps, with his fellows in the Triumvirate Antony and Caesar, is expressed in one of the play’s most peculiar and arresting conceits: ‘To be drawn into a huge sphere and not to be seen to move in’t, are the holes where eyes should be, which pitifully disaster the cheeks’ (2.7.14-16) ³.

While this image draws abstrusely on Ptolemaic cosmology, it is also suggestive of a Greek theatrical mask, grotesquely uninhabited; or of a body emptied of soul, taking soul as that divine inner faculty which ‘moves’ us. Although Caesar’s motives are entirely self-interested and pragmatic, he speaks unawares to this larger theme when he instructs Thidias to ‘observe’ Antony ‘And what thou think’st his very action speaks In every power that moves’ (3.12.34-6). There even seems to be a subtle echo here of St Paul’s words (Acts 17:28) of the divinity ‘in which we live and move and have our being’.

These deep concerns with ‘love in deed’, ‘nobleness of life’ and the accomplishment of being suggest our play is best treated sui generis. They are ill-served by attempts to interpret the drama in conventional terms, whether as tragedy, history, romance, or in the catch-all category of a ‘problem-play’. Ideally perhaps, every Shakespeare play needs to be approached in this way; each presents us with a complete world, a ‘cosmos’ which calls for its own hermeneutics, which in turn depend on discerning its underlying mythos.

A clue to the play’s framing metaphysic may be found precisely in Shakespeare’s use of the word ‘nobleness’. The text is remarkable for containing over forty instances of noble, nobler, noblest and nobleness. In a Roman context, these carry the conventional connotations of noble lineage and/or honourable conduct, properties which are conferred and confirmed by society. But, on occasion, ‘noble’ when applied to Antony points towards qualities of mind and heart which exist over and beyond the social code. They are qualities akin to Aristotle’s concept of magnanimity, as eloquently defined in Webster’s Dictionary of 1828: ‘Greatness of mind; that elevation or dignity of soul, which encounters danger and trouble with tranquillity and firmness, which raises the possessor above revenge, and makes him delight in acts of benevolence, which makes him disdain

³ David Bevington comments on these lines: “The underlying image is of a heavenly body that cannot circle properly in its fixed concentric sphere. Eyes are often compared with stars in Shakespeare, and ‘disaster’ is an astrological term ... [signifying] ‘an unfavourable aspect of a star or planet.” From the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play, edited by David Bevington. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 2005), p. 154.
injustice and meanness, and prompts him to sacrifice personal ease, interest and safety for the accomplishment of useful and noble objects.  

Caesar pays tribute to Antony in these terms when he recalls how he endured with stoic courage the privations of famine: ‘Though daintily brought up, with patience more / Than savages could suffer: thou didst drink/The stale of horses and the gilded puddle / That beasts would cough at’ (1.4.61-4).

At his finest, Antony may embody such qualities. This ideal template, towards which he may strive, and against which his greatness may be measured, is confirmed by the Soothsayer. As his name implies, he relays a truth about Antony’s essential nature which issues from a higher authority, from his guardian spirit, his daimon. Antony is warned against aligning himself too closely with Caesar, ‘near him, thy angel becomes afeard’:

Therefore, O Antony, stay not by his side.  
Thy daemon - that thy spirit which keeps thee - is  
Noble, courageous high, unmatchable,  
Where Caesar’s is not. But, near him, thy angel  
Becomes afeard, as being o’erpowered; therefore  
Make space enough between you.

(2.3.17-22)

This is a summons of a different kind, calling Antony to ‘be seen to move in’ his own ‘huge sphere’, to become his being. It is by this criterion of nobleness as opposed to baseness that Antony judges his own conduct. In the bitterest of his self-reproaches he castigates himself for ‘a most unnoble swerving’ (3.11.50); misinformed that Cleopatra has committed suicide, he experiences the deepest shame: ‘Since Cleopatra died, I have lived in such dishonour, that the gods / Detest my baseness’ (4.14.56-8).

*For then shall you see a noble game*  

If we look to Renaissance alchemy, as it developed in the sixteenth century as a moral and spiritual discipline involved as much with ‘soul work’ as with chemical operations, we find an intense focus on states-of-being. The master-metaphor of the *Opus Alchymicum* is a progression along a spectrum from

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baseness to nobleness. In terms of metallurgy, the practitioner aims to transform base metals like lead or iron into the perfected state of gold and silver. As a spiritual discipline, the Royal Art is concerned with human ennoblement. Even beyond reforming the microcosm, as though acting in partnership with the divine creator, its adepts aspired to participate in a work of cosmic redemption: 'then is made the new Heaven and the new Earth.'

There is abundant evidence that alchemy holds an essential key to interpreting Shakespeare's drama of mature love. It accords with the play's source and setting, and the archetypal stature of its twin protagonists; and it accounts for the dialectical patterning of its plot, its distinctive lexicon, obscure symbolism, and the sublime reach of its poetry.

It was in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, during the first three centuries of our era, that Khemia evolved into a sacred science. Under the influence of neoplatonic, hermetic, and gnostic cross-currents, there developed a metaphysical praxis which was later to re-emerge to play a significant role in the culture of Renaissance Europe.

Shakespeare's narrative source was Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's Life of Marcus Antonius, and it was Plutarch who defined alchemy as the 'Egyptian art', deriving its etymology from the ancient name for Egypt: Khmi meaning 'blackness', a reference to the rich black soil made fertile by the waters of the Nile under a fierce meridional sun.

Antony swears: 'By the fire / That quickens Nilus' slime' (1.3.69-70), while Cleopatra's affinities are with the element of water, 'she makes a shower of rain as good as Jove' (1.2.157-8). She identifies herself with the primordial 'serpent', a key symbol in alchemical lore, standing both for the subject of the work, the materia prima which must be recovered and purified, and the agent of its self-transformation, the Mercurial or 'Secret Water' which both kills and heals.

He's speaking now,
Or murmuring 'Where's my serpent of old Nile?'
For so he calls me. Now I feed myself
With most delicious poison. Think on me,
That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black,
And wrinkled deep in time?

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6 Eirenaeus Philalethes, Ripley Reviv'd: or an Exposition upon Sir George Ripley's Hermetico-Poetical Works (London: William Cooper, 1678).
7 Seminal works by Charles Nicholl (The Chemical Theatre, 1997) and Margaret Healy (Shakespeare, Alchemy, and the Creative Imagination, 2011) have established beyond question the significant presence of alchemical discourse both within the canon of plays and sonnets, as well as among Shakespeare's fellow poets; while Ben Jonson's satirical treatment in The Alchemist testifies as much to his in-depth knowledge of its curious terms and operations as to his critique of its abuses.
Here Cleopatra’s bitter-sweet imaginings of her absent lover are convolved within an elaborate hermetic riddle, suggesting that she herself is *khmi*, Egypt’s black earth, and may stand in some esoteric sense for the whole operation of the *opus*. ‘Nile’, ‘Serpent’ and ‘Venom’

8 all happen to be code words for this arcanum, the Mercurial Water which acts first as a solvent to break down the raw matter, and later as a healing regenerative balm; ‘delicious poison’ is typical of the paradoxical formulations which alchemical discourse delights in. These are designed deliberately to mislead or rebuff the uninitiated. Chemical substances and processes are confusingly re-defined as ‘our sulphur’, ‘our mercury’, ‘our fire’, (and so distinguished from their common namesakes), resulting in a quaint discourse which is parodied when Lepidus observes: ‘Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun: so is your crocodile’ (2.7. 26-7).

