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Altered States in Donne's "The Canonization": Alchemy, Mintage, and Transmutation

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Recently, I visited an arcade in a local amusement park where I overheard a conversation between two boys standing at a coin press. They planned to use the device and its various dies to restamp pennies. They were stamping money chiefly for entertainment. Contemplating the images and inscriptions on the various dies, the boys finally made a selection. By a single stroke, they minted a new coin of apparent fivefold value. What had been a penny now bore the imprint of a nickel. This act of numismatic legerdemain resulted in an easily detectable counterfeit, a copper-colored nickel. But by upgrading the penny to a seeming nickel, the boys practiced a kind of alchemy, transmuting a lesser coin into greater value.

The artifact created by the boys, a fraudulent nickel, provides the point of departure for understanding both alchemy and coinage, each activity embedded in Donne's "The Canonization." In what follows, I will examine certain terms in Donne's poem, such as "dye" (26, 28), "patterne" (45), "ruin'd fortune" (3), "wealth" (4), "the King's reall, or his stamped face" (7), "the'Eagle and the dove" (22), and the "Phoenix" (23).[1] Previous commentators have linked the foregoing terms either to alchemy or to coinage, but not to *coinage as a form of alchemy.* Unlike other commentators, I contend that all of the foregoing terms, while

[1]Donne's poetry is quoted from *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: J. M. Dent, 1985). Subsequent references are parenthetical.

deriving from alchemy, also pertain specifically to practices in the London mint and in other English mints in the Tudor and Stuart eras, when both metal and monetary values were transmuted in the process of manufacturing and stamping coins.

To be sure, Donne was no stranger to alchemy, mintage, and transmutation. In "A Valediction of weeping," for instance, the speaker contends that he will "powre forth" (1) his "teares" (2) next to his beloved; for her "face coines them" (3) and her "stampe they beare / And by this Mintage they are something worth" (3–4). Other poems and several prose works carry similar explicit references to alchemy, mintage, and transmutation, processes in "The Canonization" that are figured in avian images, notably the eagle, dove, and phoenix.[2] Stanton J. Linden asserts that these three birds, "among the most common symbols in alchemical literature and pictorial art," designate "substances and stages in the alchemical process."[3] Whereas the eagle signifies sulphur, the dove represents mercury. From the parent principles of sulphur and mercury, other paired opposites, sometimes called primary oppositions, emerge. Sulphur, associated with the eagle, signifies heat, dryness, masculinity; mercury, emblematized as the dove, represents coldness, moistness, femininity.[4]

Implied by primary oppositions is the early modern belief that altered states, not unlike the transmutation of metals, may occur among the four elements, so that earth, for instance, would become water if dryness gave way to moistness, or air would become flammeous if ignited by fire, and so forth. Underlying these processes of altered states is the belief that human intervention may accelerate, if not vary, natural processes that take place over long periods, that occur infrequently, that are unlikely to happen, or that might never take place naturally though their occurrence was theoretically possible.[5] Such viewpoints concerning altered states will inform my study of "The Canonization."

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[2]For a survey of references to coinage in Donne's poetry and prose, see John Carey, "Donne and Coins," in *English Renaissance Studies Presented to Dame Helen Gardner in Honour of her Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 151–163.

[3]Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p. 175.

[4]Linden, pp. 15–19

[5]Linden, p. 17.

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Framing his analysis of "The Canonization" in the context of alchemical lore and literature, Linden, like preceding commentators, agrees that the eagle and the dove signify, respectively, the speaker and the woman he loves. Elaborating on this view, Linden argues that the lovers, though at first differentiated sexually by contrasting avian images, annihilate their differences by *conjunctio.*[6] Precisely at this point, however, the interaction of the lovers is at its most crucial juncture. If, from an alchemical perspective, the mercury and sulphur that began the process of interaction and transmutation were impure, then only baser metals, including iron and tin, would result therefrom. Correspondingly, when the parent principles of two lovers are impure because baser passions incite them to sexual interaction, their relationship does not progress beyond *conjunctio.* But when the mercury and sulphur or parent principles that began the interaction are pure, then more precious metals, notably silver and gold, will eventuate from the union.[7]

