“But oh, I could it not refine”: Lady Hester Pulter’s Textual Alchemy

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ABSTRACT

Hester Pulter addresses personal and spiritual transformation in a unique way. The elusive nature of alchemical language allows Pulter to express the incomplete, ongoing process of internal transformation, with all its difficulties and inconsistencies. By means of a rich alchemical lexicon, Pulter stresses suffering rather than consolation, conflict rather than reconciliation, and lack of resolution rather than closure in her poetry. She repeatedly tries to see a divine order in earthly suffering, but she insists upon this suffering, and she often argues for a gendered element to this pain, particularly as a mother grieving her dead children. The lack of resolution we see in Pulter's writing pushes against conventional constructions of the ideal female Christian as passively accepting God's plan, and shows the limits of the religious lyric to truly provide consolation. My thesis will extend the discussion of Pulter's use of alchemical imagery and symbols in her poetry, and will argue that she uses alchemical language to reflect how transformation and healing are never, in fact, fully achieved during our physical existence. The promise of literary alchemy as a vehicle for transformation and spiritual regeneration is not always fulfilled in Pulter's work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a thesis is a little like alchemy: we mix others' knowledge, stir in a little of our own ideas, and keep refining until we find our own philosopher's stone. Unlike the alchemist's opus, however, often depicted as a lonely search for knowledge and perfection, thesis writing is a work that depends on the support of others.

I would, first and foremost, like to thank my supervisor Victoria Burke for her invaluable support, input, and (incredibly fast!) feedback. Thank you for always believing in my project, even when I doubted its success myself.

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INTRODUCTION

"Thus have I lived a sad and weary life,
Thirteen a maid, and thirty-three a wife"
("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 118-119)[1]

Jayne Archer tells us that Britain in the 1640s and 1650s was like an "alchemical vessel" (9), where the series of transformations taking place during the English Civil War in politics, society, and religion caused conflict in the public sphere and deeply affected the personal sphere. While England was "in the grip of political, social, and religious upheaval," radical changes were also underway in other fields, such as that of scientific inquiry (Eardley, *Poems* 10). As the English Revolution coincided with the "Scientific Revolution," modern science and its institutions emerged (Osler 3), coexisting alongside the older occult practices of alchemy and astrology. But transformations, especially when associated with revolutions, lead to instability, and the "uncertainty and unpredictability of the times" (Keeble 4) can be seen reflected in the literature produced in the period. The contemporary experience of "disruption, disorder and disorientation" (Keeble 4) found its way into poetry and prose, permeating not only the content, but also transforming both literary genre and form.

In the midst of this "great alchemical-political experiment of revolution" (Archer 9) taking place during the Civil War years, Lady Hester Pulter (1605?-1678) was performing her own experiments in writing. Written between c.1640 and c.1665, Pulter's extant literary oeuvre survives in a single manuscript (Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection, MS Lt q 32),

1 Poem quotations are taken from Alice Eardley's annotated edition of Pulter's verse, *Poems, Emblems, and The Unfortunate Florinda*, and the modernized spelling and punctuation adopted in this edition were used unless otherwise stated.

and comprises a collection of poems, emblems, and an unfinished romance, *The Unfortunate Florinda*. Mark Robson distinguishes three types of poetry in Pulter's first collection of poems: political poetry, which contains Royalist responses to the wars of the 1640s and Interregnum of the 1650s; devotional poetry; and "domestic" poetry, mostly about or addressed to her children[2] ("Swansongs" 243-244). As if reflecting the irruption of the Civil War into daily life, Pulter's political poems interrupt the sequence of devotional and personal poetry throughout the first part of her collection of poems. Possibly written to show how Pulter is reacting almost immediately to the events leading to the conflicts, political poems alternate with devotional lyrics and with personal elegies on the death of her children. The war and its consequences interrupted daily life, spiritual reflection, and even the work of writing itself. As Pulter tries to assimilate her changing world through writing, her manuscript becomes a record of the rapid and disruptive transformations occurring during the period.

Personal and spiritual transformations are also major concerns of Pulter's verse, and this thesis will argue that Pulter addresses these changes in a particular way. The elusive nature of alchemical language allows Pulter to express the incomplete, ongoing process of internal transformation, with all its difficulties and inconsistencies. By means of a rich alchemical lexicon, Pulter stresses suffering rather than consolation, conflict rather than reconciliation, and lack of resolution rather than closure in her poetry. The lack of resolution we see in Pulter's writing pushes against conventional constructions of the ideal female Christian as passively accepting God's plan, and shows the limits of the religious lyric to truly provide consolation. My introduction places Pulter's poetry in two important contexts: women's manuscript writing

2 Pulter gave birth to fifteen children (eight daughters and seven sons), only two of whom are believed to have outlived her (Ezell, "The Laughing Tortoise" 342).

(particularly devotional poetry) in the Civil War period, and alchemy, and outlines the scholarly approach and organization of the thesis.

Women, Manuscript Writing, and Alchemy

The intellectual and literary activities of writers such as Pulter are not always reflected in the official literary histories. Elizabeth Clarke draws our attention to the understanding that more women from the early modern period wrote in manuscript than had their work published, and that those women who did not publish are often "invisible" to the scholarly community ("Introducing Hester Pulter" 1). Although seventeenth-century female authors such as Katherine Philips and Margaret Cavendish have received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, as shown by the work of Hilary Menges, Gillian Wright, and Lara Dodds, among others, significant work is still required in order to recover "seventeenth-century women's participation in literary and intellectual culture" (Ezell, "The Laughing Tortoise" 332), especially the participation of those women who wrote extensively (or even purely) in manuscript.

Sarah Ross argues that a focus on "manuscript-based poets offers a new critical view of women's relationship to poetry" (*Women, Poetry, and Politics* 4) in the seventeenth century, particularly in their response to the political events of the Civil War and the Interregnum. Robson reminds us of Arthur Marotti's concern that the "critical tendency to judge the literature of the Civil War predominantly in terms of printed texts has produced an inaccurate picture of cultural production in the period" ("Swansongs" 244). After all, "literature registers the pressures, upheaval, freedoms, and promise of ... change" taking place during the English Revolution

(Knoppers, *Literature and the English Revolution* 7), all of which are not exclusive to printed literature. The "rubric of literature and the English Revolution" should bring together "canonical and non-canonical texts" (Knoppers, *Literature and the English Revolution* 7), works both printed and in manuscript, circulated or not. By adopting both a historicist and formalist approach to the analysis of Pulter's manuscript poetry, my thesis will help reveal how a woman writer such as Pulter, who wrote exclusively in manuscript, was also responding to the events of the wars, and engaging in contemporary intellectual and literary culture.

Pulter's manuscript, like the works of other early modern authors, reveals a relationship between a writer's reading and her own writing, or as Laura Knoppers puts it, a "symbiosis of reading and writing" (*Early Modern Women's Writing* 5). But what makes Pulter's work remarkable is the surprising way in which her wide reading finds expression in her writing: classical and contemporary literary sources, religion and astronomy, politics and alchemy, and even gender issues are combined and transformed by Pulter's pen. Alchemists, Lyndy Abraham tells us, were concerned with the union and reconciliation of opposites in their laboratory experiments (*Alchemical Imagery* 35). As a textual alchemist, Pulter is engaging in similar experiments on the page: she tries to conciliate her nostalgia for the "halcyon days" of Charles I's reign ("2. The Invitation into the Country" 111) with the current political climate, her grief for the loss of her children with her expectation of heaven, and her own body and soul. She even tries to settle contemporary scientific debates (whether it is the "motion of the sun or earth" that "[d]oth end the day as it began its birth" ["12. The Garden" 520-521]) through the writing of poetry. Pulter's attempts to explore a variety of different subjects in her writing, through a wide range of different genres and poetic forms, echo the attempts to assimilate the religious, political,

social, personal, and scientific transformations taking place during the period. Pulter manages to negotiate such disparate subjects in her writing, and "like an alchemist," she "reworks and refines them, and fashions something new" (Archer 10). Pulter's manuscript becomes her own alchemical laboratory where she experiments with genre and form, while mixing literary sources, political and social events, and personal experiences.

Many seventeenth-century writers turned to alchemy and its "discourse of change, metamorphosis and revolution," to "articulate, examine and understand" their changing world (Archer 1). The use of alchemical symbols, flexible and ambiguous by nature, in writings of the period can be seen "as an attempt to convey the fluid, changing, transforming nature of reality" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* xvii-xviii). The "language of alchemy," Abraham observes, "permeated seventeenth-century culture on every level" (*Marvell and Alchemy* 25); alchemy was subject matter for the stage, with Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (1615) being notable examples, and also for the page. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart identifies three peaks of alchemical publication during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (1560-70, 1610-20, and 1650-85), where alchemy as a gold-making operation was discussed alongside its more spiritual pursuit of personal transformation and quest for a "deeper, more intimate knowledge of the mind of God" (84).

In literary writings, Henry Vaughan and John Milton employ alchemical imagery and metaphor in order to "convey a sense of the sublime, of refinement, of higher aspiration and attainment" (Maxwell-Stuart 117). John Donne and George Herbert, Stanton Linden has demonstrated, mark a turning point in the use of alchemy in literary works (*Darke Hierogliphicks* 154). Previously used mainly for the purpose of humour and satire, alchemy's

literary use is expanded by Donne and Herbert to meet the "intellectual, spiritual, and imagistic demands of the new metaphysical poetry that they were creating" (Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks* 155).[3] Andrew Marvell also makes extensive allusion to alchemical symbolism in his poetry, and his use of alchemy in "Upon Appleton House" and "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn" has been thoroughly explored by Abraham.[4]

Penny Bayer has shown that women were also very much involved with alchemy, whether practical or philosophical. She notes that women participated in alchemical culture in a range of ways, "through patronage, keeping and writing receipts for alchemical medicines and gold-making, education in philosophical alchemy, and involvement in sophisticated Paracelsian alchemical reading and writing" (365). Writers such as Katherine Philips and Margaret Cavendish were known to employ alchemical ideas and conceits in their literary writings (Archer 1). Philips' friendship poems, Martine van Elk tells us, draw on a range of discourses about women, including alchemy (160); Cavendish, Lisa Walters has shown, discusses alchemy, magic, and fairy lore in her scientific treatise *Philosophical Letters*, as well as in her fictional texts (413).

The main goal of alchemy was to produce the famous Philosopher's Stone, which could "perfect imperfection in all things" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 145). It was believed that this mystical substance was capable of turning base metals into pure gold, or the flawed self into an illumined and perfected being (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 145). The stone was also known as the *elixir vitae* or the "Elixir of Life," and was revered for its universal healing properties: the elixir was thought to be able to cure any disease, and thus to indefinitely prolong human life

3 Lyndy Abraham reminds us that Donne also refers to a "true religious Alchimy," a process through which earthly man would be spiritually perfected (*Marvell and Alchemy* 1).

4 See Abraham's book *Marvell and Alchemy*.

(Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks* 7). The philosopher's stone was prepared through the *opus alchymicum*, which consisted of a series of iterations of the processes of dissolution and coagulation – *solve et coagula* – of the matter for the stone in the alchemical vessel. The alchemical work was divided into three traditional stages: nigredo (black), albedo (white), and rubedo (red)[5], and the sequence of changing colours in the vessel marked the completion of each stage during the stone's preparation. As Abraham explains:

> Very simply, the alchemical *opus* begins with the 'death' of the *nigredo*, passes to the pure, white *albedo*, and proceeds to the flushing of the pure white with the rich red-purple at the *rubedo*. The work culminates with the 'projectio' – the projection of the transforming, red and white elixirs upon the imperfect metal for transmutation into silver and gold. (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 292)

During the nigredo, the impure matter, metal, or body in the alchemical vessel was putrefied and broken down into its *prima materia*, or original matter. This matter would then be purified during the albedo so that it could be recreated into the new and perfected form of the white stone. This white stone, which would be able to transmute base metals into silver, would be flushed with red at the rubedo, yielding the red philosopher's stone. Once in possession of the red stone, the alchemist could transform metals into gold, transmute imperfect humans to perfected beings, or heal any illnesses.

In a move similar to other seventeenth-century writers, Pulter also turned to alchemy, and its promise of transformation and healing, in her writing. Using the blank page as her alembic and her pen as her "secret refining fire" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 170), Pulter turned to

5 Older alchemical traditions identify the red stage as the fourth stage; a yellow stage, the *citrinitas*, took place between the white and the red stages. The yellow stage later became integrated into one of the other stages.

writing to produce her own philosopher's stone, which would allow her to transmute herself into a sort of "spiritual gold" (Smith, B. 66), and would heal her suffering through a process of textual alchemy. Jayne Archer has already brought to our attention Pulter's use of alchemy in her cycle of poems titled "The Circle," and has shown how Pulter employs alchemical concepts in her writing as a way to explore transformation (Archer 2). Sarah Hutton has also pointed out that alchemical "processes of calcination and sublimation provide metaphors of transformation" ("New Astronomy" 83) throughout Pulter's poetry. The poem, "21. The Circle [2]," and the emblem, "40. View but this tulip, rose, or July flower," explicitly describe the processes of alchemical experimentation, and terminology such as dissolution, condensation, and calcination figures in several of Pulter's lines.

As such, Pulter's use of alchemy is not unusual; what is striking in Pulter's case is how her alchemical efforts often seem frustrated or incomplete. My thesis will extend the discussion of Pulter's use of alchemical imagery and symbols in her poetry, and I will argue that Pulter uses alchemical language in subtle and often unusual ways to reflect how transformation and healing are never, in fact, fully achieved during our physical existence. The promise of literary alchemy as a vehicle for "change, growth, transformation, and spiritual regeneration" (Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks* 156) is not always fulfilled in Pulter's work. Through this unique application of alchemical imagery, Pulter's poetry also demonstrates a nuanced approach to devotional writing. Unlike writers such as the anonymous poet "Eliza," who hoped to achieve a sense of stability and peace through her devotional writing (Rex 206), or Mary Carey[6], whose religious lyric, Donna Long argues, may be "recuperative" (260), Pulter highlights the potential inability of

6 Mary Carey also wrote about child loss and provides a good comparison for Pulter's own lyrics. See Carey's poem "Upon the Sight of my Abortive Birth The 31st of December 1657."

religious poetry to provide relief and healing, and to transform suffering. Pulter does not present the speaker in her poems as unquestioningly following mainstream Protestant views. Instead, she depicts a voice whose suffering seems to push against conventional constructions of the ideal female Christian as passively accepting God's will.

Pulter's poetic opus can be identified with the three stages of traditional alchemical work – nigredo, albedo, and rubedo – and this thesis has been divided into three chapters, each coinciding with one of the alchemical stages. In Chapter 1, attention will be given to how Pulter understands the necessary death at the nigredo, but that her ambivalent feelings about her own death and the untimely deaths of her children are still reflected in both poetic content and form. The struggles we see in these poems reflect Pulter's belief that certain emotions cannot really be resolved, but that they still need to be expressed. Chapter 2 will argue that Pulter associates the albedo stage of the opus with the coming of Aurora, the goddess of dawn. The white stage should deal with purification, but in Pulter's case, it is filled with conflict and doubt. Struggling with the idea of her own innocence versus her sinful nature, Pulter's white stage is anxiously expected but never quite achieved, suggesting that Pulter needs to keep on refining. Chapter 3 will discuss the sporadic appearance of the colour red and of rubedo imagery in Pulter's poetry, and will argue that even if Pulter alludes to the philosopher's stone itself, it is only to reinforce the difficulty of its achievement on earth.

Methodology

This thesis will focus on the first section of Pulter's manuscript, *Poems Breathed Forth by the Noble Hadassah,* written between the mid-1640s and 1655, and which comprises her collection of political, devotional and personal poetry. The methodology will consist of formal textual analysis which draws on New Formalist approaches (such as close reading practices), a historicist attention to Pulter's life and times, and a focus on material features drawn from book history scholarship.