These lines are referenced in Lyndy Abraham’s *Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* under the entry for ‘Crocodile’. They are glossed as follows:

The amphibious nature of the crocodile made it an apt symbol for the dual-natured Mercurius... [Lepidus] is referring to the generation of gold in the earth, and the generation of the mercurial serpent through the heat of the secret fire or ‘sun’.” With the phrase ‘operation of your sun’ Lepidus also alludes to the final law of the alchemical *Emerald Table*: ‘That which I had to say about the operation of your Sun is now completed.”

Shakespeare is purposive in deploying these hermetic tropes; they are not merely intended as colourful scene-setting, or sly displays of occult erudition, but are fundamental to his design. The story of Antony and Cleopatra, as it has come down to us already semi-mythologised, follows the contours of alchemy’s central allegory. As legendary archetypes of masculine and feminine, identified with divine partnerships, Venus and Mars, Juno and Jove, Isis and Osiris, they ‘stand up peerless’. No other royal pair in history are so suited to play the roles of the alchemical king and queen who progress through alternations of love and strife, quarrelling and reconciling, to culminate in a *chymical wedding* which is also strangely a death.

Antony is directly compared to the Philosopher’s Stone or elixir, goal of all the adept’s strivings, when Cleopatra complains of her servant Alexas:

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9 Abraham, p. 48. See also Abraham’s article, documenting in depth the intellectual context of these same two lines: ‘Alchemical Reference in Antony and Cleopatra’, Sydney Studies in English,. 8 (1982-3), 104-5.
How much unlike art thou Mark Antony!  
Yet coming from him, that great med’cine hath  
With his tinct gilded thee.  

(1.5.37-39)

Two essential properties of the Stone are here attributed to him: its curative power as medicine, and its capacity to transform imperfect substances into philosophical gold.

Agrippa makes a further association, through the equivalent symbol of the phoenix, the purple bird of self-renewal and resurrection, when he exclaims: ‘O Antony, O thou Arabian bird!’ (3.2.12); while Enobarbus detects similar potencies in Cleopatra: the immortaliaing properties of the elixir; ‘Age cannot wither her’ (2.2.245), and the transmutational powers of the Stone:

That she did make defect perfection,  
And, breathless, power breathe forth...  

(2.2.241-2)

Cloaked in a mode of playful hyperbole, these are nevertheless astonishing claims, ascribing powers to Antony and Cleopatra, uniquely associated with possession of the Stone, which mark the alchemist’s crowning achievement. Planted by Shakespeare early in the drama, and seemingly at odds with their often all-too-human conduct, they exist as if they were in the ether, hinting at higher destinies envisioned for these lovers. They are like utterances ‘spoken from another place’. The word ‘allegory’ derives from Greek allos (‘other’) and agoria (‘speaking’).

The alchemists, in pursuit of their far-off goal, must first engage laboriously in manifold ‘chemical’ operations involving the furnace and the flask, the bellows and the fan. These are reflected in the play’s rich repertoire of metamorphic images, mirrored in verbs of heating, warming, burning, roasting, stewing, fuming, melting, pouring, overflowing, sinking, stirring, blowing, cooling, thickening, digesting ... (The mediaeval alchemist Roger Bacon encouraged adepts to, ‘Cook, cook, cook – and never tire of it.’)  

Although in reality they are legion, alchemy’s myriad processes are traditionally classified as twelvetofold, as in George Ripley’s Twelve Gates. The first five of...
these aim at purification through the breaking down of the ‘matter’ or ‘subject of the work’ into its essential constituents: Calcination, Solution, Separation, Conjunction, Putrefaction. The following seven are concerned with its renovatio, its reconstitution and perfecting: Congelation, Cibation, Sublimation, Fermentation, Exaltation, Multiplication, Projection. This terminology may appear alien and recondite to us today, but in the practice of spiritual alchemy such transformative processes were regarded on the one hand as reflecting the inescapable condition of human life, the necessity of suffering and change, and on the other, as the potentialities for maturation and growth.

The overall aim was union, the harmonising of all contraries. In the words of Ripley’s Compound: ‘a conjunction which Natures repugnant joins to perfect unity’, ‘a copulation of dissevered qualities, Or a co-equation of principles.’ The adept must contend ceaselessly with a chaos of opposing forces. These are figured in the play’s ever-shifting moods and circumstances, as fortune spins her wheel; presented in a kaleidoscopic succession of 42 scenes, (more than in any other Shakespeare play), and in language plaited with antonyms. While antithesis is an ever-present hallmark of Shakespeare’s style, in this context there is a particular focus on contrastive verbs of separation (part, divide, rend, rive, split, fly off) and conjunction (join, bind, snaffle, clip, solder, seal).

These reflect the Great Work’s essentially dualistic pattern, expressed in the alchemist’s watchword: solve et coagula. For the matter to be purified it must be subjected to repeated dissolvings and coagulations, for as the ‘body’ needs to be raised and sublimed, the ‘spirit’ must be condensed and embodied. In Ripley’s words, in his Second Gate: Solution:

Our Solution is cause of our Congelation,  
For Dissolution on the one side corporeal,  
Causes Congelation on the other side spiritual.

It is a formula embedded in Antony’s speech, when he conjures a joyful reunion of husbands and wives after battle. In just four lines the whole trajectory of the opus is traversed: a conjunction succeeds a separation, and a coagulation is dissolved in women’s mercurial tears; their kisses bestowed, tokens of a sacred marriage which restores wholeness:

Enter the city, clip your wives, greet your friends,  
Tell them your feats, whilst they with joyful tears  
Wash the congealment from your wounds and kiss  
The honoured gashes whole.

(4.8.8-11)
While its essential reiterative rhythm is binary, alchemy's major stages, by which progress in the work is measured, are conceived as threefold: the nigredo, the 'blackness' of the adept's initial despair, 'black vesper's pageants' (4.14.8); the albedo, the pure white 'fixed' stone: anticipated in Antony's gift of 'an orient pearl', and attained when Cleopatra proclaims, 'I am marble-constant' (5.2.252); and finally, the triumphant rubedo, the red stone, the 'carbuncle of the sun', here envisioned as a solar chariot, its wheels studded with red jewels, 'carbuncled / Like holy Phoebus car' (4.8.28-9).

For the 'Sons of the Art' to engage in the opus, as a radical work of self-renewal, it is first necessary to succumb to the deepest depression: 'Love, I am full of lead' (3.11.73), to reach an apparent nadir in one's fortunes: 'All is lost!', to suffer dismemberment, an eclipse of the self: 'No more a soldier: bruised pieces' (4.14.43 ). It is the concept of the nigredo which informs and makes sense of the defeats and desolations suffered by Antony, Cleopatra, and Enobarbus – of which more below.

A fourfold principle is also at work: the distillatory opus circulatorium involves a constant morphing between states of hot, cold, moist and dry among the four elements: 'our dungy earth', 'Nilus slime', 'winds and waters', 'i th'fire, i th'air'.13 Each of these elements is assigned to one of the first four alchemcial operations, fire (Calcination: dried to powder), water (Dissolution: weep, disponge, discandy, dislimn), air (Separation: part, break off, fly, flee) and earth (Conjunction: we are firm by land).