But the lover and beloved in the poem progress to *exaltatio*, the next and consummate stage of the alchemical process, which is signified by the phoenix, an avian image indicating that differences are annihilated and the harmonious integration of opposites has been achieved.[8] If, according to alchemical lore, this consummate stage indeed were reached, the result therefrom would be the philosopher's stone, a legendary substance with powers of transmutation or an *elixir vitae.* The philosopher's stone would have remarkable properties to purify and enhance lesser metals on contact, to heal illnesses, and to prolong life. By imitating the saintly and idealized lovers, who constitute the "patterne" on earth of pure love, the interaction of lustful partners would be transmuted into a sublime loving relationship. Similarly, lustful partners would be healed of their affliction, a distempered and feverish state issuing from carnalism, which has prevented them from attaining to *exaltatio.* Finally, by curtailing their lust, partners in a relationship will live longer because folklore, cited by Donne himself, taught that frequent sexual intercourse was believed to shorten life by depleting one's spirits.

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[6]Linden, p. 175.
[7]Linden, pp. 15–16.
[8]Linden, p. 175.

In "Farewell to Love," the speaker, referring to coitus, contends that "each such Act, they say, / Diminisheth the length of life a day" (24–25).

Within the framework of the poem, the stage of *exaltatio* in the lovers' relationship is likened to sublimation heavenward and sainthood. Reinforcing the lovers' resemblance to saints is the invocation that ends "The Canonization," a prayer that the speaker formulates to celebrate his and his beloved's *conjunctio* and *exaltatio*. In addition to celebrating the canonization of the speaker and his beloved, the same prayer enables petitioners on earth to implore them to become heavenly intercessors with the godhead. As heavenly intercessors or patron saints of lovers on earth, the speaker and his beloved will request that the godhead designate a couple on earth who will embody "the patterne" (45) of exalted love in the midst of inferior relationships. Worthy of emulation, the couple newly designated to succeed the speaker and his beloved will generate the salutary effects on others that the heavenly saints had imparted during their loving union on earth. Accordingly, the invocation begins by celebrating the "reverend love" (37) of the speaker and his beloved when they were on earth. "Reverend" here means "sacred" and "hallowed,"[9] thereby distinguishing the lovers' relationship when they were on earth from the "rage" (39) of others. In this context, "rage" means "violent desire, sexual passion, heat."[10] The location where the lovers are sequestered is called a "hermitage" (38), a term traditionally fraught with religious overtones.[11] Indeed, because of their purity and sublimity, the speaker and his beloved, for whom "love was peace" (39), are cohabitants of a sacred place of prayer, contemplation, and serenity. Their hermitage may he likened to a chapel, oratory, abbey, or even a more secluded location.

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Whereas traditional alchemy is perceived as quixotic, visionary, and arcane, whose goal of transmuting baser into more precious metals could not be realized, I contend paradoxically that the practice of alchemy occurred in early modern England, so much so that the entire populace

[9] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "reverend," 3.b.
[10] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "rage," n. 5.c.
[11] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "hermitage," 1.

was economically affected. The alchemical enterprise to which I refer occurred in the London mint and in other English mints, when, for instance, a sovereign authorized the debasement of currency. Coins of lesser intrinsic worth were stamped with higher values, as if their metallic content had been transmuted, in effect, into richer or purer metals. This so-called "bad money" drove out of circulation the "good money," namely the coinage whose face value and intrinsic worth were approximately the same. Hoarded by the people, "good money" was prized for its intrinsic worth.[12]

The debasement that I cite was exceptional, not normative. In fact, English monarchs typically insisted on a very close match between the intrinsic worth of the metal (its weight and fineness) and its stamped value as currency. To enforce this expectation, officials at the mints would oversee processes that tested coins against various so-called "patterns" (as they were termed) that exemplified the values to be closely approximated. These processes—called fire assaying or cupellation—included instruments, ironically associated with alchemy, that measured the weight and fineness of the precious metal. Assaying began with a cupel, a small porous ladle made of bone ash and filled with a half teaspoonful of water. Placing the cupel in a furnace until it became red-hot, workers then added to the ladle a piece of silver enclosed in lead foil. After a few minutes, the lead, having been oxidized, was absorbed into the cupel. Along with the lead, other impurities in the silver, such as copper, were also purged. Remaining behind was a silver button or metal globule whose weight and fineness were assayed against the criteria of the respective patterns.[13] Falling short of the weight and fineness of precious metal that truly reflected the correlation of intrinsic worth and stamped denomination, a coin was deemed counterfeit.