Sasha Roberts, hoping to bridge the gap between formalist and feminist criticism, reminds us of the often overlooked importance of form in early modern women's works; early modern women's writing, she stresses, "is *predicated* on [women's] engagement with literary form" ("Feminist Criticism" 76). Early modern authors, including women writers, saw an association between form and order; believing in the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, early modern writers often saw the "order, structure, and harmony of the universe echoed in poetic and musical forms" (Burton and Scott-Baumann 11). The use of structured rhyme, for example, was thought to bring order to chaos of the imagination (Burton and Scott-Baumann 11). Pulter adheres to this early modern notion as she chooses to adopt rhyming couplets in the vast majority of her poetry, and this thesis will refer to J. Paul Hunter's work on the couplet to complement its examination of the couplet's versatility.

Much scholarship on early modern women's writing is indebted to a historicist perspective that acknowledges the importance of a writer's networks and personal circumstances. This thesis will draw on historically and culturally relevant information to situate Pulter in the

mid-seventeenth century, as the mother of numerous children, living in an isolated country seat, and yet in touch with scientific knowledge of the day. Eardley reminds us that because of Pulter's isolation, she was "liberated from the need to conform to the expectations and tastes of a widespread audience," and she "expresses opinions and emotions not usually encountered in poetry by early modern women, or indeed men" (*Poems* 2). As much as Pulter was a product of her environment, she was also making her own choices as a writer about which issues to highlight and explore.

In addition to using the main methodological framework of New Formalism, complemented by a sensitivity to historical context, my thesis will analyze certain physical features of Pulter's manuscript, for example, transcription practices such as layout and spacing, and annotations, with methods borrowed from the field of book history. This book historical approach to Pulter's manuscript is made feasible by the high quality facsimile of the manuscript available on *Perdita Manuscripts: Women Writers, 1500-1700*. Attention to the material characteristics of a manuscript can offer answers to questions about how it was produced, how it functioned, and what its intended audience might have been. The main scribe of the manuscript has produced an elegant fair copy of Pulter's verse, which Pulter herself has annotated and supplemented at various points in her own hand. Although there is no evidence of circulation of her manuscript, Pulter's careful attention to the physical aspects of her work suggests a concern with the afterlife of her poetry and with a potential reading audience.

CHAPTER ONE – *NIGREDO*

"I gladly will my form resign,
It will my carnal heart refine."
("16. The Revolution" 26-27)

In *Writing Metamorphosis,* Susan Wiseman argues that "the seventeenth century is marked by concentration on the potential of the human, and indeed the very matter of the world, to change or be changed" (1). The alchemists were also concerned with this potential for transformation in all its aspects: not only of base metals into purer forms such as that of gold and silver, but, most significantly, with the "mystic transformation of base man into a state of spiritual perfection" (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 1). Alchemy was seen as "the art of transmuting or perfecting everything in its own nature" (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 1), and the main goal of the alchemical opus was to produce the famous philosopher's stone or elixir, the mystical substance which would effect these transformations and ultimately "perfect imperfection in all things" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 145). With each of her poetic experiments, Pulter tries to come closer to being "perfect and sublimed" ("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 30) by transforming what she sees as impurities from all aspects of herself: her sins, her doubts, her "impatient soul" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 107), her inconstant faith, and her "fruitless grief" ("34. To Aurora [3]" 19).

As with any experiment, however, even poetic ones are not always successful. As Pulter writes about the "decay" of her physical body ("51. Made When I Was Not Well" 26), the expectation of her death, and the untimely deaths of her children to reflect the first stage of her

poetic opus, the nigredo, her "fluctuating ambivalent feelings about life and death" (Archer 6) make it difficult to successfully complete this first stage and move on; Pulter does not unquestioningly accept the deaths of her children and is not completely at ease with the idea of her own decline and death. In this chapter I argue that the struggles we see reflected in both content and form in what I characterize as the nigredo poems reflect Pulter's belief that certain emotions, such as her contradictory feelings about fearing and accepting death, cannot really be resolved, but that they still need to be expressed. The elusive nature of alchemical language allows Pulter to express the incomplete, ongoing process of personal and spiritual transformation, with all its difficulties and inconsistencies, even if its final result cannot be fully verbalized. The lack of resolution we see in Pulter's writing pushes against conventional constructions of the ideal female Christian as passively accepting God's plan, and shows the limits of the religious lyric to truly provide consolation.

Alchemical concepts and imagery are used in combination with specific formal features in Pulter's poetry to illustrate the process of transformation. The "root meaning of change and transformation" (Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks* 155) of the alchemical image is combined, paradoxically, with the "constraints of metre, rhyme, and structure" (Strier 74) of traditional seventeenth-century poetic forms such as the rhymed couplet, which Pulter adopts in a substantial portion of her body of poetry. Couplet poetry gained strength in its characteristic form in the decades following 1625, through the work of poets such as John Denham, and with the influence of the period's literary taste (Wallerstein 166), culminating in a "nearly hegemonic dominance" in seventeenth-century lyric (Henderson 152). Pulter's choice to adopt the couplet in her poetry was influenced by the popularity of the form during the period, but the couplet is also

a fitting choice for Pulter from an alchemical perspective. Alchemical belief held that in order for the work to be successful, oppositions should not be "denied and destroyed," but, instead, "held in creative tension" (Martin 38). J. Paul Hunter reminds us that rhymed couplets "formally involve a careful pairing of oppositions or balances," but offer no formal resolution ("Form as Meaning" 157), making the couplet the perfect vehicle for many of Pulter's poetic experiments, where she could try to reconcile opposing principles by holding them in their own creative tension.

Pulter's need for transformation into a more perfected state is suggested in "1. The Eclipse," the very first poem of her collection; despite having "had her birth" in heaven ("1. The Eclipse" 54), Pulter's soul is not "from all transgression free" (55). Helen Wilcox reminds us that religious poetry by early modern women was often written as self-reflection ("My Hart Is Full" 448), a notion confirmed by Pulter as she uses her own devotional poems to reflect on the "curséd nature" ("1. The Eclipse" 62) of her flawed self. Even though Pulter's speaker complains that mortality "fett'rest [her] with flesh and bone" (39), and that "Earth's fading pleasures" and "[c]orruption" (56-57) keep her separated from God, she believes that it is really her sins that "will not let [her] fly" to heaven (59):

> But, oh my sins (my sins) and none but those
> Make my poor soul o'erflow with sad annoy;
> 'Tis they, and none but they, do interpose
> Twixt heaven and me, and doth eclipse my joy.
> ("1. The Eclipse" 49-52)

The rhyming scheme of "1. The Eclipse," as seen in the quatrain above, is unusual in Pulter's

poetry; following an *ababcc* scheme, the alternating rhyme of the poem formally reinforces its theme of interposition. Playing with the meaning of the word "interpose" and its position on the stanza (literally "interposing" between the rhymed words "annoy" and "joy"), Pulter makes clever use of her knowledge of astronomy to show how her sins come between her and the light of the "eternal glory" of heaven (64) and its "celestial joys" (2), just as the earth and the moon conceal light during an eclipse.

The alternating rhyme scheme also seems to subtly introduce the alternating stages of nigredo and albedo through its play of alternating light and dark. Nigredo, the black stage, was the initial stage of the alchemical opus, which would be followed by the albedo, or the white stage. The progression from nigredo to albedo, from black to white, would not happen only once, but in a number of iterations of the alchemical opus. The work "would be repeated and repeated and repeated, each time waiting for the colours to appear" (Martin 28), until the final stage – the rubedo, or the red stage – would be achieved and the philosopher's stone would be ready for use. This circular work was also seen as repeated iterations of the processes of *solve et coagula* (dissolution and coagulation), where the impure matter in the vessel would be repeatedly dissolved and then coagulated into a new and perfected form; after each cycle of *solve et coagula,* the matter in the alembic would become more purified (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 35). With each new iteration of her own cycle of *solve et coagula*, with each succession of poems reflecting the nigredo and poems reflecting the albedo, Pulter also hopes to make herself and her poetic matter become "purer and more potent" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 187). The eclipse was also a symbol associated with the nigredo stage itself (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 135), and it is highly suggestive that Pulter begins her own poetic opus with a poem titled "The

Eclipse." Disguised, in the true fashion of the alchemists, as a lyric poem praising God, Pulter's first poem in her manuscript also works as the first step towards her own transformation, and signals the beginning of her own *magnus opus* – her own "Great Work."

But before the philosopher's stone could be produced, and base metals be transmuted into gold (or flawed humans be perfected), a process of dissolution or disintegration had to take place; if not a physical death, at least a metaphorical one was necessary. During the nigredo, Abraham explains, the "body of the impure metal, the matter for the Stone, or the old outmoded state of being" would be "killed, putrefied and dissolved into the original substance of creation, the *prima materia*[7]" (*Alchemical Imagery* 135). This process of breaking down was essential for regeneration to be possible, and to allow for the impure and imperfect matter to be "renovated and reborn in a new form" in later stages of the alchemical work (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 135). Even nature, the alchemists held, "could only be renewed after first dying away" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 135). Understanding that she, too, "[m]ust taste of death" and to her "first principles[8] must turn" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 32, 15) before she can achieve a new and perfected form, Pulter employs images of decay and death in her poems to reflect the necessary dissolution and putrefaction taking place during the nigredo. The appearance of the colour black in Pulter's poetic vessel signals that the nigredo is under way, and symbols associated with the black stage, such as the grave and night, complete Pulter's rendition of the first stage of the alchemical opus.

In Andrew Marvell's representation of the opus[9] in "Upon Appleton House," the cycles of

7 The *prima materia*, or first matter, was believed to be the original "basic stuff of creation," from which everything in the universe was created and to which one day everything will return (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 153).

8 Pulter's allusion to "first principles" could also relate to the principles of the alchemists according to Paracelsus (sulphur, mercury, and salt) (Roberts, G. 111).

9 See Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy.*

solve et coagula taking place over the course of the opus are mapped on to external locations and events. The dissolution of the nigredo is mapped on to the dissolution of the corrupt nunnery that gives way to Appleton House; the new Appleton House comes to stand for the coagulation of the dissolved matter into its new and perfected form after the albedo (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 69). The war enacted in the Fairfax garden also comes to represent the destruction of the old state of being to make way for the new (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 89). Unlike her male contemporary, Pulter internalizes the process of alchemical dissolution, and maps this process on to the decay of her own body.[10] Alice Eardley reminds us that Pulter's poems "frequently allude to the experience of her own body, either directly after she has given birth or in the poignant awareness of her gradual physical decline into old age." Even though she adopts poetic conventions traditionally used by male writers, she "does not negate her own female body in the process" (Eardley, "Lady Hester Pulter's Feminine Melancholic Genius" 242). Embodying the process of dissolution, she describes the corruption of her "feeble" and "frail frame" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 2), and says, in several of her poems, that she "gladly will [her] form resign" in order to realize the process of corruption that will "refine" her "carnal heart" ("16. The Revolution" 26, 27).

In poem "51. Made When I Was Not Well" the speaker describes her decaying physical body to reflect the process of corruption:

> Seest thou these eyes ('tis thou that gives them sight
>
> Or they would quickly set in endless night);
>
> What splendent sprightliness in youth they had,

10 Ben Jonson in "My Picture Left in Scotland" also internalizes a process of decay, although not to represent the alchemical process of dissolution.

Now weeping makes them dim, and dull, and sad.

These locks did curl and were a golden brown;

Now thin and lank, like silver threads, hang down.

My lovely count'nance had a pleasing grace;

Now Erra Pater's or a sibyl's face.

My lips were cherries, rosy were my cheeks,

But those that now for blood or beauty seek

Will find them spoiled by time and adverse fate,

Whose cruelty doth give to all a date.

("51. Made When I Was Not Well" 3-14)

Jonathan Sawday tells us that in the Renaissance the human body may have been "'emblazoned' or embellished through art and poetry," but that to "blazon" a body is "also to hack it into pieces in order to flourish fragments of men and women as trophies" (Sawday qtd. in Edwards 126). Invoking the blazon tradition only to subvert it, Pulter uses the form to "hack" her own body into pieces so that she can "flourish" its aging "fragments" and lament its decay. Using couplets to try to balance the opposites youth and old age, Pulter contrasts her once "lovely" features on the first line of each couplet with their older equivalent, now "spoiled by time," placed on the second line. Pulter creates an individual foil for each of her physical and intellectual attributes, and the description of their decay is strengthened by each individual juxtaposition with the younger counterparts. Hunter reminds us that poets from as early as the Civil War found the structure of the couplet suitable for expressing the "preservation and acceptance of difference" ("Form as Meaning" 157), and old and new are held in creative tension within each couplet, reflecting the

impossibility of their reconciliation.

In an unconventional use of alchemical imagery, Pulter appropriates symbols which alchemical tradition associates with the white stage of the opus, the albedo, to describe her body decaying in "51. Made When I Was Not Well." She uses "new-fallen snow" (15) to allude to the whiteness that her skin once had, and "swan," "dove," and "lilies" (18, 19) to compare her once "smooth," "soft," and "swelling" breasts with their current "withered" state (18, 17, 20). While all of these metaphors of snow, white birds, and white flowers are conventional images of youthful beauty, they are also all symbols associated with the albedo stage. This stage, as discussed in Chapter 2, is never used by Pulter to represent an actual present state, but rather an idealized stage that is never quite achievable. In the "Aurora" poems discussed in the next chapter, Pulter's albedo is used to describe an idealized purification that she still hopes to achieve. In "51. Made When I Was Not Well," the albedo symbols are used to describe an idealized past, corrupted by her present state of sin and sorrow. By placing symbols which are associated with the pure white stage of the opus in a poem which discusses corruption, Pulter continues the discussion she had initiated from her very first poem, of the corruption of innocence by sin, in particular, the corruption of her own innocence and her transformation into a sinful being, a process she is constantly trying to reverse through her poetry. Pulter corrupts the very symbols associated with purity, which suggests that Pulter believes her own innocence and purity may have been corrupted and are beyond restoration in the physical world. Physical and moral decay thus become mingled in Pulter's poem, and an impossibility of restoring a corrupted physical form becomes a reflection of the impossibility of also restoring the moral self while on earth.

Pulter's use of "rottenness" in close proximity to "flesh" in "31. Made When I Was Sick, 1647" alludes to the physical process of decomposition that takes place during the nigredo, but also recalls the word's figurative meaning of being morally corrupt and lacking integrity,[11] aspects which Pulter associates with a flawed physical existence. Choosing to stay on this corrupt physical plane would be to "prove" "ungrateful" ("31. Made When I Was Sick, 1647" 4) to God:

> Oh me! how sore! how sad is my poor heart
> How loath my soul is from my flesh to part;
> Hath forty years acquaintance caused such love
> To rottenness; that thou wilt ungrateful prove;
> To that invisible light! of which we are beams
> Wilt thou leave substances (my soul) for dreams
> ("31. Made When I Was Sick, 1647" 1-6)[12]

Exclamation marks interrupt the flow of the poem from its very first line, and the three semicolons which follow (with two appearing on line 4 alone) make the subsequent lines visually and aurally segmented. Eardley suggests that many manuscript verse writers expected their readers to "infer structures from their writing that might otherwise be communicated by punctuation marks" (Eardley, "I haue not time to point yr booke" 163). This often resulted in early modern manuscript verse, such as Pulter's holograph, to lack full punctuation. Although we cannot confirm whether the punctuation in Pulter's manuscript is entirely her own choosing or added by her scribe, it is worth noting when unusual punctuation appears in Pulter's verse. The

11 *OED,* "rottenness, n." 3.
12 Original manuscript punctuation was used in this excerpt instead of Eardley's punctuation from the annotated edition.

introduction of semicolons breaks up the lines in the excerpt above, reiterating the breaking down which takes place during the nigredo; the interruptions also create pauses, making the reader spend more time reflecting on the words "rottenness" and "ungrateful," which not only affect the speaker, but are no doubt expected to resonate also with the reader.