While Cleopatra's affinities are with the solvent and volatile properties of Mercurius14 (her 'sighs and tears' are 'storms and tempests'), Antony, as 'the firm Roman', is associated with the fixed qualities of 'masculine' Sulphur, and the element of fire. His existential choice, between soldier and lover, is couched in elemental terms, whether to battle 'by sea or by land'. (These alternatives are echoed a score of times through a dozen scenes.) That he opts to fight 'by sea' appears fatally mistaken since it leads to the disgrace of his defeat at Actium. When Cleopatra 'The breeze upon her, like a cow in June, / Hoists sails and flies' from the scene, he follows after:

   Claps on his sea-wing, and, like a doting mallard,
   Leaving the fight in height, flies after her:

   (3.10.14-15 and 20-21)

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13 1.1.36, 1.3.70; 1.2.155; 3.10.3.
14 ‘Mercurius is a symbol for the alchemists’ magical arcanum, the transformative substance without which the opus cannot be performed … most frequently described as a water … also referred to as a fire … and as water and fire.’ For the multiple meanings of Mercurius, see Abraham, pp, 124-5.
In this image of the ‘fixed’ becoming fugitive Antony appears to betray his masculine self, certainly from a Roman perspective:

I never saw an action of such shame;  
Experience, manhood, honour, ne’er before  
Did violate so itself.

(3.10.22-4)

It is only later that he begins to understand his flight – this apparent self-desertion - at a deeper level, as following the irresistible promptings of his soul:

Egypt, thou knew’st too well  
My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings,  
And thou shouldst tow me after: o’er my spirit  
Thy full supremacy thou knew’st, and that  
Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods  
Command me.

(3.11.56-61)

After a storm of self-reprimand, as well as fury at Cleopatra’s flight, Antony softens, touched by her extreme contrition and distress, to a ‘love in deed’. In begging a kiss (a conjunctive gesture) he is moved as much by compassion as by desire:

Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates  
All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss;  
Even this repays me.

(3.11.69-71)

The four elements in combination are raised to their perfection in the quintessence, the stage at which art appears to outdo nature, and matter is exalted in the corpus glorificatum, sometimes figured as a ‘crowned maid’. In Ripley’s fantastical alchemical poem Cantilena the ‘king’, having been apotheosized and solarised by the moon goddess, is granted a vision of this Maid:

Hence God sett ope the Gates of Paradise,  
Where Cynthia deckt him in Coelestiall Guise,  
Sublim’d him to the Heavens, and when sh’had done,  
Crown’d him in Glory, aequall with the Sun.

Foure Elements, Brave Armes, and Polish’d well  
God gave him: In the mid’st whereof did dwell
A Crowned Maid, ordained for to be
In the fifth Circle [of the Mystery].  

A ‘delicious unguent’ flows from her, she is adorned ‘with every Precious Stone’, ‘glittering Bravely in her Golden Robes’, she ‘Shines and sits in Haire of Nett-worke.’

Despite its convoluted imagery, this account finds a striking echo in Enobarbus’ dazzling description of Cleopatra, clothed in ‘cloth of gold, of tissue’, envisioned as Venus seated on a ‘burnished throne’. In these enchanting lines, universally acclaimed for their sumptuous beauty, every detail: the precious metals, fabrics of exquisite fineness, the graceful play of elements, the senses attuned to ethereal music and the presence of a ‘strange invisible perfume’ is suggestive of the *exaltatio*, of matter sublimed to the fifth degree. (Entries in Abraham for ‘art and nature’, ‘purple’ and ‘fragrance’ confirm their associations with the quintessence.

The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne
Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold,
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster. For her own person,
It beggar’d all description: she did lie
In her pavilion – cloth of gold, of tissue -
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-colour’d fans, who wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid, did.

(2.2.201-215)

The charged conceit ‘burned on the water’ invokes yet again the elusive *Mercurius*, one of its many definitions being a ‘water which burns’, while a further paradox is present, fundamental to alchemy, that seemingly opposite processes of heating and cooling, evaporating and distilling, are in reality complementary, and may occur simultaneously, ‘and what they undid did’.

Present not only at the rhetorical level, tincting the play’s lexis and imagery, alchemical tropes are also the determinants of its structure. *Antony and Cleopatra* is plotted along a sequence of what could be termed failed

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15 Ripley, Cantilena Riplaie https://www.alchemywebsite.com/cantilen.html
16 Abraham, pp. 11-12; 159-60; and 81.
conjunctions, attempts at coming together - in love, marriage, friendship, political alliance - which end in betrayal, abandonment and estrangement. These attempts founder because they are based not on true relationship but self-interested calculation. The motif is played out most pathetically in the marriage of convenience arranged between Antony and Caesar’s sister Octavia. It is an act of cynical expediency, intended to seal a pact, not between husband and wife, but between the two leading members of the triumvirate.

In proposing the match Maecena hopes it will serve, ‘to atone you’; Agrippa that it will ‘hold you in perpetual amity, / To make you brothers and knit your hearts with an unslipping knot’ (2.2.132-4). Caesar proclaims, as he clasps hand with Antony:

Let her live
To join our kingdoms, and our hearts, and never
Fly off our loves again!

(2.2.159-161)

In this travesty of ‘amity’, relationship is purely instrumental. Poor Octavia is to be ‘the cement of our love’ (3.2.29).

*During the Nigredo stage, water is the dominant element, symbolizing the dissolution and putrefaction of the matter of the Stone, with the vessel sometimes figured as Noah’s ark riding on the flood.*

The drinking party aboard Pompey’s galley is another attempt at a *coniunctio* which unravels. Intended as a feast of fellowship: ‘Come, let’s all take hands’ (2.7.106) - it ends in fiasco, undermined by Menas’ treacherous plot and the progressively incapacitated revellers. Not only a failed *coagula*, the scene presents us with a succession of alchemical processes in travestied form.

Poor Lepidus, forced by his companions to drink endless toasts, becomes the victim of excessive ‘imbibation’ - ‘fill till the cup be hid’ (2.7.89). (Ripley warns against the dangers of ‘overglutting’ the ‘earth’ with liquid during the process of calcination.) And the purifying effects of ablution when the matter is cleansed through repeated washing, is turned instead to a process of polluting when Caesar complains: ‘It’s monstrous labour, when I wash my brain, / And it grows fouler’ (2.7.99-100).

That Lepidus is ‘high-coloured,’ and Caesar notes, ‘We have burnt our cheeks’ does not herald the final stage of the opus, the *reddening*. Instead, it is the mere

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17 Abraham p. 10.
effect of intoxication, a misguided attempt at *exaltatio* which collapses into its opposite. Under the rites of ‘plumpy Bacchus with pink eyne!’, these humans have undergone a debasement of being, rendered grotesques. Caesar complains: ‘this wild disguise has anticked us all’. (2.7.114, 124-5)

Putrefaction, the process of decomposition, of rotting and foulness which takes place in the ‘grave’ at the base of the alembic, accompanies the black state of the *nigredo*. It is expressed in Cleopatra’s casual curse: ‘Sink Rome, and their tongues rot / That speak against us’(3.7.15-16); and later invoked in unsparing detail when, in the final scene, she imagines an alternative fate to being paraded in triumph by Caesar:

Rather a ditch in Egypt  
Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus’ mud  
Lay me stark naked, and let the water-flies  
Blow me into abhorring!

