

The Famous Stone:
The Alchemical Tropes of George Herbert's "The Elixir"
in their Late Renaissance Context

Alister E. McGrath

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"The Elixir" is widely regarded as one of George Herbert's most enigmatic works.¹ Literary scholarship has given careful consideration to the process of the poem's revision over a period of perhaps more than ten years, noting its distinct and striking use of alchemical imagery, and its imaginative poetic transposition of core theological themes, particularly the rich analogy of Christ as the "philosopher's stone."² It has been noted that the exploration of alchemical

¹ The three main sources for Herbert's "Elixir" are the Williams manuscript (MS Jones B 62 at Dr Williams's Library, London, usually known as "W"), the Bodleian manuscript (MS Tanner 307 at the Bodleian Library, Oxford usually known as "B"); and the first printed edition of 1633. Although early printed editions of this poem used the spelling "Elixer," Herbert himself used the spelling "Elixir" in *W*, added alongside the original title, "Perfection." This and other revisions in the poem in *W* are thought to be in Herbert's hand. For the esteem in which the poem is held, see John Drury, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 113; 144–9; 320–1; 327–8; Mark Oakley, *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul* (London: SPCK, 2019), pp. 132–5. The text of "The Elixir" used in this study is that provided in *The Works of George Herbert*, edited by F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), pp. 184–5. Helen Wilcox retains the spelling "The Elixer" in her edition of *The English Poems of George Herbert* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 640. The author is grateful to Sidney Gottlieb and Jonathan F. S. Post for their perceptive and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

² Clarence H. Miller, "Christ as the Philosopher's Stone in George Herbert's 'The Elixir,'" *Notes and Queries* 45 (1998): 39–40; Yaakov Mascetti, "'This Is the Famous Stone:' George Herbert's Poetic Alchemy in 'The Elixir,'" in

themes during the Renaissance and early modern period often took a poetic form.³ This article sets out to explore this in greater detail, especially in the light of a deeper understanding of the persistent creative intermingling of alchemical and theological imagery during the early modern period arising from recent scholarship, particularly the imaginative lure of the notion of *chrysopoeia* (“turning into gold”) for many Renaissance writers.⁴

The first half of the seventeenth century appears to have represented an age in which alchemy was seen as a legitimate and productive source of imagery in poetry, literature, and sermons.⁵ Herbert could be argued to construct a “synesthetic poetics,”⁶ which constructs bridges between “that which is Hellenic, Hebraic, classical, and Christian;” his alchemical interests merely extend the range of disciplines and cultural idioms that he deployed in his poetry.

Mystical Metal of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture, ed. Stanton J. Linden (Brooklyn, NY: AMS Press, 2005), pp. 301–24.

³ See the two major studies of Didier Kahn, “Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis, Part I – Survey,” *Ambix* 57 (2010): 249–74; Kahn, “Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis, Part II – Synthesis,” *Ambix*, 58 (2011): 62–77.

⁴ The poetic potential of such tropes was made clear by Giovanni Aurelio Augurello’s *Chrysopoeia* (1515), which was the first great alchemical poem to be written in a pure classical style. See Zweder von Martels, “Augurello’s ‘Chrysopoeia’ (1515): A Turning Point in the Literary Tradition of Alchemical Texts,” *Early Science and Medicine* 5, no. 2 (2000): 178–95. Augurello’s poem closely imitates the classical structure of Virgil’s *Georgics*, creating a new interest in the literary capabilities of alchemical practices and doctrines.

⁵ For alchemy and popular culture in this era, note the points made by Eugene Webb, “The Alchemy of Man and the Alchemy of God: The Alchemist as Cultural Symbol in Modern Thought,” *Religion and Literature* 17 (1985): 47–60; William Eamon, “Alchemy in Popular Culture: Leonardo Fioravanti and the Search for the Philosopher’s Stone,” *Early Science and Medicine* 5 (2000): 196–213; Philip Ball, “Alchemical Culture and Poetry in Early Modern England,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 31 (2006): 77–92.