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[12]C. E. Challis, *The Tudor Coinage* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1978); Challis, ed., *A New History of the Royal Mint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Craig, *The Mint: A History of the London Mint from AD 287 to 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953); Stanley Lane-Poole, ed., *Coins and Medals: Their Place in History and Art* (Chicago: Argonaut, 1968); R. A. G. Carson, *Coins: Ancient, Medieval & Modern* (London: Hutchinson, 1962).

[13]For commentary on fire assaying and cupellation, see Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, p. 25 and n. 77; see also the following website: http://www.mine-engineer.com/mining/assay2.htm>.

The processes recounted above applied also to assaying gold, except that it was heated in a ladle with silver and lead. After cupellation, which removed the lead and other impurities, the remaining metal, silver and gold combined, was boiled in nitric acid, a process that purged the lesser metal, after which only a gold button in a bone ash cupel remained, a phenomenon that may be likened to a regenerated phoenix from the ashes of its pyre. If by such processes counterfeits were discovered, fines would be levied against the officers of the mint.[14] Presumed to be the exemplar of pure gold, the button that remained behind, after the cupel had been removed from the furnace, had multiple potential applications. Often stored in a pyx, it was sometimes called the "pattern"[15] against which other gold of lesser purity was judged to be deficient, usually by chemical means such as an "acid test"; the gold button, moreover, approximated the philosopher's stone that purportedly would transmute baser metals on contact; and it was presumed to possess healing powers. Likewise called "patterns" were the coins stored in pyxes, coins that truly reflected the correlation of the metallic worth of a coin and its face value.[16] With reference, then, to the lovers in "The Cannonization": their relationship assumes the multiple significances to which I refer above. Their love has normative value like the "pattern" used in the mint to evaluate the purity of gold and to measure the degree by which the intrinsic worth of a coin may fall short of its face or stamped value. Their love, in other words, is the norm against which other relationships are deemed deficient and debased, lustful unions that enacted *conjunctio* without being sublimated to *exaltatio*.

Even at times when debasement was not officially mandated, assayers may have surreptitiously reduced the value of coinage by using gold or silver of lesser weight and fineness than indicated by the stamped markings on the money. In doing so, they prospered so long as they avoided detection. Of course, the people themselves practiced debasement by clipping coins and accumulating the fragments, thereby circulating monetary instruments of decreased, and decreasing, intrinsic value.

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[14] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "assay," v. I.2., and Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, p. 25 and n. 77.

[15] Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, p. 43.

[16] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "assay," v. I.4.a. and "pyx," n.[1] 2.

On the other hand, English monarchs often recalled debased coins so that countermarkings would be applied to indicate the lesser worth, thereby restoring the normative relationship between intrinsic worth and stamped value. Or recalled coins might be melted so that the process of coinage could begin anew from the precious metals that remained after the lesser metals were separated. Restamping or countermarking not English but foreign currency, usually Spanish, added to the inventory of English coins, which were denominated sometimes by reference to foreign currency. By that, I mean that the Spanish real often served as the frame of referencc for English money, not only English rials but also other coins whose value was denominated as a fraction of a Spanish real. In effect, in "The Canonization" the "king's real or stamped face" is conjunctive and apposite, a construction that uses "or" in "connecting two words denoting the same thing."[17] And the presence of a sovereign or sovereigns on a coin is illustrated in a particularly notable instance after the marriage of Mary I of England and Phillip II of Spain in 1554 when coins with their likenesses, notably silver shillings, were minted in England. Each was facing the other, surely in reconciliation, like the union of the eagle and the dove. Using avian imagery in *Hudibras*, Samuel Butler refers to the coin in the following way: "Still amorous, and fond, and billing, / Like Philip and Mary on a shilling."[18] On a larger scale, by this marriage the two countries, often at conflict, were reconciled into a harmonious union. These coins imitated a similar arrangement of Spanish coins on which Ferdinand and Isabella were facing each other, signifying that the realms of Aragon, on the one hand, and Castile and Leon, on the other, were conjoined peacefully.

More significant than I have suggested is this brief period when England and Spain were at peace, a condition manifested in the marriage of Mary I and Philip II (1554–1558). In 1557 the gold and silver denominations produced in England included "the coinage of the *king's* bullion" (emphasis mine), presumably a reference to Philip II, who may be the king to whom "The Canonization" refers. From Spanish bullion supplied by Philip II and transported to the London mint, coins stamped with Spanish dies (though in an English mint) included the single and

[17] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "or," conj.[1] 4.a.