(5.2.56-9)

Conceived as a psychological death, of a death before you die - a concept burlesqued by Enobarbus when he marvels at Cleopatra’s histrionics: ‘Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment... she hath such celerity in dying’ (1.2.147-51) - the *nigredo* is enacted in the actual death which Enobarbus, overcome with grief and shame at his disloyalty to Antony, chooses for himself. He slinks away in the night to find ‘some foul ditch to die’, and calls the moon to witness. The conceit is a complex one switching halfway from *solutio* (‘disponge’) to *calcination*, the process by which a solid is disintegrated by being dried to powder:

O sovereign mistress of true melancholy,  
The poisonous damp of night disponge upon me,  
That life, a very rebel to my will,  
May hang no longer on me. Throw my heart  
Against the flint and hardness of my fault,  
Which, being dried with grief, will break to powder  
And finish all foul thoughts.

(4.9.15-21)

In his despair, Enobarbus cannot conceive of the Mercurial Water in its healing guise as distilling the ‘dew of heaven’; for him it is only a ‘poisonous damp’. He dies despairing, but there is consolation in the witnessing soldiers’ solicitude: ‘Let us bear him / To the court of guard; he is of note ... He may recover yet’ (4.9.37-40).
In the *nigredo*, disintegration of the matter may be achieved through the actions of water, as in putrefaction, or through the actions of fire, known as the *mortificatio*. Alchemy had been defined in the fourteenth century by Petrus Bonus as ‘the passion of the metals’, passion being understood in the Biblical sense of trial, suffering and death. Subtle, in *The Alchemist*, speaks of the ‘vexations, and martyrizations/Of mettalls in the worke’.¹⁹ This purging action of the philosophical fire is reflected in the play’s vast vocabulary of ways to wound, expressed in verbs of *knifing, whipping, beating, pounding, grating, grinding, stinging, smiting, scoring, mauling, hanging* and *torturing*.

The alchemists employed various acids as fierce corrosives to disintegrate their *materia*. Hence the formulation of Cleopatra’s threat to the messenger who brings news of Antony’s marriage to Octavia: ‘Thou shalt be whipped with wire and stewed in brine, / Smarting in ling’ring pickle!’ (2.5.65-6).

Abraham notes, under the entry for ‘Vinegar’:

In Ben Jonson’s *Mercurie Vindicated*, Mercury comically lists vinegar as one of the many substances with which the alchemists torture him: ‘what betweene their salts and their sulphures; their oyles and their tartars, their brines and their vinegers you might take me out now your sous’d *Mercury*, now a salted *Mercury*, now a smoak’d and dri’d *Mercury*, now a pouldred and pickl’d *Mercury*. (lines 56-60).²⁰

These woundings are not only physical. On the two occasions when Antony and Cleopatra visit undeserved punishments on hapless servants, the whippings are externalisations of their own emotional anguish. Later, in Act 4, Antony in *extremis*, driven to a paroxysm of grief believing the ‘foul Egyptian’ has betrayed him, cries out as though being burnt alive: ‘The shirt of Nessus is upon me’ (4.12.43). He is referring to the shirt of poisonous fire which ate into Hercules’ flesh. The paradox of this shirt, akin to the double nature of *Mercurius*, is that it was intended as a love token from his wife, but turned out to be a death-dealing poison.²¹

The comparison to Hercules is doubly appropriate. He is the cult hero, undergoing initiation through his twelve labours, who often features in alchemical allegory, pounding the matter with his club, seeking the golden

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¹⁹ Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist* 2.5.20-1.
²¹ Patrick Harpur comments on this myth in a way which indirectly sheds light on why Shakespeare’s switching of Eros for Hercules is so essential. He observes: ‘One version of the myth tells us that Nessus’ blood is poisonous because he was shot and wounded by one of Hercules’ poisonous arrows in the past. Poison is sometimes the only way love can reach us. It is a metaphor of the corrosive force love is perceived to be by the impervious Heraclean ego – which, if it will not die to itself, must finally consume itself. And so, Hercules puts on the shirt and, insane with agony, tears himself to pieces.’ *The Philosopher’s Secret Fire*, (The Squeeze Press, 2009), p. 512.
apples of the Hesperides, attaining his final apotheosis through the agency of fire. Even more to the point he is, according to Shakespeare, Antony’s tutelary god, not as in Plutarch, the god Bacchus. This switching of gods is the single most significant change Shakespeare makes to his source in Plutarch.

The pivotal moment in Antony’s destiny occurs early in Act 4 in an uncanny scene witnessed by a group of soldiers on guard. Strange music is heard ‘i’ th’ air... under the earth... What should this mean?’ ‘Tis the god Hercules whom Antony loved, now leaves him.’ (4.3.16-22). This desertion by the demi-god of strength must surely deal a devastating blow to his ‘captainship’. And yet, within a dozen lines, Antony appears, calling urgently on a quite different power: ‘Eros! Mine armour, Eros!’ (4.4.1).

Fortuitous or providential, but perfectly suiting Shakespeare’s purposes, it just happened to be the case that, as mentioned in Plutarch, Antony had a servant called Eros. Shakespeare always repeats himself when he wishes particularly to catch our attention. With the pun on armour/amor, this triple invocation to the god of love, is promptly repeated. A scene of ‘happy valiancy’ ensues - the felicitous phrase coined by Coleridge to characterise the unique mood of ‘this astonishing drama’22. Antony, with Cleopatra and Eros acting as his armourers, enthuses: ‘to business that we love we rise betimes’ (4.4.20). In bidding farewell to Cleopatra with ‘a soldier’s kiss’ (4.4.30) he appears for the moment to reconcile his roles of warrior and lover.

With the advent of Eros, in the guise of a faithful ministering servant, comes a fresh impulse, the infusion of a new ethos of love extending beyond erotic desire to the wider sympathies of affection and compassion. Already, at his first appearance in Act 3, this is apparent. It was not only Cleopatra’s tears which moved Antony from anger to tenderness, it was Eros who had first prompted their reconciliation:

Eros:
Most noble sir, arise. The Queen approaches.
Her head’s declined, and death will seize her; but
Your comfort makes the rescue.

(3.11.46-8)

A rapid succession of scenes in Act 4 bring first triumph in battle and then, again, disaster. It is now Antony who is in need of rescue. Under the misapprehension that Cleopatra, this ‘false soul of Egypt’ has ‘packed cards with Caesar’ and betrayed him, Antony undergoes his own putrefaction. He turns to Eros for confirmation of his very being: ‘Eros, thou yet behold’st me?’ (4.14.1). To

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understand the speech which follows, and the role Shakespeare has cast for Antony in his chemical theatre, it is helpful to read the account in Abraham of the role of the ‘king’, identified both as the raw matter for the stone and the Philosopher’s Stone itself:

During the process of becoming the Stone, the king has to undergo a death and a resurrection. In the early stages of the work the king, as ‘our gold’ or the alchemists’ raw stuff, suffers death and putrefaction as he is dissolved into the original matter of creation, the prima materia. This was the death that necessarily preceded rebirth. In the myth of the rex marinus, the king is almost drowned in the sea but is saved, renewed and united in the coniunctio with his queen.  