Pulter often uses the rhymed couplet to keep oppositions in balance by pairing them through end-rhymed lines. In the excerpt above, however, a pairing does not occur through rhyme, but through the repetition of the word "To" at the beginning of lines 4 and 5, which pairs the "rottenness" of the earthly body and the "invisible light" of heaven both visually and aurally. This pairing suggests that an attempt to reconcile these opposites does not seem to be taking place in this case. Instead, the lines are set up in a way to illustrate the soul's dilemma: whether to continue its path "[t]o rottenness"on earth or finally accept death, which will lead "[t]o that invisible light" emanating from heaven. The enjambment between lines 3 and 4 ("love/To") is repeated immediately below, in lines 4 and 5 ("prove/To"), reinforcing the pause established by the semicolons, and suggests a formal fork in the speaker's road. In many of Pulter's lyrics, the speaker tries to convince her soul to "never care" and to let "Death abrupt [her] story" ("31. Made When I Was Sick, 1647" 15), only to find that her soul is often still "loath" (2) to leave the body, despite the speaker having practically "reached at last" her "sepulcher" (11).[13]

It is not only "Time's tyranny" which causes Pulter's body and mind to wither and decay, but also the "cruelty" of "adverse fate" ("51. Made When I Was Not Well" 21, 14, 13). Her "sportive wit and mirth" are also "spoiled" (22, 13): she has become "moping" and "dull" (23) because of the deaths of her children and the events of the Civil War. Elizabeth Clarke reminds us that "all texts in the turbulent period of the Civil Wars and Interregnum were potentially

13 The sepulcher, another name for grave or tomb, was also a symbol associated with the nigredo.

available for politicization," and Pulter's writing, which existed only in the "most apparently private medium of the manuscript" would be "no exception" (Clarke, "A heart terrifying Sorrow" 72). Poem 31, "Made When I Was Sick, 1647," is conveniently dated, and "1647" is underlined in the manuscript, as if to call specific attention to the year in question: the year when Charles I was imprisoned by the English Parliament until his execution two years later.[14] The "sable" "scene" (7) set in Pulter's lyric, with its obvious political connotations, places speaker and reader directly into the blackness of the nigredo stage (theatrical pun intended). Alchemy and theatre were closely associated, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the theatre also served as a metaphor for the alchemical vessel, where the cycles of the *solve et coagula* were reenacted (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 199).[15] Punning on the theatrical meaning of "tragedies" ("31. Made When I Was Sick, 1647" 7), Pulter alludes to the events of the Civil War, "acted here" on "this dismal stage" (8-9), and associates the war with the nigredo.

The imagery of war, Abraham tells us, was commonly used in alchemical writings to represent the breaking down of the old and corrupt state of being (*Marvell and Alchemy* 91). Marvell also uses the Civil War in "Upon Appleton House" to reflect the process of dissolution during the nigredo: the war functions as the *solve* of the *solve et coagula*, and "symbolizes the deconstruction which must precede purification and reconstruction" (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 89). In Marvell's poem, the battles of the war are seen as necessary in order to dissolve the old state of corruption in England, and to establish a "new Paradisal state through military means" (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 88). The war also becomes associated with the *solve* in Pulter's poem, but the focus in Pulter's verse is on the suffering which comes associated with the

14 Charles I was only temporarily released for a week in November of 1647.

15 Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* are prominent literary examples of this association. Many alchemical books and treatises were also called "theatres," such as Elias Ashmole's collection of alchemical poetry *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, first published in 1652.

process of dissolution itself. She does not see the war as Marvell does, as the precursor of a "desired renewal" after the "deathly battle" of the nigredo (*Marvell and Alchemy* 91), but laments the consequences of the war, and highlights the suffering, both personal and public, associated with the conflicts. Coincidentally, the beheading of the king was also a symbol of the dissolution taking place during the nigredo, and the tears present during the black stage express the sorrow for the death of the king (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 198); the tragedy performed before the speaker's "weeping eyes" ("31. Made When I Was Sick, 1647" 9) in Pulter's poem may well have been referring to Charles I's own beheading in the following years, for which Pulter sheds a considerable amount of poetic tears.

The Civil War was also responsible for Pulter's "enforced solitude" (Ross, "Tears, Bezoars and Blazing Comets" 2) at her country house, Broadfield Hall. During the 1640s, Hero Chalmers reminds us, Royalists "began to be forced into retreat by the sequestration of their estates, ejection from public office, imprisonment, or exile" (105), and Pulter complains that she has been "shut up in a country grange" ("57. Why must I thus forever be confined" 18) and away from her children who remained in the city.[16] But Pulter's confinement relates to more than only her physical displacement: inside her country house, Pulter often found herself also confined to her bed, either ill or during the lying-in period of her fifteen pregnancies. Pulter's "captivated soul[17]" ("55. Must I thus ever interdicted be" 16), trapped in this sick and decaying body, is also represented as being in a "prison" ("51. Made When I Was Not Well" 2): "My soul, why dost thou such a mourning make/This loathsome ruined prison to forsake?" (1-2). But "prison" is

16 Elizabeth Clarke tells us that during this period, Pulter also experienced a "spiritual isolation" from being excluded from the church ("Women in church" 114).

17 Helen Wilcox suggests that Pulter's use of the word "captivated" here works in a double sense: that of "captive" as in "imprisoned," but also of "captivated," as in "enthralled, happily overwhelmed by the love of God"; this conflict, she argues, epitomizes "the paradoxes experienced by women in their earthly as well as their spiritual lives" (Wilcox, "My Hart Is Full" 465).

another name for the alchemist's vessel during the nigredo, where the matter for the stone is said to be captured during the process of putrefaction (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 156).[18] It is only fitting that Pulter's rendition of the putrefaction would take place in the "ruined prison" ("51. Made When I Was Not Well" 2) of her body, not only a prison representing the alchemist's vessel, but one which is also in *ruins* – undergoing its own disintegration – to reinforce the image of dissolution needed during this stage of the opus.

Clarke points out that this "sense of imprisonment and restraint" is representative of much of Pulter's poetry ("Women in church" 115), and many of Pulter's lyrics experiment with the paradoxical conciliation between bondage and freedom. (Alchemical discourse is, after all, "particularly fond of paradox" [Roberts, G. 70].) Poem 39, "The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge," brings to mind Richard Strier's argument about the relationship between the formal constraints of traditional verse form in lyric poetry, and how these constraints "seem to lead, paradoxically, to surprising accesses of power and enablement" (Strier 74). Strier questions why early modern writers chose to write within the formal constraints of traditional verse form, and suggests that lyric poetry "is a wonderful test case for exploring the will's need for artificial constraints" (Strier 74). In "39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge," Pulter uses form to emulate the constraint of the prison of the alchemical vessel during the nigredo:

> My soul, in struggling thou do[st] ill;
>
> The chicken in the shell lies still,
>
> So doth the embryo in the womb,
>
> So doth the corpse within the tomb,

18 In Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," the nunnery where Isabel Thwaites is imprisoned is "appropriately seen as a prison or dungeon in which corruption is taking place" (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 78).

So doth the flower sleep in its cause,

Obedient all to Nature's laws.

But thou'rt still striving to be free

As if none were in bonds but thee.

("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 1-8)

She abandons the iambic pentameter couplet, already constraining in both meter and rhyme, in favour of iambic tetrameter, suggesting that Pulter understands the need for struggle in order to be perfected, even if she does not always accept it. The switch to a shorter meter restrains Pulter's verse even more, creating an almost claustrophobic feeling in the lines of the poem which reflects the confinement and struggle of the "silent urn" ("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 23) of the nigredo stage; the repetition of "So doth" in the first lines of the poem adds to the overall feeling of constraint.

The word "Perfection" in the title of the poem already hints at its alchemical purpose, and the title highlights two particular features of herself that Pulter hopes to perfect: "Knowledge" and, even more significantly in her case, "Patience." The repetition of "And why" in the following lines suggests the need for the perfection of "Knowledge":

Then shall we know these orbs of wonder,

Which in a maze we now live under,

And why sad Saturn's heavy eye

Frowns on me with malignancy,

And why conjunctions[19] should foreshow

19 "An apparent proximity of two planets or other heavenly bodies; the position of these when they are in the same, or nearly the same, direction as viewed from the earth" (*OED,* "conjunction, n." 3). The context suggests that Pulter may be referring to astrological or astronomical conjunctions of planets.

Some mighty monarchies' overthrow,

And by what (swift and infinite) power,

Sol runs three hundred miles an hour,

And why pale Cynthia doth so change

Her lovely face as she doth range

All night ahunting in the shade,

And how fair Venus can be made

Hesperus in the orient

And Vesperus in the occident

Or whether ethereal fire doth burn,

Or that this terrene globe doth turn,

The sun being center unto all

And that he ne'er doth rise or fall,

Or whether they have a treble motion,

Of which we have so small a notion.

("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 32-51)

Drawing on older alchemical and astrological traditions as well as on contemporary science, Pulter mixes knowledge ranging from Paracelsus' "ethereal fire" (46)[20] to the "treble motion" (50) of the planets[21] to suggest that, just as God is the only one who can truly effect transformation, he is also the only one who has all the knowledge, and is the only one who can

20 The footnote in Eardley's annotated edition tells us that Paracelsus' followers believed that "ethereal fire" was a "life force circulating from the heavens to earthly things" (*Poems* 137).

21 Copernicus in his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (1543) defines the three motions of the earth around the sun: diurnal (around its own axis), annual (its yearly orbit around the sun), and trepidation (its axis' conical motion) (Eardley, *Poems* 381).

answer our earthly and heavenly questions. Only when the poet-alchemist has achieved a significant level of refinement and perfection through her own alchemical work can she participate in the wisdom and knowledge of God. In Pulter's case, it is only in heaven that she will really understand "[a]ll this (and more)" (52). Alice Eardley has touched on Pulter's relationship with knowledge and her need to "assert her intellectual status" ("Lady Hester Pulter's Feminine Melancholic Genius" 240) through her writing. While stating that "we have so small a notion" of "such wonders here below" (51, 53), Pulter ironically (but probably intentionally) also shares her own knowledge of traditional and contemporary science. In "Patience" she knows she still has much to work on, but perhaps she feels she is, at least, closer to the "Knowledge" expected from achieving the alchemical goal.

The use of anaphora in the poem also reflects the repetition for refinement of the alchemical opus: the alchemist must iterate through numerous cycles of the *solve et coagula* in order to refine the matter in the vessel. The repetition of "Then" in the following lines suggests the perfection of "Patience":

> Then will I rise and fly away
> With thee to everlasting day,
> Then shall our grief and past annoys
> Be swallowed up of infinite joys,
> Then being perfect and sublimed
> We shall discern this globe calcined,
> ("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 26-31)

The poem looks forward to when this stage of perfection is actually achieved, hoping that the

promise of "being perfect and sublimed" ("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 30) (at some point in the near future) will convince the soul (and poet) to be patient and just wait for the moment to arrive. Alan Rudrum reminds us that the alchemist believed himself or herself to be "a co-worker with God" ("These fragments I have shored against my ruins" 334), and Pulter not only believes that God takes part in the process of transformation, but that he is, in fact, the only one who can ultimately effect actual change. Counting on the couplet's creative tension, Pulter rhymes "grief and past annoys" with "infinite joys" in the lines above in hopes that she can keep both in balance until God eventually effects the ultimate transformation of one into the other, since she cannot do it on her own; the only thing she can perfect is her patience to wait for death and heaven.

The speaker's soul, contradicting poems "31. Made When I Was Sick, 1647" and "51. Made When I Was Not Well" discussed above, is impatient and "struggling" ("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 1) to actually leave the body in this poem. In poems 31 and 51, the speaker's soul is "unwilling" to die ("49. My heart why dost" 15), and simply refuses to leave the "rags of clay" ("3. Aurora [1]" 53) of its earthly dwelling; it takes a lot of effort from the speaker to persuade the soul to leave the body. In poem 39, the soul is "striving to be free" ("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 7), and the speaker must convince it to be patient since the process of transformation is still not completed. This conflicted relationship of the speaker with her soul across Pulter's poems reflects Pulter's own struggles with accepting death. At times wishing for death, and at others fearing it, Pulter cannot put her doubts to rest, not even at the promise of "everlasting life and light" (19).

Coincidentally (or not) the scribe who transcribed Pulter's manuscript split the poem "28.

Oh my afflicted, solitary soul," at the exact moment when Pulter, once again, expresses anxiety about death, and momentarily changes the direction of the poem. In the first twenty lines, Pulter's speaker is seemingly reconciled with the notion of dying, and complains that her soul "still in dust and ashes roll[s]" (2), refusing to "reassume" the "ancient right" of her "celestial birth" (9, 10, 3). Pulter often compares dying to going to sleep, and the paradoxical line "And never wake until in death we sleep" (18) alludes to the necessary death at the nigredo in preparation for spiritual awakening; this "nap in black Oblivion's urn" ("33. The Welcome [2]" 8) is anxiously expected. The first part of "28. Oh my afflicted, solitary soul" can stand on its own as a complete poem, and it is almost a surprise to turn the page over and realize ("Ay me") that Pulter is neither fully convinced about death, nor really finished with the poem:

> (Ay me) this thought of death my courage dashes;
> Must I, and mine, turn all to dust and ashes
> Death hath already from my weeping vine
> Torn seven fair branches; the grief and loss is mine
> The joy is theirs who now in glory shine
> ("28. Oh my afflicted, solitary soul" 21-25)

The repetition of the phrase "dust and ashes" in this section does not mirror the meaning suggested by Pulter earlier in the poem, when she associates the same terms with the "dunghill earth" (12) and describes her soul's refusal to leave the physical world. Here, they assume a much more powerful and painful image, that of the result of the transformation of the black stage of the opus, the return to the "dust" of the original matter. The ambiguity of Pulter's own terms creates instability in the poem, reflecting her own ambivalence towards death.

Using form to reinforce content throughout her poetry, Pulter sometimes "resign[s]" ("16. The Revolution" 26) even poetic form to reflect a literal dissolution in poems associated with the nigredo. The semicolon after "courage dashes" creates a pause at the end of the phrase, as the speaker stops to reflect on her moment of weakness, and reinforces the disruption initiated by the physical turning of the page. The second semicolon, after the line "Torn seven fair branches" ("28. Oh my afflicted, solitary soul" 24), actually breaks the line in the middle, interrupting the rhythm of the initial couplet. The image of tearing initiated by the enjambment on the previous line is reinforced as the second line of the couplet is, literally, "[t]orn" in the middle by the semicolon, and the pause accentuates the "grief and loss" (24) that come immediately after it.[22] The initial rhymed couplet, already insufficient for what Pulter needs to express, and now cracked by the semicolon break, becomes a rhymed triplet when Pulter's grief becomes, perhaps, too much for only two end-rhymed lines to contain. Hunter reminds us that rhyme words "almost inevitably call attention to themselves" ("Seven Reasons for Rhyme" 177), and when Pulter chooses to turn a couplet into a triplet, the extra repetition strengthens the rhyme words' already "special status" (Hunter "Seven Reasons for Rhyme" 177), formally and visually reinforcing the overflowing of Pulter's grief.[23]

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22 The tearing of branches also recalls the motif of the truncated tree, another symbol associated with the dissolution taking place in the nigredo (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 205).

23 A similar use of the triplet occurs in poem "57. Why must I thus forever be confined." By the end of the poem, the speaker's "suff'rings" (100) have become so great as to make her unable to verbalize, and she will "say no more" (99) to the reader about them. But instead of leaving the speaker lost for words, grief, paradoxically, explodes the couplet at the end of the poem into a frustrated triplet, leaving poet, poem, and reader without a satisfying resolution:

> Or were't for debt, I soon could pay that score,
> But 'tis, oh my sad soul, I'll say no more;
> To God alone my suff'rings I'll deplore.
> ("57. Why must I thus forever be confined" 98-100)

In the manuscript, the scribe (or Pulter, perhaps) visually reinforces the rhyme with the inclusion of an annotation at the margin joining the three lines together. While using a curved bracket to indicate a triplet rhyme was a feature of printed texts of the period, this marker does call even more attention to the excess of grief expressed by the triplet.