⁶ Denae Dyck, “Writing Wisdom: George Herbert’s Synesthetic Poetics,” *Christianity and Literature* 66 (2016): 39–56, cited at 40.

Herbert's willingness to incorporate alchemical themes within his essentially Reformed theology finds many parallels at the time – as, for example, in the works of the Anglican clergyman Thomas Tymme (died 1620), who found that his Calvinist theology allowed him to establish meaningful connections with alchemical ideas.⁷ The early modern overlap between what are now seen as the distinct enterprises of divinity, alchemy and chemistry permitted disciplinary transgression and cross-fertilization, so that alchemical imagery came to be seen as acceptable, perhaps even normal, in religious and spiritual works.⁸ Even Puritan preachers indulged themselves in its application: Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), for example, declared that the grace of God was “a blessed Alchemist,” in that “where it toucheth it maketh good and religious.”⁹ Some even considered alchemical knowledge to be a divine gift, designed to improve the external human condition and transmute the inner life.

Spiritual Alchemy: Transformation of External Substances and the Human Soul

⁷ As noted by Bruce Janacek, “Thomas Tymme and Natural Philosophy: Prophecy, Alchemical Theology, and the Book of Nature,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 4 (1999): 987–1007. Although Lutheranism was an important early force in the Church of England, it was gradually displaced by the theology associated with John Calvin and his circle during the later sixteenth century: Alec Ryrie, “The Strange Death of Lutheran England,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 53 (2002): 64–92.

⁸ For some excellent accounts of this phenomenon, see the material assembled in *Bridging Traditions: Alchemy, Chemistry, and Paracelsian Practices in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Allen G. Debus, Karen Hunger Parshall, Michael Thomson Walton, and Bruce T. Moran (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2015). For related patterns in the Middle Ages, see Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira, *L'arte del Sole e della Luna: Alchimia e filosofia nel medioevo* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1996).

⁹ Richard Sibbes, *A Learned Commentary or Exposition, upon the First Chapter of the Second Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians* (London, 1655), p. 257; cited in William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 125. For what now seems to be a curious combination of “alchemy and dogmatic religion,” see Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy, or, the Hunting of the Greene Lyon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 48–9.

It is important to appreciate that Renaissance alchemy was not concerned merely with the external transformation of nature, of which the process of *chrysopoeia*, in which base metals were transmuted into gold, was perhaps the most famous example. This idea had roots in the early Middle Ages, but gained wider circulation at the time of the Renaissance.¹⁰ The plausibility of this process of transmutation was bolstered by a series of “transmutation narratives,” in which reliable individuals testified to having witnessed this transformation into gold actually take place.¹¹ It was not until the early eighteenth century that the public – as opposed to scientific – plausibility of this transmutation was finally dismantled in England.¹² At the time of the writing of Herbert’s “Elixir,” this idea was still culturally plausible and imaginatively appealing.

The conversion of base metals into gold was understood by many to have *spiritual* implications. Many saw a parallel between the “purification” of base metals and the purification or cleansing of the mind or soul of the alchemical practitioner. The external transmutation of metals paralleled a deeper internal transformation of “the metal of the mind.”¹³ Commenting on

¹⁰ See, for example, Peter H. Marshall, *The Magic Circle of Rudolf II: Alchemy and Astrology in Renaissance Prague* (New York: Walker & Company, 2006); Alain Mothu, ed. *La pensée en cornue: Matérialisme, alchimie et savoirs secrets à l’âge classique* (Paris: Société d’Étude de l’Histoire de l’Alchimie, 2012); Leah DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Matteo Soranzo, *Giovanni Aurelio Augurello (1441–1524) and Renaissance Alchemy: A Critical Edition of Chrysopoeia and Other Alchemical Poems, with an Introduction, English Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

¹¹ For some excellent examples, see Lawrence Principe, *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and His Alchemical Quest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 93–8; William R. Newman, *Gehennical Fire: The Lives of George Starkey, an American Alchemist in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 3–13.