Antony expresses his dissolution of being in the language of solve. ‘Here I am Antony, yet cannot hold this visible shape’. His experience of unselving is figured as a series of phantom images in a cloudscape which appear only to disappear, to ‘dislimn … As water is in water’ (ll. 10-11).

Sometime we see a cloud that’s dragonish,  
A vapour sometime like a bear, or lion,  
A tower’d citadel, a pendent rock,  
A forked mountain…

(4.14.3-5)

Seemingly random, these fluxive images are in fact typical of the creatures and landscapes which feature in alchemical illustrations. Moreover, in almost every instance, in the polysemic symbolism of the opus, whether dragon, lion, citadel, rock or mountain, they are included in the glossary of terms which may stand for stages in the production of the Stone.

It is as though, while the adept toils away on the mundane level, suffering repeated failures and frustrations, the goal of all his labours is already present in the eternal realm, and in potentia within himself. Shakespeare requires us to attune to deeper processes at work beneath the narrative surface, and to view events with a ‘parted eye’. In the recursive rhythm of solve et coagula, experiences which appear to the self as affronts and undoings may be preludes to gains, a dissolution the necessary precondition of a congelation.

Abraham explains the rationale of this opus contra naturam:

The process of creating the philosopher’s stone requires the that the alchemist consciously turn back to the divine source, against the outward

23 Abraham, pp. 110-111.  
24 See Abraham, pp. 32, 59-60, 92-4, 131, 172,
thrust of nature, in order to know the secret of creation and its laws. In order for regeneration to occur, the imperfect metal (or outmoded state of being) has first to be destroyed. It must be dissolved into the original stuff of creation, the prima materia, before a new, purified microcosm or stone can be reconstructed or created.²⁵

In Ripley’s sequence of Gates, what follows on from Putrefaction are the stages of Congelation and Sublimation. It is these cyclical processes of distillation, aiming at a further refinement of the matter, which inform Cleopatra’s passionate protestation when Antony accuses her of being cold-hearted towards him. The episode occurs earlier in Act 3. He is consumed in a nigredo of self-pity and humiliation: ‘When my good stars that were my former guides / Have empty left their orbs and shot their fires / Into th’abysm of hell’ (3.13.150-2), She counters his accusation with an extraordinary pledge:

Ah, dear, if it be so,
From my cold heart let heaven engender hail
And poison it in the source, and the first stone
Drop in my neck; as it determines, so
Dissolve my life! The next Caesarion smite,
Till by degrees the memory of my womb,
Together with my brave Egyptians all,
By the discandying of this pelleted storm
Lie graveless, till the flies and gnats of Nile
Have buried them for prey!

(3.13.163-72)

While this elaborate conceit clearly owes much to the Biblical account of the punishments visited upon the Egyptians: the plagues of hail and flies, as well as the plague on the first-born, (Exodus 12:12); more occultly, it is informed by the processes of dissolution (‘dissolve’, ‘discandying’), congela- tion (‘engender hail’, ‘pelleted storm’)²⁶, and putrefaction: when the body of the Stone lies dead in the bottom of the flask. In the purifying operations of subliming and distilling, the Stone ascends and descends within the vessel as it is alternately vaporized and condensed, hence the puns on ‘stone’ and ‘neck’. The latter was the adepts’ term for the top of the vessel: ‘and the first stone / Drop in my neck.’²⁷

²⁵ Abraham, p. 139.
²⁶ The approipriacy of associating hail with congela- tion is clear from the following definition: ‘the conversion of a liquid to a solid state, also known as fixation, crystallisation and freezing’. Abraham, p. 45.
²⁷ Synesius wrote: ‘Thus when our stone is in the vessel, and that it mounts up on high with fume this is called Sublimation, and when it falls down from on high, Distillation, and Descension. (Synesius, The True Book, 171.) Cited by Abraham, p.55.
This curious self-directed curse, in its conjuring of Magus-like powers, and its rapid rehearsal of the refining processes of the opus circulatorum, (albeit in reverse, so that the outcome, instead of regeneration, is sterility), acts upon Antony like a spell. All his anger evaporates in an instant: ‘I am satisfied’.

The Seven Planetary Metals

Despite the alternating pattern of defeats and rallies, the overall trend in Antony’s fortunes throughout Acts 3 and 4 appears downward. However, Shakespeare’s alchemical schema allows him to introduce a subtle countercurrent which runs athwart the tragic arc of the play, a motif of progressive ennoblement derived from the hermetic concept of a sevenfold ascension up the scale of the planetary spheres and their associated metals.

The alchemists drew on a long classical tradition which identified each of the seven planets with a particular metal. It was, in fact, Stephanus of Alexandria in the sixth century who codified this list in its final form. Chaucer rehearses the tradition in his Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale:

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The bodies seven eek lo! Them here anon
Sol gold is, and luna silver we thrape
Mars yeren, Mercurie quik-silver we clepe
Saturnus leed, and Jupiter is tin
And Venus coper, by my fader kin!
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Ordered according to their distance from the earth, the sequence should run: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. But the alchemists tended to invert this sequence to reflect an ascent from the black heaviness of Saturn to the shining preciousness of silver and gold. While they retained the Sun in its central position in the sequence, it also, symbolically, crowned the sequence as gold.

From this hierarchical schema, an analogy could be drawn between temper and temperament in man and the process of tempering in metalwork, a parallel further endorsed by the homonymic linking of ‘mettle’ and ‘metal’.

In figure 1, an illustration from an alchemical tract depicting the integration of body, soul and spirit in microcosmic man, we see this ascent depicted. The process starts at the bottom with lead, coloured black to symbolise the density of the physical body, unregenerate matter – and the mood of melancholy which envelops the alchemist at this initial stage. The sequence then unfolds from Jupiter (tin), to Mars (iron), to Sun (gold), to Venus (copper), to Mercury (quick-silver) to Moon (silver).
The first hint of a metallurgical metaphor comes in Act 3 when Antony, in a state of *nigredo*, confesses to Cleopatra: ‘Love, I am full of lead’ (3.11.72). The famous engraving by Albrecht Dürer, dating from 1514, (Figure 2) captures ‘Melencolia’ in Saturnian mood, sunk in dejection. It includes a seven-stepped ladder symbolising the seven metals and seven planets, with the irregular polyhedron at the bottom symbolising lead.

Shakespeare omits any reference to tin – in fact there is not a single mention of this metal in the whole of the canon - but following the prescribed sequence we come next to iron when Antony calls Eros to arms:

Eros! Come, mine armour; Eros!
Come, good fellow, put thine iron on. (4.4.2-3)

Of all the planet–metal correspondences, this is the most commonly alluded to: ‘plated Mars’ as the god of war and weaponry being most obviously associated with iron.28

After this, the next metal to be mentioned is not a planetary one, but it does represent iron in a more evolved form: alloyed with carbon, tempered in fire, and hence ‘ennobled’. This is steel. In bidding farewell to Cleopatra with raised spirits and ‘a soldier’s kiss’, Antony declares: ‘I'll leave thee / Now like a man of steel’ (4.4.32-3).