Wilcox reminds us that even though in devotion the soul "might be considered to be in a realm beyond male and female," in devotional poetry attention is paid "to the gendering of individuals in their cultural and linguistic encounters" (Wilcox, "My Hart Is Full" 449). Pulter's nigredo is gendered female, as is her entire alchemical opus, and the images she turns to are almost always related to women, and more specifically, to mothers. The grief and suffering Pulter portrays in the poems associated with the nigredo, which are an integral part of the black stage, are also very much a woman's and a mother's suffering. Donna Long appropriates Stanley Fish's term "poetics of tension" (257) to talk specifically of a female poetic tension in elegiac verse, which, unlike in their male counterparts' works, in women's poetry "comes unbidden," and "happens because the conventions of elegy and of grief expression cannot contain [women's] experience" (258). This "specifically female 'poetics of tension'" is "born of a continuing social repression of 'immoderate' grief and a need to express grief," and Long finds in this tension "the possibility for the recuperation of women's experiences as mothers, mourners, poets, Christians" (Long 257). Even when not specifically writing elegies, Pulter's verse often assumes an elegiac tone, and we can see this "poetics of tension" arising from the "negotiation of faith in the face of loss" (Long 257) in much of Pulter's poetry about grief and loss. Pulter brings to our attention how the literary language of the period (including that of literary alchemy, with all its hopes of effecting transformation) was often not representative of women's experiences, such as the expression of motherly grief. Pulter tries to fill this gap through a gendering of the stages of her poetic opus and her use of motherly figures, such as the grieving speaker of several poems, and also the character of Aurora (to be discussed in Chapter 2).

After the spilling over of emotion into changes in poetic form, and the momentary doubts

at the "thought of death" ("28. Oh my afflicted, solitary soul" 21), Pulter seems to return to her initial acceptance and expectation of death at the end of "28. Oh my afflicted, solitary soul." Pulter understands that the sorrow and suffering experienced in the nigredo are necessary for the successful completion of the alchemical work, and balance seems restored at the end of the poem (but only delicately poised on the end rhymes of "desire" and "choir"):

> And as they were to me of infinite price
> So now they planted are in paradise
> Where their immaculate, pure, virgin souls
> Are now enthroned above the stars or poles
> Where they enjoy all fullness of desire
> Oh when shall I increase that heavenly choir?
> ("28. Oh my afflicted, solitary soul" 26-31)

Pulter seems to accept the "revolution" of "life, and death, and life" ("47. Why art thou sad at the approach of night" 11-12), and she reconciles the opposites life and death by the end of the poem by juxtaposing an image of death with an image of rebirth and continuation of life in a better place. Her children may have died, her "seven fair branches" may have been torn away from her "weeping vine," but they are better off now as they are "planted ... in paradise" ("28. Oh my afflicted, solitary soul" 24, 23, 27). Unlike the speaker, who still needs to go through a few cycles of refinement, her children are "immaculate, pure, virgin," and so ready to join the "heavenly choir" (28, 31).

But despite the hopeful lines in which the poem ends, the poem as a whole is unstable, and barely able to provide Pulter with the consolation expected from its writing. The

seventeenth-century "anxiety over grief as a sin," which afflicted particularly mothers who have lost children (Long 255), helps to explain Pulter's contradictory feelings when she writes about grief. Excessively mourning the death of a child would be associated with an unwillingness to accept God's will, as well as suggesting that the grieving parent loved the child more than she loved God. Clarke brings to our attention the volumes published during the seventeenth century aimed at bereaved parents, and the texts' particular concern over bereaved mothers, considered more inclined to transgress the boundaries of the adequate expression of grief ("A heart terrifying Sorrow" 67). These texts directly influenced mothers (and often fathers) writing about the deaths of their children, as they struggled to maintain a balance "in the attitudes to and expressions of parental grief" in their writing ("A heart terrifying Sorrow" 74, 67). Exploring particularly early modern women's spiritual journals, Clarke reminds us that no matter how "private these documents were intended to be," there was still "extraordinary pressure from seventeenth-century religious culture to render these accounts orthodox" ("A heart terrifying Sorrow" 82); even when dealing with grief over the deaths of their children, early modern parents still had to find a divine justification for their experience.

Pulter also struggles with what may be considered adequate in terms of expressing sorrow over the deaths of her children, and turns to literary alchemy in hopes to achieve balance through alchemy's concern with the reconciliation of opposites. Archer suggests that "the womb/tomb analogy" in "41. The Invocation of the Elements" "is stark and unsettling" (10): "I ask no pyramid, nor stately tomb;/Do but involve me in thy spacious womb" ("41. The Invocation of the Elements" 79-80). But we can also see this as, perhaps, an attempt to effect an alchemical reconciliation between the opposites "womb" and "tomb," between life and death, through

Pulter's use of the rhymed couplet. Both terms were also names for the alchemical vessel in different times of the opus. During the nigredo, the vessel was often referred to as the "tomb" where putrefaction would take place. In later stages of the opus, the philosopher's stone would be "conceived, generated and born" in the same alchemical vessel, which would then be, paradoxically, known as a womb (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 219).

The first stage of the alchemical opus is marked by suffering and sacrifice, and the alchemist understood that this difficult phase was essential in order to "gain the wisdom and humility necessary for illumination" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 136). Pulter understands the necessity of this stage, and uses personal images of decay and death to reflect her own personal nigredo, in hopes to complete this difficult phase and achieve the ultimate transformation at the end of the opus. But instead of focusing on the consolation and healing achieved with the attainment of the goal of the opus, Pulter consistently returns to the suffering and pain of the nigredo, suggesting that she is, perhaps, very much stuck in this endless cycle of grief. Jayne Archer suggests that Pulter "wrote about grief in order to transform her grief" (10), and concludes that this transformation is, in fact, never really achieved. Writing about grief thus also allows Pulter to show the limitations of devotional poetry to effectively transform suffering and pain.

Calcination, another alchemical term Pulter frequently turns to in her poetry,[24] involved heating the substances in the vessel to reduce them to powder or dust, thus rendering the physical matter porous for the introduction of the mercurial water.[25] Mirroring the process from practical alchemy, calcination in spiritual alchemy would make spiritual matter "receptive to the influx of

24 For an analysis of Pulter's use of calcination, see Jayne Archer's article "A 'Perfect Circle'? Alchemy in the Poetry of Hester Pulter."

25 The mercurial water would cleanse the putrefied matter in the alembic and transform the black nigredo into the white albedo (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 53).

the divine spirit" by reducing the "human soul to a state of utter despair" (Archer 5). The alchemist had to deal with this "confused mass of himself or herself" at the beginning of the opus in order to be later "cleansed by the work" (Martin 27) and achieve a more refined and perfected form. For Pulter, pain, grief, and death all "calcine," all reduce "flesh and bones to dust" ("Emblem 3. That many heliotropians there be" 35), as she tries to make herself and her poetic matter ready to receive the divine spirit in order to become "perfect and sublimed" ("39. Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 30). As Pulter has shown us through her textual alchemy, however, this is easier said than done.

CHAPTER TWO – *ALBEDO*

"But yet (alas) what comfort's in this light
That is alternately pursued by night?"
("44. A Solitary Discourse" 11-12)

In alchemy, to refine is "to purify a metal (or soul) by removing defects and impurities and raising it to a more subtle or spiritual state" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 170) with each iteration of the cycle of *solve et coagula* (dissolution and coagulation). As alchemical texts describe the alchemist working through the stages of the opus, purifying the matter in the vessel, the philosopher's stone in these texts, growing and transforming inside the vessel, also becomes associated with the practitioner's own process of transformation (Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks* 10). The "evolving 'stone' becomes the symbol for, or direct reflection of, stages in the subject's inner purification" (Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks* 10). Pulter's own "evolving 'stone'," the progress of her writing, also becomes a reflection of her own stages of inner transformation. Pulter's process of personal and spiritual refinement revolves around her need to transform her sinful self, which "in Adam fell from glory" ("44. A Solitary Discourse" 79) into a more perfected and purified form.

The next stage of the alchemical opus, the albedo or white stage, is attained after cleansing the matter in the vessel from impurities, and the advent of the colour white signals the successful achievement of this stage and creation of the white stone or elixir, which can transmute base metals into silver; when the matter in the alchemical vessel reaches the albedo, "it has become pure and spotless" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 5). In Chapter 1 we saw how

Pulter's nigredo was conflicted because of her difficulties in reconciling her ambiguous feelings towards life and death; Pulter's movement from the darkness of the nigredo into the light of the albedo is not without its own difficulties. In this chapter, I turn to Pulter's struggles with questions of innocence, purity, and perfection. I argue that Pulter uses the albedo, an unattainable state in Pulter's rendition, to show the impossibility of achieving these qualities on earth, even through literary efforts. Writing through this alchemical prism allows Pulter, once again, to show the limits of poetry to truly give consolation and transform, but in the case of the albedo, it also, paradoxically, helps Pulter to keep going. Pulter's exploration of the white stage of the alchemical opus focuses on the erratic and ever-changing nature of the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Pulter is as interested in showing the struggles of her poetic persona as she is in focusing on the potential for purification, thus making this woman writer's perspective a jarring one.

The albedo is symbolized in alchemical tradition by "all things pure, white or silver" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 5) such as the moon or Luna, the virgin goddess Diana, snow, the lily, the white rose, the swan, and the dove. The white stone or elixir, obtained at this stage, is also represented by a variety of symbols associated with white, radiant light, and purity. The concentration of the colour white and symbols which we can ascribe to the albedo in Pulter's cycle of "Aurora" poems suggests that in Pulter's rendering of the alchemical opus, she appropriates the figure of Aurora,[26] the goddess of dawn, and many of the symbols already associated with her,[27] to illustrate the arrival of the white stage. Alchemical tradition states that during the albedo the adept is led into the "dawning of consciousness" after the dark night of the

26 Paracelsus' alchemical treatise (published in English in 1659) was called *His Aurora and Treasure of the Philosophers* (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 233).

27 The cover of Alice Eardley's annotated edition, for example, is *Dawn with a Torch Scattering Flowers*, an image which Pulter also uses to describe Aurora.

nigredo (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 5), making Pulter's use of the figure of Aurora an even more fitting choice for representing the arrival of this stage. Pulter's opus, as discussed in Chapter 1, is gendered female, and Pulter not only appropriates female figures, but figures of mothers, to illustrate the stages of her alchemical work. Similarly to how she associates the nigredo stage with a mother and her children, "Old Night" and "her infernal brood" ("22. To Aurora [1]" 5), Pulter also associates the albedo stage with Aurora and her daughter, Astraea.[28] The endless cycle of the new morning, the "sweet" and "young" Aurora ("26. To Aurora [2]" 7), following "old Night" recalls the alchemical concept of the old giving way to the new and the circular nature of the opus itself.

But this circularity also reflects the fleeting nature of the dawn; the figure of Aurora, constantly moving in the sky, always fleeing, provides a fitting image of pursuing an impossible completion of the albedo and, as a consequence, of the opus itself. In the alchemical endeavour, Rudrum points out, there is "a strong implication of the importance of process"; "reality is not simply fixed," and there is always "the possibility of movement, development, change of state" (Rudrum, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" 334). The dynamic nature of alchemical language allows Pulter to express the ongoing process of transformation, even if the emphasis is on the incomplete nature of her opus. Pulter's paradoxical pursuit of Aurora lets her keep trying to effect change during her physical existence, even as it highlights the impossibility of truly achieving this transformation.

In the first poem of the cycle of "Aurora" poems, "3. Aurora [1]," Pulter describes the advent of the albedo with an abundance of alchemical symbols. These symbols, clustered in the first fourteen lines of the poem, reflect the white stage of the opus. In a blazon celebrating

28 Astraea is the Roman goddess of truth and justice (Eardley, *Poems* 369).

"Lovely Aurora" (1), Pulter describes the goddess of dawn as being "heavenly fair" (1), despite the "disheveled hair" (2) of someone who has just woken up:

> Lovely Aurora; oh how heavenly fair
> Does she appear with her disheveled hair?
> Pearled o'er with odors of the early east;
> How infinitely she doth our senses feast.
> She needs no gems her snowy neck to adorn;
> For what can luster add unto the Morn?
> Her right hand holds forth light unto our view,
> The other sprinkles aromatic dew
> On Flora's fragrant various-colored flowers;
> Attended by a train of fleeting Hours,
> Drawn by white palfreys, first of that kind,
> Now since produced by snuffing up the wind.
> Thus, as in silver coach she's hurled,
> She both enlightens and perfumes the world.
> ("3. Aurora [1]" 1-14)

Aurora's neck, which "needs no gems" "to adorn" it, is not only white, but "snowy." Snow was a symbol favoured by the alchemists to denote the albedo, both because of the colour white itself and because of the association of snow with purity. Snow is, of course, water frozen into a solid form, and the congelation of water into the perfected and more beautiful form of the snowflake could also be representing the transformation of the matter in the alembic into a more perfected

form. Just before the colour white of the albedo, many other colours would appear in the alchemical vessel, in an intermediate stage known as the peacock's tail or *cauda pavonis*. All of these colours would eventually be integrated into a perfect white, signalling the completion of the stage. Flora's "various-colored flowers" could be a reference to the multitude of colours of the peacock's tail appearing in the vessel just before the actual appearance of the colour white (represented in the poem by the "white palfreys"). The "silver coach" being pulled by the white horses suggests the transforming power of the white stone or elixir, which could transform base metals into silver.

In stark contrast with the previous stage, the putrid smells of the grave-like "dunghill earth" ("12. The Garden" 183) of the nigredo give way to "odors of the early east" and "fragrant" flowers ("3. Aurora [1]" 3, 9) in the albedo. At this stage of the opus, Abraham reminds us, the body of the stone "smells fragrant and has attained to a spiritual state where it is no longer subject to sin or decay" (*Alchemical Imagery* 5). After the "stinking putrefaction of the coffin" during the nigredo, the advent of sweet fragrances tells the alchemist that the matter of the stone has been cleansed, purified, and brought to "the resurrection of the white stage" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 81). The figure of Aurora seems to embody the albedo, and Aurora's arrival suggests that transformation in the poetic vessel is occurring, and that the alchemical opus is following its expected course.

The second line of "3. Aurora [1]," however, raises the question that this chapter is also asking: does Aurora, in fact, appear? Is the albedo stage achieved in Pulter's poetry? Rather than celebrating the completion of the white stage, the second line of the poem seems to be asking if the colour white has, in fact, appeared in the vessel. Have Pulter and her speaker actually

managed to achieve the purified state, "no longer subject to sin" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 5), required for the completion of the albedo? In her analysis of Pulter's cycle of poems entitled "The Circle," Jayne Archer suggests that Pulter returns again and again to the circle, the symbol of eternity and of the completion of the alchemical opus, in her poetry (3). But Pulter's *opus alchymicum*, Archer argues, is "not a perfect circle," and it is, as such, never really complete (10). This "flaw" in the very core of her alchemical work is what "impels Pulter to keep on writing, to turn and return to the circle" (Archer 10). Extending this idea also to Pulter's "Aurora" poems and the white stage of the opus, we can agree that Pulter, despite her efforts, seems to be struggling to achieve completion of her alchemical work. The albedo stage with its abundance of light and white is anxiously expected, beautifully imagined and described, but not necessarily achieved.