¹² For a nuanced account of the collapse of credibility of the concept of *chrysopoeia*, see Lawrence M. Principe, “The End of Alchemy? The Repudiation and Persistence of *Chrysopoeia* at the Académie Royale des Sciences in the Eighteenth Century,” *Osiris* 29 (2014): 96–116.

¹³ A point stressed by John Read, *Through Alchemy to Chemistry* (London: Bell, 1961).

these spiritual aspects of Renaissance alchemy, Tara Nummedal points out how the controlling alchemical image of the “philosophers’ stone” was easily capable of being assimilated to central Christological or soteriological themes.

If the philosophers’ stone could be likened to Christ (and vice versa), then, by implication, the entire alchemical opus – the process of making and using the philosophers’ stone – was, in some sense, soteriological. Working with the bodies and souls of metals, perfecting nature and matter, the alchemist touches a fundamental truth of faith, its promise of salvation.¹⁴

Nummedal thus notes how alchemical imagery and tropes are regularly found in “religious” writings, in much the same way as religious imagery and tropes are found in “alchemical” writings. Leah DeVun reinforces this point through her suggestion that analogical resemblances between Christ and the philosophers’ stone showed that Christian imagery offered a tool for framing and communicating alchemical concepts.¹⁵

This emphasis on the alchemical correlation of the external and internal worlds was highlighted by Robert M. Schuler, who pointed out how an understanding of what can fairly be described as “spiritual alchemy” emerged in England in the early modern period.¹⁶ This allowed

¹⁴ Tara Nummedal, “Alchemy and Religion in Christian Europe,” *Ambix* 60, no. 4 (2013): 311–22 (318).

¹⁵ Leah DeVun, “‘Human Heaven:’ John of Rupescissa’s Alchemy at the End of the World,” in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. Bruce Holsinger and Rachel Fulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 251–61. See also her analysis in *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, pp. 109–16.

¹⁶ Robert M. Schuler, “Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41, no. 2 (1980): 293–318. For later studies of this phenomenon, see Daniel Merkur, “The Study of Spiritual Alchemy: Mysticism, Gold-Making, and Esoteric Hermeneutics,” *Ambix* 37 (1990): 35–45; Mark S. Morrisson, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of the Atomic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 135–183.

individuals such as Elias Ashmole to hold together his deep involvement in alchemy and astrology, while at the same time being a founding member of the Royal Society, and a loyal Anglican.¹⁷ For many alchemical writers, Christian understandings of creation were easily accommodated within an alchemical framework.¹⁸ Alchemical imagery was then both familiar and culturally acceptable to many educated people, and seen as being capable of being accommodated to and incorporated within the enterprise of spiritual transformation. Although some difficulties remain about identifying the alchemical associations of some English terms during the Middle Ages and early modern period, there is little doubt that Herbert uses tropes in this poem that would have been recognized as alchemical by his readers, allowing a plausible connection to be established between theological and alchemical themes.¹⁹

Alchemical Tropes in 'The Elixir'

In the first manuscript version of Herbert's poem, known as "Perfection," only one alchemical trope is found – the "Tincture."²⁰ In its final version, Herbert's "Elixir" contains four interconnected and well-attested alchemical tropes: the "Elixir" itself; the *lapis philosophorum* or

¹⁷ Schuler, "Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England," p. 294.

¹⁸ As noted by Michael T. Walton, "Alchemy, Chemistry and the Six Days of Creation," in *Mystical Metal of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (New York: AMS Press, 2006), pp. 233–54.