From lead, to iron, to steel, and four scenes later, to gold. When Antony commends a fellow soldier to Cleopatra for his valour in battle, she responds: ‘I'll give thee, friend, / An armour all of gold’ (4.8.26-7). Here Scarus, as the recipient of this virtual accolade, stands as proxy for his captain. Such a ‘gilding’ bestowed on Antony at this stage of the *opus* would be premature. But the image is typical of the way the language of the play signals and previews the end goal of ongoing processes.

Next in the prescribed sequence comes ‘the strong-winged Mercury’, supreme agent in the operations of spiritual ascent. Cleopatra invokes his assistance in elevating Antony’s body to her embrace in the monument scene. Antony’s urgent

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28 Although copper is not mentioned, Cleopatra as Venus to Antony’s Mars is the goddess of copper, a metal regarded by alchemists as superior to iron, its shining quality marking its closeness to solar gold. In this sense ‘copper’ is implicitly operative throughout the play. Alison Roberts quotes a remarkable passage from Stephanus of Alexandria in her account of the tincturing power of copper. This “acts ‘like a ferment’ in the body due to its three active qualities - ‘movement, sensation and passion’. Its tincturing power is an inner force, a volatile energy, vitalizing solid bodies, an invisible ‘ferment’ making them rise.” *Hathor’s Alchemy* (Rottingdean: NorthGate Publishers, 2019), p. 198. This could serve as a description of the way Cleopatra ‘acts’ upon Antony: ‘Antony / Will be himself’ - but stirred by Cleopatra’ (1.1.43-4). Fermentation is the stage following the sublimation, in which the Stone works on other substances like yeast. See Roberts, p. 108; and Abraham, p. 74.
call, ‘O quick, or I am gone!’ (4.15.32), and Cleopatra’s wish to ‘quicken with kissing’ (l.40) catch the quality of his quicksilver nature.

In Act 5 Cleopatra refers to the moon, number seven in the sequence, and the heavenly body most closely identified with the feminine. But she invokes it only to reject it: ‘Now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine’ (5.2.239-40). This rejection suggests her aspiration to self-transcendence. It heralds her apotheosis, when later in the same scene she is to be crowned in gold.

**Multiplication and Projection**

While this thread of metallurgical imagery serves to indicate the drama’s overarching direction of travel towards the spiritual telos of philosophical gold, it is reflected on a material level in the literal gold which Antony bestows on his friends and followers. (On several occasions Antony is compared to Jupiter, the god most closely identified with beneficence and abundance, ‘Your emperor / Continues still a Jove’ (4.6.29-30). This dispensing of ‘bounty’ and ‘treasure’ is couched in the language of the two penultimate stages of the opus: the multiplicatio (augmentation of the virtue of the Stone) and projection, when its powers of transmutation, ‘tinging truly and perfectly’ are increased. 

Unlike Caesar, who deploys ‘bounty’ strictly as an instrument of policy, Antony’s spontaneous acts of generosity – his ‘bounty overplus’ - are expressive of his most attractive quality, his affectionate, empathic and forgiving nature. (Here Shakespeare takes his cue from Plutarch who refers to Antony’s selfless ‘liberalitie’ in the context of his capacity to inspire the love of his followers: ‘And furthermore, being given to love: that made him the more desired, and by that meanes he brought many to love him.’) 

After the catastrophe at Actium his thoughts turn in an instant from self-loss to the welfare of his men: ‘I / Have lost my way for ever. I have a ship / Laden with gold. Take that, divide it. Fly (3.11.3-5). And, similarly, on hearing that Enobarbus has deserted him, his immediate response is free of all rancour or reproach:

Go, Eros, send his treasure after. Do it.
Detain no jot, I charge thee. Write to him
I will subscribe - gentle adieus and greetings.

(4.5.12-14).

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30 See Appendix V to the Arden edition of the play, edited by M.R. Ridley, which provides extracts from Shakespeare’s source in Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579).
That Eros should be entrusted with this mission is entirely fitting. This is love taking the form of *philia*, a relationship of love and loyalty between friends. Aristotle, in his *Nichomachean Ethics* (1159b28), includes the bond between fellow soldiers as an example of φιλία. He considers the cultivation of such bonds justified as contributing to living a fulfilled life.31

On the eve of his final battle against Caesar Antony feasts his men, addressing them as ‘my hearts’ and clasping each man’s hand in turn: ‘Let’s tonight / Be bounteous at our meal / Give me thy hand ... Thou, and thou, and thou’ (4.2.9-12). In a beautiful speech of thanksgiving (which carries inescapable echoes of the communing at the Last Supper) he speaks of an ideal of mutual service which goes far beyond a feudal code of shared self-interest:

> I wish I could be made so many men,  
> And all of you clapped up together in  
> An Antony, that I may do you service  
> So good as you have done.

*(4.2.16-19)*

Expressed in an image of perfect *coniunctio*, this is true ‘amity’, the all-embracing love of *agape*. The effect on his companions is transformative. This ‘love in deed’ is the power of Projection: ‘when the tincture is thrown over base metal to transmute it into gold’. Enobbarbus, overwhelmed, registers the change in terms of a transmutation. Hailing Antony as ‘Thou mine of bounty,’ he is figuratively ‘gilded’ and touched to the heart:

> O Antony,  
> Thou mine of bounty, how wouldst thou have paid  
> My better service, when my turpitude  
> Thou dost so crown with gold! This blows my heart.

*(4.6.32-5)*

Antony’s fellows are likewise moved to tears: ‘Grace grow where those drops fall. My hearty friends... I spake to you for your comfort’ (4.2.38-40).

Setting the seal on this leitmotif of Antony as the ‘multiplying medicine’, Cleopatra will conclude: ‘For his bounty, / There was no winter in’t; an autumn ‘twas / That grew the more by reaping (5.2.85-7).

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The Hermaphrodite

While Antony, in these touching scenes, manifests ‘feminine’ qualities, the feeling values of the heart, (Enobarbus protests, ‘Transform us not to women!’ 4.2.36), Cleopatra, in seeking to outwit Caesar, must develop a ‘masculine’ will to action.

This cross-gender theme has classical precedents in the story of Omphale, Queen of Lydia, dressing Hercules in women’s clothes32, and in various versions of the myth of Mars and Venus in which the goddess of love overcomes and disarms the god of war.33 However, it is in the alchemical concept of the Hermaphrodite that it finds its deepest rationale. The final union of the two principles in the Chemical Wedding (Man and Woman standing for all apparent ‘opposites’) is figured in this mysterious symbol. Three centuries before Jung, alchemy was unique in its recognition of the importance of integrating and balancing the complementary energies of *anima* and *animus* in the pursuit of wholeness, both within and between the genders.34

In progressing towards this androgynous coupling, the opposing principles of ‘fixed’ and ‘volatile’ substances were required to exchange roles. Antony, as the fixed masculine principle and potential Stone, must soften and become permeable to the influence of the *anima*, while Cleopatra, in order to ‘make the rescue’ and play her regenerative role as *Mercurius*, must abandon her moist and volatile nature to take on ‘masculine’ qualities of boldness and resolve.