The "aromatic dew" (8) present in the description of the sun rising in "3. Aurora [1]" recalls the dew in Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," and the occurrence of dew has an alchemical significance for both poets.[29] Dew was a symbol associated with mercurial water, the powerful transforming substance which would transmute the nigredo into the albedo through the cleansing of the matter in the vessel (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 115). The washing by the mercurial dew always preceded the *coniunctio* or conjunction – the alchemical process where opposites were "reconciled of their differences and united" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 117,

29 "When in the East the Morning Ray
Hangs out the Colours of the Day,
The Bee through these known Allies hums,
Beating the Dian with its Drumms.
Then Flow'rs their drowsie Eylids raise,
Their Silken Ensigns each displayes,
And dries its Pan yet dank with Dew,
And fills its Flask with Odours new."
(Marvell, "Upon Appleton House" 289-296)

35). Pulter hints that a union, a *chemical wedding* in the alchemical lexicon, between Aurora and "that illustrious star" (15), the sun, would take place after the "aromatic dew" (8) sprinkled by Aurora has purified the matter in the poetic vessel. The chemical wedding is one of the central concepts of the opus, and is symbolized by the union of a white woman (Aurora, in this case) and a red man (also symbolized by the sun, and in this poem, "Delia"). From the union taking place in the wedding, the philosopher's stone would be born, signalling the successful completion of the opus.

The union of the chemical wedding is, however, replaced by Pulter in "3. Aurora [1]" with the suggestion of rape, which implies a union not of conciliation and peace, but of violence and strife. The sun is "filled with love and rage" (21) at Aurora's fleeing from him, and he chases her over the sky with "furious speed" (23), "[l]ashing" his horses "until they bleed" (24). The word "rape" is used later in the poem (albeit in a different context), and reinforces the image of sexual violence evoked in this section.[30] Alchemical narratives would often make use of violent and disturbing images (Roberts, G. 71), and Pulter would not have strayed far from alchemical convention by portraying the opus through images of sexual violence. The couple which unites in the chemical wedding is itself often referred to as the "quarreling couple" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 141) before the opposing principles which they represent are reconciled and united. Sulphur, which stands for the "male, hot, dry, [and] active" principles of the opus would be united with its opposite mercury (quicksilver or *argent vive*), which represents the "female, cold, moist, [and] receptive" aspects (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 141). Instead of reflecting in the wedding a reconciliation of opposites, however, Pulter's union between the "virgin coy" Aurora

30 "Presenting death in this most horridst shape,/Then of my reason straight they make a rape" ("3. Aurora [1]" 45-46).

and "wanton" Delia (20, 19) is far from conciliatory – if it has happened at all – and would not have yielded the true philosopher's stone. Abraham reminds us that if the alchemist tried to hurry the alchemical work, or made an error during the process, the opus would not be completed; the "birth" of the stone would be "aborted," and would "fail to come to fruition" (*Alchemical Imagery*, 2).

The appearance of the colour red in Aurora's "blushing" ("3. Aurora [1]" 20) hints at the possible achievement of the red philosopher's stone from a successful chemical wedding. The red stone is created by flushing the white stone, obtained after the successful completion of the albedo, with red, and the mingling of red and white in the image of "blushing" is a symbol of this process (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 29). The "vermilion drops" (25) falling from the sky as a result of Delia's "[l]ashing" his horses (24) also suggest a reference to the red stone or red elixir – the stone's liquid equivalent. But Pulter's use of the term "vermilion," as shown by Archer in her discussion of the poem "21. The Circle [2]," is deceiving. Archer has analyzed Pulter's use of "vermilion" to refer to the stone's potential for turning poisonous if not prepared correctly:

> Pulter understands vermilion as the union of mercury and sulphur – 'mercuric sulphide', as it is now called – and draws upon the use of vermilion to describe the Stone in its final stages of completion, when it turns a blood-red colour, and when, paradoxically, it becomes the most potent of poisons. Chymicks, Pulter seems to suggest, focus on the literal meanings of mercury and sulphur – rather than their philosophical, idealized forms – and thus concoct poisons that bring poverty, disease and death, where they had promised to confer wealth, health and eternal life. (Archer 8)

Similarly, the union between Aurora and Delia would have dangerous consequences if executed with the wrong intentions in mind. Pulter's use of "vermilion" in close proximity with this union suggests that if the chemical wedding happened under the circumstances described, with anger, violence, and a forced union rather than an agreed conciliation, it would not lead to the successful completion of the opus, and the elixir produced would become a "fretting[31] vermil poison" ("21. The Circle [2]" 8) instead of a healing medicine.

In either case, of a union that has not happened, or one which did not take place under the right circumstances, the end result is the same: the opus has not been completed. The poem's turn to commentary on the contemporary social and political situation reinforces this, as it plunges the speaker back into the nigredo with its renewed references to "horrid Night" ("3. Aurora [1]" 32) and darkness. The return to the nigredo could have meant that a cycle of *solve et coagula* had been completed, and is restarting at a more refined level; the alchemist was, after all, expected to "always dissolve the stone just won" and "never rest or stop at the *coniunctio*[32]" (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 101). In Pulter's rendition, however, the defeated tone of the poem only confirms that the cycle has gone back to its beginning, and the speaker is brought back into the seemingly endless cycle of suffering that Pulter associates with the black stage. Closing the couplet "Unto my troubled fancy, then again/They take advantage from my grief or pain" ("3. Aurora [1]" 43-44) with the rhyme "again/pain" reinforces this return to suffering. The early placement of the poem in the manuscript, the third poem in the sequence, also suggests only an early attempt at completing the opus.

Like many of Pulter's lyrics, "3. Aurora [1]" ends with the speaker turning to God in the

31 "Gnawing, corroding, consuming, wasting" (*OED*, "fretting, adj." 1).
32 The alchemical process of conjunction or union of opposites.

final lines. As if reminding us that she is still composing religious poetry, Pulter brings us to one final attempt at consolation at the end of the poem by reminding herself (and the reader) of the promise of heavenly peace after the earthly strife she has just described. But the poem's final lines seem to distance the speaker even more from God instead of bringing her closer to his solace. The repetition of "then" reminds us that this consolation is yet to come, and only after death:

> For then I placed shall be in such a sphere
> Where Night's associates I shall never fear.
> Oh if I once could lose these rags of clay
> Then I (poor I) should far outshine the day,
> Then that great God that ancient is of days
> Should be the alpha and omega of my praise.
> ("3. Aurora [1]" 51-56)

At first glance, the poem seems to end on a hopeful note. But Pulter's poetic experiment is, in fact, frustrated: the albedo has not yet been achieved, the speaker's pain has only been partially transformed, and consolation seems further away than ever; the speaker's "poor heart" is still "full of grief" ("3. Aurora [1]" 49). Like everything else in the physical world, even Pulter's own writing, the "sad fancies" ("38. To My Dear J. P." 4) of her mind, "cannot yield relief" ("40. My soul, why art thou full of trouble" 4).

Pulter seems to accept her suffering as God's plan, as would have been expected of her as a seventeenth-century pious woman (Long 255), but this acceptance does not come submissively and willingly. Pulter's concentration on grief in her poetry, as opposed to the consolation

(supposedly) offered by a poetic prayer, allows her to question the effectiveness of the religious lyric (and even, perhaps, of religion itself) to truly transform suffering and provide relief on earth. From an alchemical perspective, instead of focusing on the completion of the opus, and on the achievement of the philosopher's stone, which would perfect all things and provide healing, Pulter opens to scrutiny the process of achieving the stone, the tortuous journey towards purification and perfection, often showing the flaws of this process as she exposes her own human limitations. Stanton Linden traces the transformation of alchemical imagery in the seventeenth century, from its previous association with satire, to the "emergence of a new pattern," which "places primary emphasis on change, purification, moral transformation, and spirituality" ("Mystical Alchemy" 79). Pulter pushes this imagery in even newer directions that stress the difficulties of achieving the "change, purification, moral transformation, and spirituality" expected from this turn to literary alchemy; she highlights the sharp edges of the endeavour to show an inherent conflict about death, innocence, religion, and the writing of poetry itself.

In the next poem of the "Aurora" cycle, "22. To Aurora [1]," Pulter tries to conciliate her conflicted relationship with innocence and guilt through her textual alchemy. The speaker of the poem tells us that she would have no reason to utter her "sad complaints" (8) if innocent lives were not disturbed by those who take advantage of "men's miseries" (6) in times of political and social conflict: "Did guilty only suffer, I would cease/These sad complaints and ever hold my peace" (7-8). But the conflicts of the Civil War spared neither guilty nor innocent, and she cannot "hold [her] peace"; she needs to highlight the injustice taking place. Through "harmony of rhyme" (Hunter, "Form as Meaning" 157), the words "cease" and "peace" are yoked together by

their similarity of sound, invoking the sense that "peace" has in fact "ceased" because of the political and social disarray. Eardley points out that Pulter was especially concerned with family breakdown and the effects of the war on women and children, left behind as husbands and fathers went away to fight (*Poems* 23). Pulter also blames her own separation from her children, and the "ceas[ing]" of her familial "peace," on the nation's conflicts.

Kate Chedgzoy suggests that the juxtaposition of Pulter's personal and political poems reveals "[r]hetorical and thematic similarities" that "demonstrate the intertwining of public and domestic" in Pulter's poetry (144). The "political and familial aspects of [Pulter's] writing are often interwoven," even "within individual poems" (Chedgzoy 144). Pulter's verse often mingles her own personal pain and public grief: she suffers over the deaths of her children as she and sympathizers of Charles I also suffer over the regicide. The seventeenth-century manuscript lyric, Susan Wiseman reminds us, is not the "self-enclosed poem" we have come to know in the post-Romantic period, but is a lyric that has been "pressed into polemical service" by contemporary social and political situations (Wiseman, "Women's poetry" 128). Pulter's poems show a concern with the effects of the war on the lives of women and children and, "pressed into polemical service," comment on how war and political upheaval affect even those who are innocent, and not directly involved in the armed conflicts.

The speaker's call to Aurora in "22. To Aurora [1]" is disturbed, however, by doubts regarding the speaker's own innocence:

> Though innocence I hold still in my breast,
>
> Yet she[33] (ay me) disturbs my quiet rest.
>
> But I forget myself, what do I mean?

33 "Old Night."

For who (alas) can say their heart is clean?

("22. To Aurora [1]" 9-12)

The pivot in "Yet," directly followed by another pivot in "But," creates tension mid-poem as the speaker questions her own innocence: is her own "heart" really "clean"? Has she achieved refinement with the arrival of Aurora in the albedo? Is she even worthy of achieving this purity? The speaker's petition to both Aurora and Astraea, which began as a request to "conquer" external "fiends" (17), is transformed into an appeal to reconcile her own internal doubts. The position of "22. To Aurora [1]" in the manuscript implies that Pulter's poetic opus may have already gone through a few cycles of refinement, but the doubt still present in the poem suggests that transformation is far from being complete. Only with the advent of "Sweet Light[34] and Truth[35]" ("22. To Aurora [1]" 18) in the white stage, which the speaker (still) anxiously awaits as the repetition of "Come then" (13, 17) suggests, can her internal conflict be laid to true "quiet rest" (10).

Conflict, be it public or personal, is far from absent from Pulter's poetry, and in the apparent order and resolution of many of her poems lie moments of doubt, struggle, and confusion. Hunter reminds us that rhyming couplets "privilege the balancing itself" ("Form as Meaning" 157), rather than attempting a compromise between opposing principles, and as Pulter experiments with the rhyming couplet, she too seems to realize that the couplet simply "refuses to resolve" (Hunter, "Form as Meaning" 160). The couplet which closes "22. To Aurora [1]," for instance, attempts to balance two very distinct notions: "Come then and conquer these infernal fiends,/Sweet Light and Truth, my two eternal friends" (17-18). The opposites "fiends" and

34 Aurora.
35 Astraea.

"friends" do not exactly rhyme, despite the proximity of sound, suggesting that despite the hopeful note on which the poem ends, Pulter does not expect an easy resolution. Rather than aiming for a resolution (at least in this life), Pulter chooses to embrace and expose the conflict. Similar to what Marvell was doing in his alchemical poetry, Pulter also seems to use conflict to create the "necessary momentum" that will sustain her poetry as "a living creation" with the potential for actual transformation, and not merely a "lifeless image" of the outside world (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 294). Instead of describing, then, the actual achievement of the white stage, Pulter portrays an idealized image of the albedo, and her own struggle to work to achieve it. She knows what she needs to achieve, she can describe it, she can almost touch it, but she knows that she must keep refining. Paradoxically, writing about what she needs to accomplish, even if knowing that she cannot effectively do it, seems to spur her on and help her to keep going.

Pulter strengthens her association of the albedo with Aurora in "22. To Aurora [1]" through her depiction of Aurora's daughter, Astraea, who is described as having "alabaster" skin (15). Alabaster, a shiny white stone, is a symbol of the "white stone of the philosophers" obtained at the albedo (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 4). The birth of Astraea in this poem can be interpreted as the birth of the white stone itself, and the product of a successful white stage. Although Astraea is the daughter of Aurora and Astreus in Pulter's account (Eardley, *Poems* 369), the father figure is suggestively absent from the poems themselves, and Pulter focuses, instead, on the relationship between mother and daughter, and on the purity and perfection of both female figures. But Pulter's association of mother and daughter with the white stage also serves to reassert that Pulter's albedo is impossibly unattainable, and both Aurora and Astraea

come to represent, like the albedo stage itself, idealized symbols of purity and perfection which Pulter can only strive to attain, but cannot really achieve. Aurora is a mother, but she is also a "[f]air rosy *virgin*" ("22. To Aurora [1]" 1, my emphasis), and is, therefore, a mother who is still young, a "sweet maid" (13), and potentially free of sin (with echoes of the Virgin Mary herself); Aurora is a direct contrast with the image Pulter usually portrays of her speaker as a grieving and sinful mother. Seeing as Pulter outlived almost all of her fifteen children, the already idealized figure of Aurora assumes an even more powerful (and poignant) image once we realize that Astraea is Aurora's "immortal issue" (13), and unlike Pulter's own daughters, cannot die.

Fooling her reader into believing that Aurora has arrived in "26. To Aurora [2]," the next installment in the cycle of "Aurora" poems, Pulter once again describes the dawn in terms that recall the advent of the albedo, complete with the "aromatic scent" ("26. To Aurora [2]" 4) that accompanies the arrival of the white colour in the vessel. Pulter even invites her "sad eyes" to "[l]ook but up and see" (1, 5) that the day is dawning and pushing away the darkness of the nigredo. "But oh" (13), it turns out that Aurora and the albedo are not arriving at all:

> Oh that I once could see that lovely sight;
> Astraea naked in the arms of Light.
> But oh, I ne'er can see it till above
> I am involved in endless joy and love.
> ("26. To Aurora [2]" 11-14)

The first fourteen lines of the poem almost stand on their own as a sonnet, complete with the incorporation of the "twist or turn" in the last couplet (Dubrow 25). The sonnet, Heather Dubrow reminds us, "too often dwells in and on loss," traditionally of a woman, whether it be her death,

her loss, "or the permutations on [her] disappearance and absence" (25). In Pulter's quasi-sonnet, the sense of loss comes from the feeling of incompleteness, of longing for Aurora to arrive, only to realize that there is still work to be done, and (many) more lines of poetry are needed.

Comparing couplet poetry from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the earlier sixteenth-century sonnet, Hunter suggests that, in the sonnet, writers attempted to "summarize something complex into a neat and tidy short conclusion" ("Poetry on the Page" 189), but that couplet poetry began with a simple idea and complicated it in the course of the entire poem. Pulter's potential sonnet is not able to merely summarize and celebrate Aurora's arrival (the achievement of the albedo is not that simple), and Pulter explodes the initial fourteen lines into a longer 38-line poem. As Rachel Dunn has suggested when discussing Pulter's emblems, the civil wars' "fragmentation of despair,[36]" "which permeated and transformed established genres" during the period, does not transform Pulter's emblems in the same way (64). Despair, instead of fragmenting the emblem, makes Pulter expand its traditional three-part structure with the inclusion of a fourth section at the end (Dunn 63); despair, in Pulter's emblems, "leads not to formal fragmentation," but, instead, to a revision of form, and "her poems actually become larger" (Dunn 64).