¹⁹ For the problems in identifying these associations, see Peter J. Grund, "The 'Forgotten' Language of Middle English Alchemy: Exploring Alchemical Lexis in the MED and the OED," *Review of English Studies* 65 (2014): pp. 575–95. (The abbreviations MED and OED refer to "Middle English Dictionary" and "Oxford English Dictionary" respectively).

²⁰ For details of the evolution of the poem, see Mascetti, "This Is the Famous Stone;" Ben de la Mare, *From Perfection to the Elixir: How George Herbert Fashioned a Famous Poem* (Oxford: SLG Press, 2008). For reflections on the motivation of such changes, see Janis Lull, "Expanding 'the Poem Itself': Reading George Herbert's Revisions," *Studies in English Literature* 27 (1987): 71–87; Lull, *The Poem in Time: Reading George Herbert's Revisions of "The Church"* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1990), pp. 94–100.

“Philosophers’ Stone;” the “Tincture;” and the process of *chrysopoeia*.²¹ Although all of these could be understood to refer to an *external* transmutation, Herbert appears to stand within the “spiritual” tradition which recognizes the potential of such tropes to describe the internal transmutation of the believer’s soul through Christ. While earlier scholarship recognized that Herbert used the Philosophers’ Stone as a metaphor of Christ, it did not engage the full range of Herbert’s alchemical tropes, nor locate this within its existing tradition of interpretation.

The extended and radical revision process from “Perfection” to “The Elixir” led to a text that was both more elegant and suggestive on the one hand, and more theologically engaged on the other.²² The new title – “The Elixir” – acts as a framing device, establishing a context for reading and creating certain expectations of interpretation. As a result, the alchemical focus of the poem becomes unequivocal. In what follows, we shall consider each of these four interconnected alchemical tropes in more detail, before exploring how they interconnect with and illuminate the theological themes of the poem.

1. *The Elixir*. This term appears in the earliest known alchemical treatises to be translated from Arabic to Latin, such as the twelfth-century *De anime et arte alchemiae*.²³ The Latin term is clearly based on an Arabic root, which was Latinized in a number of forms, including *alexir* and

²¹ Herbert, *Works*, p. 185. The second version of “Perfection” – that is, the version in *W* with revisions, including lines crossed out and words changed – also includes all four of these tropes.

²² F. E. Hutchinson remarks that “no poem of Herbert’s better shows his skill in revision:” (Herbert, *Works*, p. 541). There is little agreement on the motivations for these changes: for some important suggestions, none of which seem entirely compelling, see Helen C. White, *The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), pp. 189–94; Charles Molesworth, “Herbert’s “The Elixir:” Revision towards Action,” *Concerning Poetry* 5 (1972): 12–20; Lull, *The Poem in Time*, pp. 94–100.

²³ The best study, on which I draw in this discussion, is Michela Pereira, “Teorie dell’elixir nell’alchimia Latina medievale,” *Micrologus: Natura, scienze e società medievali* 3 (1995): 103–48.

elixir. It is understood as a derivative product of the *lapis philosophorum*, allowing base metals to be turned into gold. This process is often understood in terms of purging metals of their impurities, and the apparently analogous process of restoration of human bodies from disorder or disease, in order that their perfect balance of properties might be restored.²⁴ By the late Middle Ages, important associations had emerged between the “elixir” and the healing ministries of religious orders, especially the mendicant friars.²⁵

The term thus appears over time to have come to be associated with a medicinal liquid capable of being ingested by human beings, thus suggesting an analogy with oral – rather than topical – medications. This theme is found in Roger Bacon’s *Opus Tertium*, where it is linked with the search for a mysterious *elixir vitae*, capable of curing all diseases and prolonging human life indefinitely.²⁶ The alchemical literature points to a wide variety of interpretations of this essentially fluid concept.²⁷ In the late sixteenth century, the French Court developed an interest in a golden elixir (*aurum potable*), held to be capable of conferring longevity and health.²⁸

In the first draft of Herbert’s poem, the titular emphasis was on the *outcome* of the process of soteriological transformation – perfection; in the final edition, this emphasis had

²⁴ See the discussion in Michela Pereira, “*Mater Medicinarum*: English Physicians and the Alchemical Elixir in the Fifteenth Century,” in *Medicine from the Black Death to the French Disease*, ed. Jon Arrizabalaga, Andrew Cunningham, Roger French, and Luis García-Ballester (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 26–52.