The theme of gender exchange is introduced at first playfully in Act 2 as a cross-dressing game between lovers when Cleopatra recalls:

That time? 0 times!
… I drunk him to his bed,
Then put my tires and mantels on him, whilst
I wore his sword Philippan.

(2.5.18, 21-3)

It is attempted prematurely, with apparently disastrous results, by Cleopatra in Act 3 when she proposes to accompany Antony into battle:

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34 See Abraham, p. 98. ‘In the production of the Stone, the alchemist must join Sulphur, the hot, dry, active male aspect of the prima materia, to the cold, moist, receptive female aspect, argent vive or mercury. The union of these two metallic seeds is presented as the copulation of two lovers, and later, at a higher level of union, the chemical wedding of Sol and Luna, sun and moon, king and queen. This complete, undivided unity, known as the rebis or hermaphrodite, is the perfect integration of male and female energies.’
A charge we bear i’ th’ war,
And, as the president of my kingdom, will
Appear there for a man.

(3.7.16-19)

Only in the final scene is it successfully realised when Cleopatra determines on her way to die:

My resolution’s placed, and I have nothing
Of woman in me. Now from head to foot
I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine.

(5.2.237-240)

This apparent renunciation of her womanhood evinces none of the revulsion we feel at Lady Macbeth’s ‘unsex me here’, rather the effect is one of exhilaration. Cleopatra is expressing her resolve in terms of a triumphant stage in the alchemical process, the albedo. This occurs ‘after the blackened matter, the putrefied body of the metal or matter of the Stone, lying dead at the bottom of the alembic has been washed to whiteness by the mercurial waters or fire.’ This is the White Stone, in Edward Kelly’s description: ‘as brilliant as white marble; it is also called the white Queen.’

It is the role of Mercurius to sublime and exalt, and ultimately to resurrect, the body of the Stone. When Cleopatra takes refuge in her monument, to avoid capture by Caesar, the scene is set for this process of ‘raising’ to be enacted quite literally.

To perform the Herculean feat of hauling up Antony’s dying body she must summon all her new-found strength. This is her labour of love, it is ‘sport in deed’. That she invokes Mercury, the patron god of alchemy, to assist her in this task is no arbitrary choice:

Had I great Juno’s power,
The strong-winged Mercury should fetch thee up
And set thee by Jove’s side.

(4.15.35-7)

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Her attempt at resurrection - ‘quicken with kissing’ - will fail. Antony will die in her arms. But the operations of exaltatio and sublimatio will continue. Her final service to love will be to exalt Antony through the power of poetry alone.

But first, faced with the catastrophe of his death, Cleopatra must suffer her own nigredo, her world collapses: ‘The crown o’ th’earth doth melt … And there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon’. She herself is ‘No more than e’en a woman … All’s but naught’ (4.15.65, 69-70, 77, 82).

And yet, the mood of utter despair is brief; almost immediately, in an impulse of affection, compassion for her companions rouses her to action, ‘How do you, women? / What, what, good cheer! … My noble girls! Ah, women, women! … Good sirs, take heart’ (4.15.86-9).

To a degree that Antony never quite achieves, she can defy fortune, ‘that false huswife’, and rise above the contingencies of a sublunar world. In out-manoeuvring Caesar, she can mock his claim to be ‘Sole sir o’the world,’ seeing him merely as ‘fortune’s fool’. This transcendent perspective, a realisation born out of the depths of loss, is expressed in the opening words of the final scene:

My desolation does begin to make
A better life. ‘Tis paltry to be Caesar.
Not being Fortune, he’s but Fortune’s knave,
A minister to her will.

(5.2.1-4)

Cleopatra’s Dream

In this final scene Cleopatra will sublume Antony in poetry of surpassing splendour. His ‘report’ is now in her keeping, and in her ‘dream of Antony’ she acts the alchemist in bringing to perfection this ‘noblest of men’.36

The Renaissance imagination had been liberated and inspired by the treatises of the Corpus Hermeticum brought to Florence in the 1460s and translated from Greek into Latin by Marsilio Ficino at the behest of Cosimo de Medici. The Hermetica accorded to humanity a potentially godlike status: ‘A human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honoured: for he changes his nature into a god’s, as if he were a god… As a microcosm of the whole of creation, humanity’s role was axial, reaching from earth to heaven, acting as a vector of celestial influences:

36 Her role here parallels Ripley’s description of the moon goddess exalting the alchemical King in the verses quoted earlier: ‘Sublim’d him to the Heavens, and when sh’had done, / Crown’d him in Glory, aequall with the Sun.’
37 This quotation from Asclepius is cited in Healy, p. 30.
His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
A sun and moon which kept their course and lighted
The little O, the earth ...

His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world; his voice was propertied
As all the tuned spheres ...

(5.2.78-80 and 81-3)

Antony’s sensual sportiveness is uplifted to the fifth element:

His delights
Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above
The element they lived in.

(5.2.87-9)

He is the tincture; his blazon is gold:

In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were
As plates dropped from his pockets...

(5.2.89-91)

In defying Dolabella’s disbelief:

Cleopatra: Think you there was or might be such a man
As this I dreamt of?

Dolabella: Gentle madam, no.

Cleopatra formulates a paradoxical relationship between art and nature which goes to the heart of the alchemical project. Alchemy was generally viewed as an ‘art’ that could perfect ‘nature’, but this was not always the case:

In the general debate art and nature were often seen as antithetical with one or the other of the two taking precedence... In other contexts art and nature were seen as complementary, with each serving the other to advantage. The first treatise in Trismosin’s Splendor Solis says, 'Here Nature serves Art with Matter, and Art serves Nature with suitable instruments and method convenient for Nature to produce some new
forms; and although the aforementioned Stone can only be brought to its proper form by Art, yet the form is from Nature.'

While Enobarbus in Act 2 had spoken in conventional terms of the vision of Cleopatra in her barge: ‘O’er-picturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature’ (2.2. 210-11); here, Cleopatra follows Trismosin in positing a reciprocal relationship between the two which elevates both. Nature could take inspiration from her idea of Antony, accessed through the power of the imagination, to create such a masterpiece:

You lie up to the hearing of the gods!
But if there be nor ever were one such
To vie strange forms with fancy; yet t’imagine
An Antony were nature’s piece ’gainst fancy,
Condemning shadows quite.

(5.2.94-9)

Hieros Gamos

There remains one last ritual to be performed, one consummate act of union in which the lovers will be conjoined and ‘glorified’ in the Chemical Wedding. Antony had conceived of his own death in these terms: ‘I will be / A bridegroom in my death and run into’t / As to a lover’s bed’ (4.14.100-2). Now Cleopatra, in staging her own, follows the script and choreography of this final act in the alchemical drama, the hieros gamos. Her chosen instrument, ‘the pretty worm of Nilus’ whose ‘biting is immortal’, recalls from Act I the ‘delicious poison’ of the ‘Serpent of old Nile’, making the play come full circle. As befits the opus circulatorium, figured in the symbol of the ouroboros, the alpha and the omega of the process are one. Whether snake, worm or serpent, they stand at once for the ‘Subject of the Work’ and the whole process of self-transformation.

For her swan song performance, Cleopatra summons the symbols of her sovereignty, appropriate both to her role as Royal Egypt’s Queen, and to her part in the alchemical ‘coronation’. Abraham notes: ‘the royal crown is a symbol of the completed Stone at the perfect red stage’ (174).