A similar revision is happening in "26. To Aurora [2]," with the use of "View then" signalling the start of a whole new section of the poem: "View then those robes which doth her[37] limbs enfold;/Rich purple fringed with never-wasting gold" (15-16). The speaker's eyes are asked, in a defeated tone, to "[v]iew *then*" (my emphasis) Aurora's robes, as the poem starts to look to a future achievement of the albedo and of the philosopher's stone, as opposed to an actual

36 She credits the term "fragmentation of despair" to Nigel Smith.
37 Aurora.

completion of the opus. The speaker has already stated that she cannot really see Aurora (or obtain the stone) "till above" (13), in heaven, when she is "involved in endless joy and love" (14). The speaker's eyes can only contemplate Aurora (and the possibility of achieving the stone) from a distance, and the purple colour of the robe here is especially significant. Purple is the colour associated with the clothing worn by royalty or those of imperial rank, as well as being part of dawn's own hues. But the purple robe (or purple tincture) is also another symbol for the red elixir or the red stone (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 165), with the image of the king putting on the purple robe being one of the most frequently recurring symbols for the attainment of the philosopher's stone (*Alchemical Imagery* 160). In Pulter's gendered opus, however, it is not the king who wears the purple robe, but the female figure of Aurora, depicted from a distance. The purple robe is also "fringed with never-wasting gold" (16), which suggests a touch of gold trying to show through, a hint of a final transformation happening, but which is as fleeting as Aurora herself, who moves on across the sky, taking the potential stone and "gold" along with her.

Pulter's blazon celebrating Aurora's beauty in "26. To Aurora [2]" also calls special attention to another "fair" (9) feature of her body: Aurora's "fair breast, which in her prime of youth/Gave nourishment unto eternal Truth" (9-10). Aurora, a "virgin" ("22. To Aurora [1]") mother, breastfeeds Astraea, a possible symbol for the white stone, and from this combination, another symbol of the albedo emerges: *virgin's milk*. This "milk" was used to feed the "infant stone" in the vessel as it developed (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 211), and was also a symbol of the white elixir itself, produced during the albedo. The association of virgins, mothers, and milk brings us once again to Pulter's gendered opus, and its particular focus on mothers. In poem

"37. Aurora [2]," the last of the poems in the "Aurora" cycle, Pulter contrasts the two mothers, "old Night" (12) and Aurora, as she juxtaposes the nigredo and the albedo. The "lovely sight" of "Astraea naked in the arms of Light" ("26. To Aurora [2]" 11, 12) gives way to the image of "those black embryos with their dam" ("37. Aurora [2]" 12). The contrast between Aurora's "immortal issue" ("22. To Aurora [1]" 13) and "Night" and her "embryos" is unsettling ("37. Aurora [2]" 12): the use of "embryos" in this poem suggests children who have not been born versus the successful birth of the stone, or "philosophical child," in the albedo, making us question once more the true achievement of the white stage.

The speaker hopes that "truth, and light, and life" will "still prevail" over "Night, Death, [and] Error" ("37. Aurora [2]" 10, 22), if only Aurora would arrive and "but show the luster of [her] eye" (11). Astraea, the "eternal Truth" ("26. To Aurora [2]" 10), would rule over earthly "Error"; Aurora, "light," would substitute for "Night," and "life" in heaven would finally win over "Death." But "Night," which is also another symbol of the nigredo stage, still "laps [the speaker] in her sable veil" (4); this black covering may refer to the sable robe or black shirt, also a symbol of the black nigredo (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 176). Pulter turns back to the nigredo in the last movement of the "Aurora" cycle, suggesting that the albedo may be further away than when she started in "3. Aurora [1]." Pulter began the "Aurora" cycle in "3. Aurora [1]" already questioning the arrival of "Lovely Aurora": "Does she appear with her disheveled hair?" ("3. Aurora [1]" 2). In "37. Aurora [2]," the speaker's question changes, but the doubt remains, and is, perhaps, even more despairing than before: "Lovely Aurora, *when* wilt thou appear/And with thy lightsome looks my spirit cheer?" ("37. Aurora [2]" 1-2, my emphasis); many cycles of refining through writing have brought Pulter and her speaker no closer to

achieving the white stage of the opus.

Victoria Burke points out that writing was an important activity for all Protestants, and conformists to the Church of England, such as Pulter, "saw devotional writing as an essential aspect of holy living" (47). Helen Wilcox tells us that one of the "more deliberate motives" for early modern women to write devotionally was "a powerful sense of duty to God," and highlights the relationship women writers saw between petitioning God for help and singing his praise in thanks ("My Hart Is Full" 452-453). But devotional verse was often a complicated arena for the early modern woman writer, and in "34. To Aurora [3]," Pulter's speaker is struggling to justify her own poetic endeavours:

> Thus (oh my God) each small, despised insect
> Buzz in my ears, that I thy laws neglect.
> In doing what they're made for, every fly
> Fulfils thy will; (woe's me) so do not I.
> I was created to set forth thy praise,
> Yet, like a wretch, I fool away my days
> In fruitless grief or moiling in the earth,
> Forgetting my poor soul's celestial birth.
> I know I have a spark of heavenly fire
> Within my breast; else what moves this desire?
> ("34. To Aurora [3]" 13-22)

The speaker feels as if she is failing in her duty to "set forth [God's] praise" through devotional writing, and spends her hours, instead, in "fruitless grief," composing poems that do nothing but

expose her pain and suffering. Sarah Ross has brought to our attention that Pulter often defines her lyrics "*as* sighs" and that she also connects her poems to sighs in the titles of both her collections of verse[38] ("Tears, Bezoars and Blazing Comets" 6). The "sighs and groans" in "34. To Aurora [3]" can also be associated with the poems themselves, and the speaker laments that she can only try to "reach" "heaven" with these imperfect utterances ("34. To Aurora [3]" 24); the speaker is, after all, still attached to a physical existence, "clogged with flesh and bones" ("34. To Aurora [3]" 23), and there is only so much that writing, like any earthly activity, can really do.

The speaker almost convinces herself that she should not be judged for spending her time writing about grief and suffering; once she is in heaven, all would be transformed by "Christ's pure blood" ("34. To Aurora [3]" 49) anyway:

> Then who dares ask, whenas I shine in glory,
> How I have spent my frail and mortal story?
> When we have drunk not Lethe but Christ's pure blood,
> All shall forgotten be but what is good,
> All shall be known that will increase our joy,
> Nothing remembered that will cause annoy.
> ("34. To Aurora [3]" 47-52)

The penultimate line of the poem recalls the end of "39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge," where Pulter implies that once in heaven "[a]ll this (and more) we then shall know" (52), including the "eternal essence" (59), or the elixir. The blood of Christ, mentioned in the

38 *Poems Breathed Forth by the Noble Hadassah* and *The Sighs of a Sad Soul Emblematically Breathed Forth by the Noble Hadassah.*

lines above, also had alchemical significance, and was associated with the elixir itself. Unlike the water from the river Lethe in Hades, which would simply make the dead forget their lives on earth after drinking it (Eardley, *Poems* 376), the "Christly elixir" (Mascetti 314) would be capable of a more sophisticated transformation, and would be capable, perhaps, of transforming even the imperfect writings of an earthly poet. These last lines do have a touch of irony, however, as Pulter's poems will remain after she is reunited with her spirit in "eternal glory" (46). Her lines will stay to remind readers of all those things that "cause annoy" (52) to her; Pulter's "fruitless grief" was not so "fruitless," after all.

CHAPTER THREE – *RUBEDO*

"Nor can the quintessence of Bacchus' liquor
Nor the elixir, make my spirit quicker"
("38. To My Dear J. P." 5-6)

The ultimate goal of alchemy was to produce the famous philosopher's stone, the mystical substance capable of turning base metals into gold (or the flawed self into an illumined and perfected being). Traditionally, in the third and final stage of the alchemical opus – the rubedo or red stage – the white stone obtained after the cleansing of the albedo would be flushed or dyed with red, yielding the red philosopher's stone. The red stone or elixir was able to "restore man to perfect health and consciousness of God" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 159) and, as such, was considered a universal medicine capable of curing all ills and of renewing the world (Simonds, "My charms crack not" 550). For many alchemists the importance of the stone lay in these "universal curative powers" rather than in the stone's capacity to produce gold (Simonds, "My charms crack not" 546).

Noting the analogy between medicinal alchemy and poetry made during the Renaissance, Peggy Simonds points out that authors such as Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe associated the writing of poetry with the search for the elixir, a "universal panacea for human ills" ("Love is a spirit all compact of fire" 137). Shakespeare's intention when writing the poem *Venus and Adonis*, for instance, was "to demonstrate that poetry itself was like alchemy and could also produce the Elixir or the universal medicine to cure human suffering"; in the particular case of Shakespeare's poem, the aim was arguably to cure suffering caused by love (Simonds, "Love is a spirit all compact of fire" 134). Yaakov Mascetti suggests that George Herbert, whose work

greatly influenced Pulter's own writing, intended to create within the verses of his clearly alchemical poem "The Elixir" "a unique process of spiritual and alchemical renovation" (302). When the speaker of "The Elixir" is finally able to achieve an enlightened state through the intervention of God, the "poetic prayer" becomes the means of perfection; the poem itself becomes "the very tincture that can refine" both the speaker's and the poet's consciousness of God (Mascetti 314), and potentially even the reader's. Similar to other early modern writers, Pulter also turns to poetry hoping that she can distill her own "eternal essence" ("39. The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge" 59) or "elixir" ("38. To My Dear J. P." 6), which would allow for healing, consolation, and perfection through writing.

Unlike Herbert's "poetic prayer," however, Pulter's own efforts are often frustrated; if the black and white stages of her alchemical opus are already seemingly impossible to achieve, the red stage appears to be even further beyond Pulter's grasp. The colours black and white figure abundantly in Pulter's poems, as discussed in the previous two chapters, and Pulter refers to a variety of symbols associated with the nigredo and albedo stages of the alchemical cycle to enact her own unique and gendered poetic opus. The colour red, on the other hand, is (perhaps not surprisingly) scarce in comparison to the other two colours, as are the symbols traditionally associated with the final stage of the opus and with the philosopher's stone itself. In this chapter, I argue that this sporadic appearance of the colour red and rubedo imagery in Pulter's verse reasserts that, in Pulter's view, the alchemical-poetic endeavour can never be fully completed on earth. The philosopher's stone, even if briefly achieved through Pulter's alchemical poetry, simply does not provide lasting transformation during our physical existence. Poetry is, after all, also a product of a flawed physical existence, and can only do so much.

As such, there is no one poem or cluster of poems which we can readily associate with the last stage of the alchemical opus, but only mentions of the colour red and allusions to rubedo imagery at specific points in certain poems. However, an alchemical reading of these few and interspersed appearances is still possible, even if Pulter only uses these references to show the difficulties of achieving the philosopher's stone. The unicorn and the phoenix,[39] red flowers, and precious gemstones, such as the pearl, can all be seen as potential references to the philosopher's stone in Pulter's poetry. What ties together Pulter's use of these symbols is not only their colour or alchemical significance, but also how they are all used to represent the interruption or incompleteness of the healing process: the stone's medicinal properties often fall short of providing lasting solace in Pulter's poems. The rare moments in which Pulter alludes to the rubedo or the stone tend not to reflect an accomplishment, but to reinforce a sense of failure. Through her unfinished (and ultimately unsuccessful) poetic opus, Pulter continues to show the limits of textual alchemy to really transform, console, and heal on earth.

The full title of the sixth poem in Pulter's manuscript, "6. Universal Dissolution, Made When I Was with Child of My 15th Child, [My Son John], I Being, [as Eve]ryone Thought, in a Consumption, 1648," adds a biographical element to the subject of healing. Added to her already fragile physical state during the lying-in period of pregnancy, Pulter also believed herself to be "in a Consumption," a disease which resulted in severe weight loss due to the abnormality or loss of bodily humours (*OED* 2.a). As its title suggests, the poem deals with dissolution on every scale: local and universal, personal and public, real and imaginary. "[A]ll sublunary things decay" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 108) in the poem, including Pulter's physical body, as it undergoes its own very real process of dissolution. From an alchemical perspective, we can

39 Both mystical animals were used in alchemical texts as symbols of the stone.

easily associate "6. Universal Dissolution" with the nigredo, and discuss it alongside the poems analyzed in Chapter 1, but the presence of the unicorn and the phoenix, two mystical "beasts" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 69) which are common symbols of the philosopher's stone, invites an analysis in the context of the stone itself. The appearance of the unicorn, associated with healing, and the phoenix, a symbol of renewal, in a poem inspired by disease and death recalls Pulter's corruption of the albedo symbols discussed in Chapter 1; the stone's curative properties, as with everything else, are corrupted in Pulter's poem.

Unicorn horns had the power to make poisonous water pure again (Eardley, *Poems* 382), and the horn's healing powers were associated with the elixir's own medicinal properties (Simonds, "My charms crack not" 550). However, there does not seem to be any healing taking place in the lines where the unicorn is mentioned in Pulter's poem:

> That beast which poisoned waters drinks with scorn
> Because she wears a cordial[40] in her horn,
> From putrefaction she her being drew,
> Corruption then at last will have his due.
> So man (alas) no cure can find in death
> When he that gave it takes away his breath.
> ("6. Universal Dissolution" 63-68)

The stone, as discussed in Chapter 2, is delicately poised between two states: it can become either a poison or a healing medicine, depending on how well the alchemical work is executed, and whether or not the alchemist's intentions are true. The first couplet in this section balances

40 "Comforting or exhilarating drink"; Pulter uses this term to refer to "antidote" or "medicine" (Eardley, *Poems*, 372).

the "poisoned waters" on the first line and the "cordial" directly below it on the second line, and holds the two properties in creative tension, thus never revealing the stone's true outcome. But the unicorn "drinks with scorn," suggesting pride and contempt, and hints at a failed experiment in producing the stone: these qualities are not those expected of the alchemist who seeks the true philosopher's stone and the wisdom of God.

The "poisoned waters" are also a possible alchemical allusion to Mercurius, which was associated with a deadly poison during the nigredo. Mercurius, or philosophical mercury (not to be confused with common mercury), was the central symbol and transformative substance in alchemy (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 124). Mercurius was present during all the stages of the opus, assuming different properties depending on the current stage of the alchemical cycle (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 124); in the black stage, the philosophical mercury was responsible for dissolving the matter of the stone into its *prima materia* (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 208). The "venomous mercurial waters" would later be transformed into the miraculous "waters of life," which would resurrect the dead matter in the vessel into new life after the albedo (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 208). In George Ripley's "The Vision,[41]" a similar situation is illustrated: from the "venome" (23) of the "Toade" (4), the poem's speaker "thus a medicine ... did make" (23), "[w]hich venome kills and saveth such as venome chance to take" (24). In the unicorn's case, however, the "venome" is never transformed into "medicine"; the substance in the vessel remains a poison and the result is only death. The unicorn, "(alas)," like the stone it represents, is created from "putrefaction" and doomed to "Corruption" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 67, 65, 66).

41 "The Vision of Sir George Ripley: Chanon of Bridlington," poem published in Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652).

Alice Eardley's footnote, in the annotated edition of Pulter's poems, tells us that Pulter's reference to putrefaction in these lines may have come from Aristotle's ideas in *De Generatione et Corruptione* (Eardley, *Poems* 68). According to Aristotle's text, "the process of decay was intimately linked to rebirth and renewal," and certain creatures were believed to be born out of the putrefying bodies of others (Eardley, *Poems* 68). We can, of course, also read this alchemically, as an allusion to the alchemical cycle which begins with death and putrefaction at the nigredo, and ends with resurrection in the final rubedo stage. In these lines, however, the alchemical cycle starts with the "putrefaction" on line 65, but ends in "Corruption" on the following line, and resurrection does not take place. The couplet's end rhymes, "drew/due," are where we expect the emphasis to be; however, the words "putrefaction" and "Corruption" not only also rhyme, but are longer, and call more attention to what is happening in the first half of the lines, emphasizing the two processes associated with death.