[18] Part 3, canto 1, line 687; quoted in Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, p. 188 and fig. 28.

the double real, examples of which were stored in a pyx as "patterns" of weight and fineness for their respective denominations. Their counterparts in England, the rial or ryal, were valued, often, at one shilling per one Spanish real. The rial or ryal, first issued in 1465 by Edward IV, was subsequently minted in silver or gold,[19] and its valuation was inextricably tied to the Spanish real.

Soon after her accession, Elizabeth I returned to their rightful owners the dies and other devices used in producing Spanish coinage. Nevertheless, the London mint was so profoundly affected by Spanish coinage that Elizabeth I ordered the production of a new coin in England, especially as an international monetary instrument. Used by the East India Company, the new English coin, which imitated the Spanish real, was minted, like its Continental prototype, in multiples of two, four, and eight. These multiples in reales, that is, were copied by the English as multiples of English shillings.[20]

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But the process of mintage has even more detailed applicability to Donne's poem. When minted, a circular metal blank called a planchet was placed between two dies so that the two sides, obverse and reverse, could be stamped at once.[21] This process was done manually with repetitive blows of a hammer because the screw press did not play a part in English mints until the era of Elizabeth I, and then it was used sparingly. The uneven edges or the off-center markings made it easy for the people to clip the coins. Henry VIII enriched the coffers by minting new coins that were chiefly composed of base metals and very little silver and gold, though they were circulated as if the stamped values matched their intrinsic worth. The people, however, hoarded the older coins of more precious intrinsic value, and only the coins minted from baser metals were being circulated. Soon after she came to the throne, Elizabeth I, advised by William Cecil and Thomas Gresham, withdrew the debased currency, melted it, and replaced it with Elizabethan coins

[19] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "rial," n.[1] 3.a. and 4.c.

[20] Lane-Poole, ed., pp. 63–64; Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, p. 145.

[21] Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, p. 13.

newly minted from more precious metals.[22]

Confidence and trust in the government and its economic practices flourished thereafter, and trade and industry expanded considerably. By also introducing standard weights and measures, Elizabeth fostered quality control. In a later era in the seventeenth century, Spain was undergoing similar problems with coins that were under weight and of lesser purity. Philip IV decreed that such coins should be returned to the mint or to sworn moneyers to be counterstamped, a procedure that more accurately correlated the newly applied markings with the intrinsic worth of the coin. Emerging from this practice by the English and Spanish was the criminal abuse of applying counterfeit markings on debased coins so that an enhanced, stamped value was achieved despite the lesser content of precious metals. Indeed, these are merely some of the ways by which a financial speculator alternately prospered or suffered "ruined fortune" (3), as Donne's poem states.

Through minting and coinage, the English and Spanish interacted in other ways. The English, for instance, plundered Spanish coins especially in the Americas, then countermarked them to be used as currency at home. And the English captured Spanish vessels that were transporting bullion, which was also minted in London and elsewhere in England. At the forefront of this privateering was Sir Francis Drake.[23]

In sum, "The Canonization" is a "richer" poem when interpreted by reference to coinage, the form of alchemy practiced in the English mints. In light of what I have recounted, the speaker in "The Canonization" uses ideas from mintage to represent the loving interaction with his beloved, an interaction that is the proverbial "gold standard" or "patterne" by which other relationships are appraised as lesser, debased, counterfeit, or spurious. Interaction with his beloved, moreover, is the "patterne" that other lovers should strive to emulate in order to enhance the quality of their relationships. Though woven into the larger texture of alchemical and avian imagery, coinage generates ironies in the poem, suggests the tonal range (gravity to levity), characterizes the speaker as fraudulent or true in representing his loving relationship, and emphasizes at least two altered states. In the first altered state, the lover and his

[22]See <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/server/show/conWebDoc.6127/setPaginate/No>.

[23]Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, p. 190.

beloved purportedly are translated heavenward as saints; in the second, lovers on earth strive to transmute lust into love. More to the point, "The Canonization" provides an example of a speaker who alters or transmutes, rhetorically, a base relationship into a precious one, a carnal union into a sanctified one. While he stamps the levity of his argument with a grave tone, such a rhetorical imprint belies the content or worth, whether the metal or the mettle, of the lover's relationship with his beloved. Despite the purported value attributed to them by the coiner, the alchemist, and the rhetorician, debased currencies, metals, and carnal unions fall short, respectively, of the "gold standard" in mintage, of the visionary philosopher's stone in alchemical folklore, and of exalted love.

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