Now, Charmian!
Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch
My best attires. I am again for Cydnus,
To meet Mark Antony ...

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38 Abraham, p. 11.
39 5.2.241 and 246. Shakespeare makes his point by choosing to use the word ‘worm’, rather than ‘aspicke’ as in North’s Plutarch, and by repeating ‘worm’ no fewer than 8 times.
Bring our crown and all.

(5.2.225-7, 231)

This is for Cleopatra the consummation devoutly to be wished. It had been from the start her deepest desire to call Mark Antony husband. The pathos of her faltering words in Act I testify to her vulnerable and constrained position as his mistress rather than his wife. As Antony, about to return to Rome, bids her farewell:

*Cleopatra*

Courteous lord, one word:
Sir, you and I must part, but that’s not it;
That you know well. Something it is I would -
Oh, my oblivion is a very Antony,
And I am all forgotten!

(1.3.88-93)

She breaks off, unable to articulate her wish, fearing his rejection, aware of her dependency on him as the very ground of her being.

Now in Act 5, she is in full self-possession, sure of her immortal destiny and of Antony’s love, and speaking the language of transfiguration: ‘Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have / Immortal longings in me’ (5.2.279-80).

*Methinks I hear*

Antony call. I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act ... Husband I come!
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life.

(5.2.279-80, 282-9)

A momentary doubt assails her, as Iras dies before her:

This proves me base.
If she first meet the curled Antony,
He’ll make demand of her, and spend that kiss
Which is my heaven to have.

(5.2.300-2)
Seeded at intervals throughout the play, sounding a higher harmonic to the narrative bass-line, a sequence of kisses act as symbolic tokens of the perfect coniunctio, affirming the primacy of true relationship in human affairs, expressions both of the ‘nobleness of life’ and of ‘love in deed’. They culminate in this final conjunction, at the chymical wedding, the ‘dying into love’. It is just at this moment, speaking of this ‘kiss which is my heaven to have’, that Cleopatra puts the asp to her breast.

Charmian is moved to lamentation by the pathos of the scene, portraying it as a cosmic event, but her words are equally expressive of the cleansing action of the distilled Mercurial waters, which may be figured as tears, rain or dew, a final solve: ‘The ablation of rain or dew always precedes a new coniunctio or chemical wedding, preparing the bodies (or body) of the Stone for the reunion with the animating soul, (or with the unifying soul/spirit).’

Dissolve, thick cloud, and rain, that I may say
The gods themselves do weep!

(5.2.298-9)

Cleopatra, now clothed in majesty, the ‘baby’ at her breast, presents a tableau of the goddess Isis suckling her child, but also with yet another hermetic mystery. At the chemical wedding the Stone manifests as a product of the royal union, in the form of the Philosophical Child. The alchemist is required to play the role of foster-parent to this Child; through the process of Cibation it is to be carefully nourished with milk.

Three further markers of the accession of the Stone are that it brings Peace, (the reconciling of all contraries), that it takes the form of ‘our balm’, a miraculous healing elixir, and is accompanied by a sweet perfume. All these elements - such is Shakespeare’s subtle artistry - are constellated in just four lines, as Cleopatra goes to meet her Antony:

Charmian
O eastern star!

Cleopatra
Peace, peace!

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?

41 See the entry for Dew in Abraham, pp. 53-4.
42 See entries in Abraham for Cibation, pp. 40-1, and for Philosophical Child, pp. 148-50.
43 For the entries on Balm, Fragrance and Peace, see Abraham pp. 16, 81, 141.
Charmian
O, break! O, break!

Cleopatra
As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle -
O Antony!

(5.2.307-11)

Heaven and earth come together at this moment. Cleopatra, ‘a lass unparallel’d’, is at once mortal and immortal. While Charmian sees her already apotheosized as the celestial Venus, her final act of service to her mistress is touchingly human, ‘Your crown’s awry; / I’ll mend it and go play’ (ll. 317-18).

Devotion finds expression in love’s tender offices.44

With the opus achieved: ‘the long day’s work is done’. We are left with a sense of consummation. Even Caesar is moved at this point by Cleopatra’s beauty, as though sleeping, ‘As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace’ (ll.346-7). Now it only remains for him to follow her wishes and to perform the obsequies:

She shall be buried by her Antony,
No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
A pair so famous.

(ll. 357-9)

It is solely in the context of a chymical wedding that this mystical union of the lovers in death acquires its fullest affirmation and significance. By conceiving the whole story of his mature lovers in terms of an Opus Alchymicum, Shakespeare makes possible this transfiguring and transcendent vision, the culmination of a full transit of eros from sensual passion to the ‘finest part of pure love’ (1.2.154).

In drawing continuously on the rich treasure-house of the alchemical imaginarium: its ‘aequivocationis, alleogriae et metaphorae,’45 he has shown his command over this magistery and its discourse. Understood in this light, as chemical theatre, all the play’s most most distinctive features: of characterisation, structure and symbolism, may be accounted for, and its most persistent misreadings refuted, whether as a story of tragic downfall or moral cautionary

44 It is perhaps worth noting that thirteen of the seventeen words that Owen Barfield lists, in his chapter on Devotion, as examples of what he calls ‘this new vocabulary of tenderness which came to us from Latin through early French’, are to be found in our play: beauty, bounty, comfort, courtesy, delicate, devotion, grace, honour, humble, passion, patience, peace, purity; while of the remaining four, all are implicitly present: anguish, charity, compassion, tender. Owen Barfield, History in English Words (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 128.
tale (of a hero ‘broken down by debauchery’, or lovers engaged in a ‘folie à deux’), or primarily a study in Roman realpolitik (‘What’s love got to do with it?’).  

The finest critics have divined this shaping presence of the *Magnum Opus*. Coleridge, impressed by the play’s ‘angelic strength’, suggests, ‘This is greatly owing to the way the fire is sustained throughout.’  

Wilson Knight observes: ‘This ‘sun’, ‘moon’ and ‘star’ imagery elevates the love-theme to universal stature: it lights the whole play ... merging with the gold-imagery ... and it adds the fourth empyreal element to our ascending scale – earth, water, air.’  

Hughes understands the unique stature Shakespeare has accorded Cleopatra in playing her role, both challenging and salvific, as ‘the goddess of complete being.’  

Spiritual alchemy’s declared telos of human ennoblement, of making ‘defect perfection’, directs us towards Shakespeare’s deepest concerns with wholeness and fulfilment of being, and the maturing powers of pure love. And by inviting us to ‘Behold and see’, to participate in this eventful journey of twin souls, he has dared us to entertain our own immortal longings:

Where souls do couch on flowers we’ll hand in hand  
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze  
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,  
And all the haunt be ours.

(4.14.52-5)

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47 See above, footnote 22.

48 G. Wilson Knight, ibid, p. 242

49 ‘... while the drama portrays the destruction of the great Roman Antony on the tragic plane, it becomes, on the transcendental plane, a theophany, the liberation of Antony’s Osirian divine love nature, under the ‘magical’ influence of the completeness of Cleopatra’s.’ Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 316-7.
Figure 1.
*Tractatus alchemicus*, Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliothek, seventeenth century.
Figure 2.