The poem "6. Universal Dissolution" may begin and end with the speaker trying to convince her soul not to be "sad" (1) at the decay of its physical "house of clay" (2), seeing as "all this universe must be dissolved" (176), but the speaker betrays her own lack of confidence throughout the poem. The presence of alchemical symbols associated with healing suggest that despite her seeming acceptance of the seriousness of her illness, the speaker is still thinking about potential healing and an end to suffering. As a good Christian, Pulter is always trying to convince herself that all her suffering will end once she dies and goes to heaven, but convincing her "unsettled soul" (175) is not always as easy as she hopes. Heaven awaits after death, but "man (alas) *no cure* can find in death" (my emphasis). Is this a slip of her pen or an intentional affirmation? The speaker's struggle with fearing and accepting death, always present throughout

Pulter's verse, "creeps into" (10) this poem as well. "[M]ortal man" (9) is a sinner, after all, and, like the speaker (and the poet herself), perhaps not worthy of heaven.

The mythical phoenix, another creature used in alchemy to represent the philosopher's stone, is also present in Pulter's poetry. The phoenix, the bird which resurrects from its own ashes, is a well-known symbol of renewal and rebirth, and is related to the alchemical idea that the stone, once calcined[42] in the vessel, would also be "resurrected" to its perfect form from the residual powder left after burning. Pulter's use of the phoenix in "6. Universal Dissolution," and later in "49. My heart why dost thou throb,[43]" is not, however, a representation of resurrection and new life, but an image of death:

> The phoenix on her lofty altar lies
> And willingly a virgin, victim dies;
> Her gold and purple plumes to ashes turns
> As in her aromatic pyre she burns.
> So man, that to eternity aspires,
> Conquered by death into his cause retires.
> ("6. Universal Dissolution" 41-46)

The phoenix's "gold and purple plumes," are turned "to ashes" as "she burns," as is expected of the self-immolating bird, but Pulter's phoenix does not rise again from these ashes as anticipated. The phoenix's cycle, much like Pulter's own alchemical cycle, is interrupted and incomplete: the alchemical work does not culminate "with the rise of the red phoenix" (Greenberg, *Art of Chemistry* 32) which symbolizes the achievement of the philosopher's stone, but the mystical

42 During calcination, the matter in the vessel is reduced to calx or dust after a "rapid, intense and dry heating" (Archer 5).

43 "The phoenix doth assume her funeral pyre,/And in those flagrant odors doth expire" ("49. My heart why dost thou throb" 13-14).

bird, like the stone it represents, is shown only dying and never being reborn. Pulter's description of the phoenix's feathers also alludes to the purple of the rubedo and the gold obtained after the *projectio*,[44] and reinforces the sense of loss and incompleteness in these lines: neither the stone nor the "gold" it would produce are available to the speaker.

Pulter associates "miserable man" (39) and his imperfections with those of the "creatures" (83) discussed in "6. Universal Dissolution," and suggests a connection between humanity's flaws, the finality of death, and the impossibility of resurrection. "[M]an," who "to eternity aspires" is likened to the phoenix, an immortal bird which would be able to endlessly resurrect and renovate herself. But "man," and possibly also the speaker, may not be able to achieve eternal life because of his sins. Alchemy, Linden tells us, is "splendidly equipped to represent moral transformation" in literary works, both from evil to good and, in the case of satirical works, from good (or potential good) to evil (*Darke Hierogliphicks* 24). In Pulter's case, however, alchemical imagery is itself transformed in order to represent the interruption of the transformative process. Pulter's alchemical poem does not give "wretched man" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 103) the chance to transmute himself: "his story" is simply "cut off" by "[c]onspiring Death and Time" (52). Unlike the speaker in "1. The Eclipse" who, "in Christ," "conquered Death and [Sin]" ("1. The Eclipse" 66), in this poem, the speaker, just as "man" and the phoenix, seems fated to be "[c]onquered by death" instead ("6. Universal Dissolution" 46).

Another image which Pulter uses to explore the rubedo is that of flowers, particularly the red flower. Leah Knight notes the early modern connection between the "salubrious power" associated with being in nature and its literary counterpart in pastoral poetry and "gardens of

44 The alchemical technique known as *projectio* or "projection" involved adding a small amount of powder (the philosopher's stone) to a substance in order to convert it to gold or silver (Maxwell-Stuart 33).

verse" of the period (*Reading Green* 36):

> The analogy so often made in this period between book and garden is usually understood to suggest that one might experience something of the latter through attention to the former; it is somewhat of a surprise to realize that, by imaginatively appropriating an atmosphere of verdure, such books offer themselves as not merely pleasant but as genuinely therapeutic agents and spaces in which readers might healthfully recreate themselves. (Knight, *Reading Green* 36)

Pulter's own "garden of verse" in "12. The Garden," may also be seen, perhaps, as one of these spaces. The placement of "12. The Garden" seems, at first, unusual (and rather surprising), when we consider the sequence of political poems and personal elegies that came immediately before it in the manuscript. But this curious placement is also highly suggestive in the context of Pulter's search for healing: nested between a cluster of poems lamenting the imprisonment and death of Charles I and the loss of her daughter Jane, Pulter seems to want to retreat into this garden of "flowers most fair and fresh" to escape "sad thoughts" ("12. The Garden" 3, 10); she wants, perhaps, to find therapeutic comfort from the excessive public and personal grief expressed in the previous poems.

This search for healing is supported by the many flowers extolling their "virtues" ("12. The Garden" 15) to the speaker as she walks through the garden. *Virtue*, Eardley's footnote points out, also stands for a plant's healing properties,[45] and the flowers try to convince the speaker that they "their fellows all excel," not only in "color, beauty, fashion, [and] smell" (7-8),

45 "With reference to a plant, liquid, or other substance: power to affect the body in a beneficial manner; strengthening, sustaining, or healing power" (*OED,* "virtue, n." 8.d).

but also in their capacity to provide healing or comfort. The "July flower," for example, makes her case by saying that had it not been for her capacity to "cheer the spirits and refresh the sight" (415, 463), the speaker had long ago been overcome by grief: "Nay, did I not to sadness give relief/She that decides our strife had failed with grief" (464-465). The poppy, too, is "confident" that if the speaker would only take the poppy's "flowers or seed," "t'would make/Her sleep, and rest" (240-241).

The garden was also a symbol for the "alchemist's secret vessel" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 83), and the dialogue taking place in the middle of the poem between the white lily (a symbol for the white stone) and the red rose (a symbol for the red stone) also hints at an alchemical transformation taking place in Pulter's garden of verse. The rose follows the lily in the stanza sequence, and the rose's speech begins with the suggestive mention of blushing, a symbol of the rubedo: "At this the *blood flushed* in the Rose's face" ("12. The Garden" 144, my emphasis). But when it comes to Pulter's alchemy, all is not always what it seems. The lily, representing the purity achieved with the albedo and the white stone, "brag[s]" about said "white purity" (136, 135), and about her own healing properties. The rose, whose own "noble virtues" (115) resemble the philosopher's stone's curative qualities, "boast[s]" (182) of these abilities instead of applying them in healing:

> Besides the beauty and the sweet delight,
> My flowers yield my virtues infinite.
> I cool, I purge, I comfort, and restore;
> Then who, I wonder, can desire more?
> ("12. The Garden" 202-205)

Both the lily and the rose seem to commit the sin of pride in the poem, and neither flower (or equivalent stone) seems too interested in providing the actual healing of which they "boast." Echoing the unicorn who "drinks with scorn" ("6. Universal Dissolution" 63), and the very alchemists whom Pulter criticizes for "[g]lorying to shine in silver and in gold" ("21. The Circle [2]" 7) in their alchemical pursuits, these representations of the white and red stones seem to have been corrupted by their own pride.

In the last section of her garden of verse, Pulter brings up pride to retell the Ovidian myth of Venus and Adonis, and Adonis evokes his past as "a foolish, proud, and scornful boy" (478) to talk about his transformation into the red windflower. Simonds brings to our attention the alchemical significance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* believed to be an alchemical text in disguise, and the allusions to alchemy in Shakespeare's own *Venus and Adonis* ("Love is a spirit all compact of fire" 134, 137). Pulter tells her own version of the love story in "12. The Garden," based not only on the original myth, but also, as Eardley has pointed out, on Shakespeare's poem (*Poems* 104). Simonds already makes the connection between Adonis and the philosopher's stone in Shakespeare's verse ("Love is a spirit all compact of fire" 153-154), and Pulter might have inherited the alchemical allusions of both her sources, making Adonis' transformation into a red flower another possible representation of the philosopher's stone in Pulter's rendition.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the stone is created from the conjunction of the *chemical wedding*, the union of a red man and a white woman. In her rendition of the wedding in "12. The Garden," Pulter enacts a more innocent version of Adonis' and Venus' love-making with flowers, but the image still resembles the conjunction of "red" and "white" which creates "perfect love":

Oft have we lay in the Idalian shade

> Where curious anadems my goddess made,
>
> Twirling with her white fingers myrtle bows,
>
> Being woven with roses to adorn our brows.
>
> Of *red* and *white*, the yellow we threw by
>
> 'Cause *perfect love* should be sans jealousy.
>
> ("12. The Garden" 480-485, my emphasis)

In some alchemical texts, such as George Ripley's poem "The Compound of Alchemy,[46]" putrefaction followed the conjunction of the chemical wedding (Ashmole 148); in Pulter's summarized version of the opus in this section of "12. The Garden," Adonis' death by the boar comes to symbolize the putrefaction of the nigredo after the union of the two lovers. Venus's tears in the following lines mix with the blood shed at the nigredo, and come to symbolize the mercurial waters cleansing the dead matter for the stone, represented here by Adonis' lifeless body. The image of the queen holding out a red robe to the king indicates that the purified matter will be transformed into the red stone (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 27), and Venus places a "scarlet mantle" ("12. The Garden" 498) around the newly "up-rear[ed]" (496) flower before placing the flower itself "between [her] breasts" (500). Venus' placement of the flower reflects Pulter's source in Shakespeare's poem,[47] and is also a very gendered interpretation of the alchemical maxim that "within the whiteness the red is hidden" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 174).[48] This image of the white woman placing a red flower, stone, or gem between her breasts to represent the "red within the white" motif is repeated in "32. Aletheia's Pearl," and "67. Somnus why art thou still to me unkind."

46 Ripley's work is published in Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britanicum*.

47 See Eardley's footnote for this poem (*Poems* 104).

48 Andrew Marvell's "The Nymph Complaining" mentions "Lillies without, Roses within" (Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* 293).

Although "12. The Garden" cannot be considered an alchemical poem per se, a few other curious alchemical connections can still be made. The poem has twelve sections, one for each of the twelve flowers described, which is also the number of "keys" in the famous alchemical treatise, *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* (Greenberg, *Chemical History Tour* 24); twelve is also the number of "gates" in George Ripley's poem, "The Compound of Alchemy."[49] The "Adonis" section of Pulter's poem coincides with the "twelfth Gate" of Ripley's text (Ashmole 184), which deals with the alchemical process of *projection*. Projection, or *projectio*, is the process associated with the transformation of metals into gold through the use of the recently achieved philosopher's stone. Pulter evokes the philosopher's stone in the figure of Adonis, and has Adonis himself talk about transformation, but leaves the poem without any resolution or actual change. If the poem was trying to send a message about the transformation of pride, for example, it may not have been quite delivered; Adonis himself is still "proud" even after being "metamorphosed to a flower" (501, 505).

In Shakespeare's poem, after Adonis is transformed into a flower, Venus "crops the stalk" (1175), and a "[g]reen-dropping sap" (1176) appears; this "sap," Simonds argues, is, in fact, the *quintessence*[50] or the elixir (Simonds, "Love is a spirit all compact of fire" 154). In Pulter's rendition, there is no such "sap"; there does not seem to be any substance which will, in fact, be used for transformation or healing. Knight tells us that John Gerard, in his *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597),[51] "implies that flowers, like poems, can and should be transformative of those who experience them" (*Of Books and Botany* 89), but "the magical

49 In Eardley's annotated edition, Pulter's poem also falls, coincidentally, on the number twelve.

50 The *quintessence*, or the perfect fifth element, was obtained from the harmonious union of the philosophical four elements (earth, air, fire, and water). The quintessence was associated with the philosopher's stone or elixir (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 75).

51 A source which Pulter may have consulted when writing "12. The Garden" (Eardley, *Poems* 86).

transmuting art of poetry" ("Love is a spirit all compact of fire" 137), or of flowers, for that matter, does not really seem present in Pulter's poem. The relief offered by "12. The Garden" itself is only temporary; the very next poem in Pulter's sequence, "13. Upon the Imprisonment of His Sacred Majesty," plunges the reader back into the suffering of the regicide, suggesting that the garden poem may have offered a momentary respite, but no real and lasting transformation or healing has actually occurred.

The philosopher's stone was often symbolized in alchemical texts by precious stones, such as rubies, pearls, sapphires, and diamonds (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 146). Aletheia, the Greek goddess of truth, offers the speaker in "32. Aletheia's Pearl" an "orient pearl" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 2), a pearl from the East considered superior in value and brilliancy (Eardley, *Poems* 377):

> Fair Aletheia (when I was a girl),
> One Sunday, offered me an orient pearl,
> But for it I must part with all I had;
> I, of the bargain, was extremely glad.
> ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 1-4)

Eardley reminds us that the adjective "orient" also denotes a bright red colour (*Poems* 377), which makes Aletheia's "orient pearl" a very suggestive red stone in an alchemical context. Lyndy Abraham points out that it was "considered a mark of originality to create a new symbol for the Stone" (*Alchemical Imagery*, xviii), and Aletheia's pearl, the pearl of truth, which was "far more bright/Than all the gems [the speaker] ever yet did view" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 88-89), may very well be a representation of the philosopher's stone in Pulter's poetry.

Gerhild Becker et al. tell us that the term *aletheia* "reveals a less common understanding of the truth," and literally means *not hidden* (647):

> [Martin] Heidegger describes *aletheia* as a *process of unconcealment*, emphasizing that truth is an opening, or a revelation of what is. In ancient Greece, *aletheia* was used in theater to describe the process of slowly drawing the curtain and revealing what had been hidden. The metaphor of drawing the curtain is a useful image in understanding how both revealing and apprehending the truth is a process. (Becker et al. 647)[52]

Appearing roughly in the middle of the first collection of poems, "32. Aletheia's Pearl" also seems hidden in the centre of the Pulter's verse, as if waiting to be revealed at the right moment. This idea of truth as an "opening" or a "revelation" ties in with Pulter's exploration of the alchemical opus as an ongoing process of realization and transformation. Aletheia "offered" (2) the pearl to the poem's speaker on the second line of the poem, but the speaker spends the remaining lines going through a process of understanding of what it really means to have the precious gem. Aletheia's truth is slowly revealed as the speaker stumbles over her own flaws and assumptions, recognizes which virtues she needs to perfect, and learns how to realize her transformation. It is not until the very end of the poem that the speaker finally understands that her true transformation can only happen by listening to her "fair guide" (115) and accepting "her counsel" (63).