²⁵ See especially Zachary A. Matus, *Franciscans and the Elixir of Life: Religion and Science in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

²⁶ Zachary A. Matus, “Resurrected Bodies and Roger Bacon’s Elixir,” *Ambix* 60 (2013): 323–40.

²⁷ For attempts to identify and produce one such elixir, see Donald R. Dickson, “The Hunt for Red Elixir: An Early Collaboration between Fellows of the Royal Society,” *Endeavour* 22 (1998): pp. 68–71.

²⁸ See especially Alexandre de la Tourette, *Bref discours des admirables vertus de l’or potable* (Paris: Roussin, 1575). This treatise was dedicated to Henri III. For the generally toxic effect of such preparations, see Philippe Charlier et al., “A Gold Elixir of Youth in the 16th Century French Court,” *British Medical Journal* 339 (2009): 1402–03.

shifted to the *agent* by which this transformation was to be attained – the elixir. The trope of the elixir was easily assimilated to, or established as a legitimate metaphor of, Christian ideas of salvation, not least on account of the strong conceptual symmetry with the notion of salvation as healing or “making whole.”²⁹ The fourteenth-century alchemical writer Pseudo-Arnald of Villanova compared Christ healing the fallen world with the Philosophers’ Stone “healing” the base metals by transmuting them into gold.³⁰ It was thus an obvious image for Herbert to use in developing some of the themes of his views on the nature of faith, a matter to which we shall return later in this paper. The phrase “The Elixir” was initially added in the Williams manuscript as an alternative or supplementary title, alongside “Perfection,” and finally became the poem’s sole title.

2. *The Philosophers’ Stone*. This is perhaps the primary alchemical trope to be used by English writers in the early modern period.³¹ Although it takes various forms, the fundamental idea is that of a haptic agent of metallic transmutation and transformation, something that renews or heals topically through *touching*.³² The concept of the Philosophers’ Stone was embedded in a network of assumptions about chemical (and especially metallic) identity as a fluid concept.

²⁹ Richard J. Clifford and Khaled Anatolios, “Christian Salvation: Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” *Theological Studies* 66, no. 4 (2005): 739–69; Brenda B. Colijn, *Images of Salvation in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), pp. 121–43; J. G. van der Watt, ed., *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

³⁰ Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 67.

³¹ Jonathan Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England: Plantagenet Kings and the Search for the Philosopher’s Stone* (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 48–50.

³² For the history and appeal of this notion, see Hans-Werner Schütt, *Auf der Suche nach dem Stein der Weisen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2000). For some useful examples of its literary application at this time, see Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, especially pp. 104–92.

Since all metals were thought to be ultimately composed of the same fundamental elements, these natural products possessed a fluid identity so that they could, in theory, be subjected to some process of alchemical rearrangement, leading to the transmutation of one metal into another.³³

From Herbert's perspective, the most important theological theme to be imaginatively enfolded by the trope of the Philosophers' Stone is the possibility of transmutation from a base into a noble metal, which Herbert internalizes in terms of the personal and moral renewal of the individual through divine grace. God *touches* individuals, and thus transforms them. There are ample precedents for this reworking of this trope in the early seventeenth century, such as Patrick Scot's *Tillage of Light* (1623), which, having denied any possibility of the physical transmutation of metals, redirected the quest for transmutation to the more subjective pursuit of wisdom. As Linden notes in his reflections on Scot's revisionist alchemical agenda, its true object is that of the purification and perfection of human nature.³⁴

3. *The Tincture*. This is the only alchemical trope to be used in "Perfection," the original version of "The Elixir."