In alchemy, divine knowledge or wisdom, both "the guide and goal of the opus," is often "personified as a beautiful female figure" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 178). Pulter's choice to

52 Pulter's paradoxical epigraph to her collection of poems, written in her own hand at the beginning of the manuscript, echoes this idea of "unconcealment": "Marvel not my name's concealed,/In being hid it is revealed." Thrice on the opening pages she refers to the poet as "Hadassah," the Hebrew version of Esther, or Hester, and she uses the initials "H.P."

have "[f]air Aletheia" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 1) be both the bearer of the philosopher's stone and the speaker's guide in the transformative process is, therefore, a fitting one.[53] The speaker's receiving the pearl on a "Sunday," the day traditionally associated with God, also implies a connection to the divine wisdom and awareness obtained through the achievement of the stone. This divine connection is reinforced when we place the first lines of the poem in the context of their probable origin, Jesus' parable of the "Pearl of Great Price":

> Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it. (Matthew 13.45-46)

The parable, Christopher Hodgkins explains, describes a merchant who "sells something of real value to purchase something of surpassing value" (29), and the story is "commonly interpreted as a call to give all one has for the kingdom [of heaven]" (Waters 423). This "bargain" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 4) is explored by Pulter in this poem, as well as by George Herbert in "The Pearl. *Matth*. 13," where the reference to the parable is explicitly made in the title of the poem.[54] The parable of the pearl can be interpreted in two ways, with the most common being that the pearl symbolizes the kingdom of heaven, or Christ, or "simply the truth of [Christ's] proclamation" (Waters 424).[55] This parable is often mentioned in the same context as the parable of the treasure,[56] and both stories are used by Jesus to explain to his disciples the true value of the

53 Aletheia seems to continue her work of guiding Pulter's speaker through a transformative process in the emblem "2. Come, my dear children, come and happy be." In the emblem, Pulter describes a series of steps to follow in order to perfect a list of virtues including patience, faith, and hope, also discussed in "32. Aletheia's Pearl."

54 There is not enough evidence to suggest that Herbert's "The Pearl" may have influenced Pulter's poem, other than the biblical reference to Matthew 13 and the use of a similar phrase: "Which on the world a true love-knot may tie" ("The Pearl" 16), in Herbert's case, and "Celestial Love the true love's knot did tie" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 10) in Pulter's. The coincidence is, nonetheless, worthy of note.

55 The least common interpretation is that the kingdom of heaven, or Christ, is symbolized by the merchant, who is seeking His Church, represented by the pearl (Lockyer 200).

56 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field" (Matthew 13.44).

kingdom of heaven, and the real cost of becoming his follower (Waters 424). Even though the two parables are similar, there is a very significant difference regarding how the treasure and the pearl are discovered; in the case of the treasure, it is found by accident, by a "man who appears to be aimless" (Lockyer 200). The pearl, on the other hand, is discovered by a merchant who was deliberately looking for the most valuable gem, who was "sincere in [his] search for truth" (Lockyer 200) – not unlike the alchemist seeking the philosopher's stone.

In Pulter's textual alchemy, the "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13.46) is fused with the philosopher's stone, "the most precious of things" (Roberts, G. 70). But Pulter would not have been the first to make such a connection between the biblical pearl and the philosopher's stone: the alchemical treatise by medieval alchemist Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *Pretiosa margarita novella*[57] (published in 1546), translates to "the new precious pearl,[58]" or "the new pearl of great price." Chiara Crisciani suggests that Bonus wanted alchemy to be taken seriously as a science, but that Bonus also believed alchemy to be a different kind of science, one which was "in part divine" and so "based upon a special revelation bestowed by God only upon true initiates" (167). Pulter seems to consider herself to be a "True Adept" of alchemy (Greenberg, *Art of Chemistry* 107), one who seeks truth and the wisdom of God.

The pearl, significantly, is not simply *given* in the poem, but *offered,* and the speaker of "32. Aletheia's Pearl," like the merchant and Jesus' disciples, must be willing to accept what it takes to receive divine truth. The speaker, too, "must part with all [she] ha[s]" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 3), and must, in this case, also go through a process of personal transformation. The poem

57 This alchemical treatise is mentioned by both Lyndy Abraham (see *Marvell and Alchemy*) and Peggy Simonds ("Love is a spirit all compact of fire" 134).

58 The full title of the treatise, *Pretiosa margarita novella: de thesavro, ac pretiosissimo philosophorvm lapide,* was translated into English as *The new pearl of great price: A treatise concerning the treasure and most precious stone of the philosophers* (Waite iii). Pulter would not have had access to the English translation (published after her lifetime), but the connection is curious, nonetheless.

tries to illustrate the actual transformation of the speaker: she is seen receiving a potential philosopher's stone and using it to try to effect change in herself. Aletheia, the speaker's "fair directress" (31), and her pearl appropriate the stone's properties, and are seen throughout the poem as providing comfort and healing, in addition to trying to perfect the speaker. The speaker's laments throughout Pulter's poetry are rooted in the speaker's own internal conflicts, and Aletheia and her pearl are shown trying to transform the speaker's encounters with suffering and doubt. Aletheia "did advise for [the] relief" (49) of the speaker that she accept "Patience" in order "to allay [her] grief" (55, 50); once the speaker has laid the "pearl close to [her] trembling breast" (91), echoing Venus' placement of the red flower in "12. The Garden," the speaker also finally accepts "Hope," whom Aletheia had brought to "sway the factions in [the speaker's] troubled heart" (93, 96).

But even in this poem, it seems that transformation and healing are never really complete, and Pulter's discussion of "Peace" and "Joy" undermines the poem's and the pearl's potential transformative powers. Wilcox reminds us that the "desire to anticipate heavenly values and experiences while on earth is a common Christian wish" (Wilcox, "Curious Frame" 19), and Pulter, at first, wants peace and joy "[t]o make [her] happiness on earth complete" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 24). But "Peace" and "Joy," "those two jolly ladies," "would not stay/Long in a place" (32-33), "nor were they as they seemed" (33). The description of the clothing worn by "Peace" and "Joy" cannot be merely coincidental:

> Peace in a purple mantle, wrought with gold
> Where groves, fanes, cities, you might there behold,
> Which cast a luster to my wond'ring eye,

> Joy in an azure vesture like the sky,
> Studded with gems, which dazzled so my sight
> That now (methought) my pearl was not so bright
> ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 65-70)

"Peace" is dressed in a mantle of purple and gold, similar to Aurora's robes in "26. To Aurora [2]." As discussed in Chapter 2, purple and gold were associated with the fleeting nature of the dawn, and the colours may have been used to symbolize the impossibility of reaching the albedo stage. Here, the two colours are once again associated with a temporary state, and with the difficulty of achieving "true peace" on earth ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 35). Abraham tells us that "azure" was a colour associated with the quintessence, and that "[t]o clothe in an azure shirt or garment" represented the alchemical process of projection, which would convert the metal in the vessel into silver or gold (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 15). "Joy" may be wearing "an azure vesture like the sky," but she is not effecting any lasting transformation in the speaker's earthly life; like "Peace," "Joy" had also "fled" "by the morn" ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 76), leaving the speaker in a state of despair.

Pulter's poetic opus is gendered female, and mothers, daughters, and sisters figure prominently in Pulter's alchemical poetry. In "32. Aletheia's Pearl," "Peace" is the mother of "Joy," and the speaker believes that if she can "[g]et but the mother," she can also "have the daughter" (28). But "Peace" and "Joy" do not dwell on earth, and, as "Aurora" and her daughter "Astraea," discussed in Chapter 2, are also impossible to achieve in "this world" (30). Aletheia had warned the speaker that "[t]here's no true peace, nor joy, below the sun" (35), but the speaker is too distracted by the "luster" of her "dazzl[ing]" guests, and forgets that not "all that

glisters" is "gold esteemed" (67, 69, 34). From a disappointing experiment of achieving on earth what, in Pulter's view, is reserved only for heaven, the speaker finally understands that she cannot truly reach heavenly experiences "till this life is done" (36), and must perfect the virtues of faith, hope and patience, instead. In keeping with the gendered aspect of Pulter's poetry, "Patience" and "Hope" are sisters, and, possibly, also the daughters of Faith.[59]

The presence of a potential philosopher's stone in "32. Aletheia's Pearl," which seems to be effecting actual change on the speaker, makes the hopeless end of the poem even more jarring:

> Thus have I lived a sad and weary life,
> Thirteen a maid, and thirty-three a wife,
> All I found true my Alethie did speak,
> But yet (aye me) the bubble will not break.
> ("32. Aletheia's Pearl" 118-121)

As the speaker "perfects" herself in the poem, dealing with issues of lack of faith, hope, and patience, so does the poet through her own devotional writing. Both speaker (and poet) may even have achieved the stone in the poem, but the transformative process is interrupted by the disappointed last line. Paralleling those moments of freedom and bondage discussed in Chapter 1, the ending of "32. Aletheia's Pearl" assumes a poignant significance when we recall words that Pulter would have encountered in the Bible: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). In Pulter's poem, the speaker seems to have found truth by the end ("All I found true my Alethie did speak"), and with it potential freedom, but the poem ends in

59 The mother figure is not named in Pulter's poem, but Eardley suggests that "Faith" is a possibility (Eardley, *Poems* 127).

grief and almost despair. The last quatrain challenges the hopeful note towards which the poem was moving, with the slant rhyme "speak/break" ending any glimmer of a final consolation. The speaker may have restored her faith and hope in Aletheia's "truth," that all the speaker's pain and "troubles" "would end in endless glory" (48), but her patience still leaves something to be desired. This failed attempt at using the stone to effect transformation during an earthly existence illustrates Pulter's experience with religious writing and its potential inability to really provide relief and effect transformation. Even in possession of the stone and in the right state of mind for change, Pulter's speaker cannot achieve lasting transformation; she still expresses impatience at not being able to escape the "bubble" of physical existence.

Pulter believes that true transformation can only happen through divine grace, and so cannot really be achieved during her life on earth; she will only be fully transformed once she reaches heaven. The scarcity of the colour red and of rubedo imagery in Pulter's writing suggests that she does not expect transformation to be fully completed on earth; to Pulter, only in God, "alchemist and Philosopher's Stone combined," can "all contraries and transmutations find their resolution" (Archer 9). Pulter's often unsuccessful alchemical opus shows the difficulties of achieving the philosopher's stone on earth, and questions the effectiveness of writing poetry to really perfect and truly heal during our physical existence.

In a curious coincidence, Pulter's very last poem, "67. Somnus why art thou still to me unkind," is a poem which ends with the mention of a "rich carbuncle" (38). A carbuncle is not only a "large precious stone of a red or fiery colour," but also a "mythical gem said to give out light in the dark" (*OED* 1.a), two descriptions that we can also attribute to the philosopher's stone itself. Indeed, the poet notes of this gem that "[t]he universe afforded not a stone/That

equaled it for splendency of light" ("67. Somnus why art thou still to me unkind" 39-40). Of additional interest is the placement of this carbuncle: between the breasts of a sea goddess, Doris. The last image of the poem, of Doris as a "fair fruitful" mother of "numerous issue" (34, 35), reminds us, even at the very end, of Pulter's gendering of her alchemical opus, and its particular focus on mothers. The poem is in Pulter's hand and was written on a loose sheet included at the end of the manuscript volume (Eardley, *Poems* 182).[60] The poem also appears to be unfinished (Eardley, *Poems* 182), and the incompleteness of the poem, which ends with the mention of the achievement of a possible philosopher's stone, makes for a (un)fortunate coincidence for the end of a potentially incomplete alchemical poetic opus.

60 Eardley includes this poem at the end of the first collection of occasional and devotional poems, just before Pulter switches to the emblem genre.

CONCLUSION – *PROJECTIO*

"Then do some good whilst light and life you have;
The idle man anticipates the grave."
("Emblem 39" 43-44)

The alchemist, Lyndy Abraham reminds us, was "concerned not only with the transmutation of base metal into gold, but most importantly with the transformation of the natural or earthly man into the illumined philosopher" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 154). In her devotional poetry, Pulter shows an interest in personal and spiritual transformation, where the perfection of her own soul and her own personal healing take centre stage in her poetic experiments. Her jagged and incomplete alchemical poetic opus, however, shows the difficulties and inconsistencies of striving for spiritual perfection and healing during a flawed physical existence. The circularity of Pulter's opus often does not reflect a cycle of refinement through continuous distillation, but, as Jayne Archer has pointed out, it becomes an endless cycle of pain and grief, "as sighs are converted into tears and back again" (9). The speaker in "The Circle [1]," for example, emulates a cycle of distillation with "sighs and tears" (1), only to realize that "there is no end" (1) to this "sad circle" (9), there is no refinement and movement forward: her tears only "descend in vain" (7), and "[t]o sighs they rarefy again" (8). Despite the hopeful note on which many poems end, or move towards, subsequent poems almost always immerse the speaker back into suffering and pain.

Even though she may not have been able to "perfect imperfection" (Abraham, *Alchemical Imagery* 145) in herself, Pulter still believed that she could help those who would eventually read

her poems to effect change in themselves, or, at least, experience relief from suffering through her writing. Sarah Ross has already brought to our attention that Pulter saw her own poetry as a "bezoar[61]" or "cordial" ("61. The Weeping Wish" 17, 19), a restorative medicine that would "sustain her personal and political friends" (Ross, "Tears, Bezoars and Blazing Comets" 7). The use of her poetry as medicinal implies that Pulter still believed her own poetic opus, despite its incompleteness, and her literary elixir, despite its flawed preparation, to be able to give some relief, even if temporary. Archer notes that "Pulter is forever weeping" (7), but that this weeping is also redemptive: "Weeping and writing poetry about weeping are transformative, alchemical acts – ways to understand, to experience, and to live through grief and loss" (Archer 7). Pulter chooses to show the difficulties, struggles, and doubts associated with spiritual transformation and personal healing, but challenges the reader to keep going, despite the difficulties that she herself has encountered.

After the final stage of the alchemical opus, the rubedo, once the philosopher's stone or elixir is finally achieved, the next step is known as the *projectio* or projection, where the stone or elixir is applied to base metals (or base humans) in order to transform them into gold. The switch to the emblem genre in her later collection of poems, *The Sighs of a Sad Soul Emblematically Breathed Forth by the Noble Hadassah*, suggests a preoccupation with, perhaps, also effecting change in others. Pulter's emblems, Rachel Dunn suggests, evoke a devotional mode and "move inward" (64), but they still try to provide lessons to a potential audience of readers, perhaps her remaining children, who could still benefit from an attempt at transformation. Unlike typical

61 William Newman and Lawrence Principe tell us that George Starkey (or the alchemist Philalethes) used the term "Great Bezoar" in his notes about the creation of the philosopher's stone, and that this term "is one trope for the Philosopher's Stone, which, like the quasi-legendary bezoar stone, was supposed to be a universal antidote" (170). Starkey (under the name Philalethes) published one of his many alchemical treatises, *The Marrow of Alchemy*, in 1654, very close to the date on Pulter's poem.

exemplars of the genre, Pulter's fifty-three emblems are not attached to visual depictions. Many of them pivot around a central image, often from the animal world, and are the occasion to impart a moral message. Her second emblem, "2. Come, my dear children, come and happy be," is explicitly addressed to her seven still-living children.

Pulter's emblems are also highly political, and are "dominated by overt commentary on Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate and on the effect [Pulter] perceives his government to be having on the nation" (Eardley, *Poems* 28). Pulter's choice to switch genres and adopt the emblem for her second collection of poems is especially suggestive, and could indicate a change in her poetic intentions; her poetry begins to show a concern with also effecting social change. Although there is no evidence of Pulter's intention to circulate her manuscript, its content and the care given to its physical compilation suggest, at least, an "imaginary audience," for whom Pulter "crafted her thoughts and feelings into literary works they would appreciate and understand" (Eardley, *Poems* 4). And they might even learn, perhaps, a lesson or two about the "emotional and domestic consequences of national conflict" (Chedgzoy 15).

Living through unstable times and "inscribing and dwelling on memories in the midst of trauma" (Chedgzoy 153), Pulter records the events of the war and her concerns with its consequences. But, "with an eye to posterity," and not yet knowing "who the victors [would] be - or whose stories [would] carry the day" (Chedgzoy 153), Pulter also inscribes her hopes for social transformation. Inviting her readers to "do some good whilst light and life" they have ("Emblem 39" 43), Pulter calls them to action, by reminding them that "[t]hose that have reason and yet idle lie/Do, just like hogs, no good until they die" ("Emblem 39" 31-32). Like the philosopher's stone, the alchemist's ultimate goal, Pulter's poetry may also be "both the product

and the agent of change" (Eggert 205).

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