All may of Thee pertake:

Nothing can be so low

W^{ch} wth his tincture (for thy sake)

³³ For a full account, see William R. Newman, "Mercury and Sulphur among the High Medieval Alchemists: From Rāzī and Avicenna to Albertus Magnus and Pseudo-Roger Bacon," *Ambix* 61 (2014): 327–44.

³⁴ Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 206.

Will not to Heaven grow.³⁵

These lines were revised and significantly improved in *W* and carried over into the final version (ll. 13–16):

All may of Thee pertake;
Nothing can be so meane
Which with his tincture (for Thy sake)
Will not grow bright and cleane.

The altered final line of this stanza is significant, in that it redirects the focus from the *goal* of the journey of faith (growing towards Heaven) to the *means by which this might be achieved* – namely, through a process of cleansing, purification and refinement which causes believers to become “bright and cleane,” perhaps like polished metal.

So what does Herbert understand by a “tincture”? The Latin term *tinctura* was used widely to refer the topical application of alchemical agents to a bodily region that is held to require transformation, perfection, or restoration. In practice, this appears to have been achieved through the creation of a suspension of powdered mineral in water, alcohol, or oil. The Latin noun *tinctura* derives from the verb *tingere* “to dye or colour,” with the derivative sense of imparting colour through direct contact with the dye. Roger Bacon’s *De oleo stibii tractatus* provides detailed instructions for the preparation of a medicinal “tincture of antimony,”³⁶ which

³⁵ I quote these lines as they were originally in *W*, before revisions were made in the manuscript version. See Hutchinson’s discussion of the texts of this poem (*Works*, pp. 184–85), and also the detailed textual note in Wilcox’s edition (*The English Poems of George Herbert*, pp. 637–39), which also includes a facsimile of the poem as it appears in *W*.

³⁶ Allen G. Debus, “Antimony in Medical History: An Account of the Medical Uses of Antimony and Its Compounds since Early Times to the Present,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 74, no. 2 (2000): pp. 362–4.

was bright red in colour. Herbert's interest, however, lies not in the colour of this or other tinctures, but its capacity to heal through being brought directly into contact with an afflicted person, thus cleansing and purifying them.

4. *Chrysopoeia*. The fourth alchemical trope found in revised and final versions of "The Elixir" is that of the transmutation of base metals into gold. As noted earlier, this was one of the most familiar themes associated with alchemy, and would have been accessible and intelligible to Herbert's readership. Its plausibility rested on alchemical theories of metallic identity, which saw metals as possessing a fluid identity, which could be realigned by the use of appropriate techniques. It was natural to adapt this trope to the transformation and purification of the human soul through the use of certain spiritual techniques. The important point to appreciate here is that Herbert is able to use the alchemical trope of *chrysopoeia* as an image of both *value* and *perfection* – thus picking up on the theme indicated by his original title for the poem.

The Hermetic writer Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), who spent some time in England between 1583 and 1586, is one of the more notable exponents of this point:

As the soul desires to recover its natural beauty, it seeks to purge itself, heal and reform itself: and for this purpose it uses fire, for like gold mixed with earth and shapeless, it wishes by a vigorous trial to liberate itself from impurities, and this is achieved when the intellect, the true smith of Jove, sets to work actively exercising the intellectual powers.³⁷

³⁷ I take this citation from the detailed discussion of "inner looking, alchemy and the creative Imagination" in Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and a Lover's Complaint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 157–94, cited at 162. Healey's analysis illuminates both Shakespeare and Herbert on this "inner alchemy."

It is important to note that Bruno's discussion of this theme includes the purification of the soul's "intellectual powers," which is a significant aspect of the Christian understanding of salvation, echoed in Herbert's "Elixir." The process of purification which is here described in alchemical terms is clearly understood to extend to human rational processes, enabling their redirection.

One issue, however, remains to be noted. "The Elixir" seems Christologically silent, making no *explicit* reference to Christ, and drawing on none of the traditional theological tropes used to affirm and invite exploration of his theological and spiritual significance. The contrast with, for example, Robert Southwell's *Saint Peters Complaynt* (1595) is marked. This carefully constructed alchemical allegory explicitly speaks of Christ purifying Peter, thus transmuting him from being a "brittle mould" to a "rock" of the Church.³⁸ Just as the sun purifies base metals into gold, so the Son of God purifies the sinful human heart, leading to faith and repentance.

Yet it can be argued that Herbert's poetic theology implicitly (and extensively) *alludes* to God and Christ,³⁹ hinting at their presence and action through its structures, rhythms, and imagery. For example, the important phrases "for thy sake" and "all may of thee partake" in "The Elixir" are both Christologically suggestive, the latter even hinting playfully of Eucharistic connotations. Herbert here develops a theme that was an integral element of the understanding of

³⁸ For this, and parallel themes in Marvell, see Gary Kuchar, "Spiritual Alchemy in Andrew Marvell's *Eyes and Tears*," *Notes and Queries* 65, no. 2 (2018): 202–4.

³⁹ See, for example, Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985); Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: "Divinitie and Poesy Met"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), especially pp. 224–67; R. V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000); William G. Witt, "George Herbert's Approach to God: The Faith and Spirituality of a Country Priest," *Theology Today* 60 (2003): 215–34. It is possible that this "absence" may correlate with hints of a *via negativa* in Herbert's poetry: Hillary Kelleher, "'Light Thy Darknes Is:' George Herbert and Negative Theology," *George Herbert Journal* 28, no. 1, 2 (fall 2004/spring 2005): 47–64.

the Christian life, deriving from Calvin and his later Genevan followers, which located the believer's "union with Christ" as central to the process of acceptance by God, and growth in faith and holiness.⁴⁰ Faith unites the believer with Christ, thus immediately securing a change in the believer's status before God (justification), and initiating the process of spiritual transformation and growth (sanctification). The four alchemical tropes of "The Elixir" serve as a "a powerful instrument of spiritual transmutation,"⁴¹ expanding and elaborating the consequences of the believer's changed status and changing nature, as a result of being united with Christ. They might even point to the author's own expanding understanding of the Christological significance of the alchemical tropes then prevalent in English culture, and their capacity to communicate theological wisdom in a manner that was neither didactic nor dogmatic.

Conclusion

C. S. Lewis, in reflecting on the relation of Christian theology and poetry, raised a question which is highly apposite to reflecting on Herbert's agenda as a poet-theologian.

Does Christian Theology owe its attraction to its power of arousing and satisfying our imaginations? Are those who believe it mistaking aesthetic enjoyment for intellectual assent, or assenting because they enjoy?⁴²

There are no persuasive reasons for supposing that Herbert's agenda in writing *The Temple* in general, or "The Elixir" in particular, was to convince his readers that Christianity was true; his concern appears to have been to facilitate its communication and comprehension using language

⁴⁰ For its place in the context of sixteenth-century doctrines of justification by faith, see Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (4th edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 214–37.

⁴¹ See Mascetti, "This Is the Famous Stone."

⁴² C. S. Lewis, *Essay Collection* (London: Collins, 2000), pp. 1–21, cited at 2.

and imagery that would make it transparent to what today might be described as its transcendent and existential significance.⁴³ In an age in which Christianity could so easily become a nominal social convention, Herbert allowed his readers to grasp its imaginative breadth and spiritual depth, penetrating beneath the surface of conventional religious practice and language.

Oxford University

⁴³ For Herbert's catechetical approach, see Stanley E. Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978). Fish distinguishes Herbert's "Socratic" use of the Church Catechism from the more mechanical methods of mere memorization employed by his contemporaries.