

## Cures and Currency in Donne's Letters to Patrons

BY ALISON BUMKE

"I Would I were so good an Alchymist to perswade you that all the vertue of the best affections, that one could expresse in a sheet, were in this ragge of paper", John Donne writes in an undated letter to George Garrat, his friend and patron.<sup>1</sup> Alchemy was an early form of chemistry that involved melting metals to transmute them into gold and extract a curative essence, known as elixir, that would make drinkers immortal. The elaborate, mysterious process of alchemy—of waiting for metals to heat and mix while monitoring their color, shape, and smell—mirrors the extended, often absurd process of seeking patronage, Donne suggests in letters to and about patrons. Moreover, both processes rely on acts of persuasion. There was no easy way to ascertain an alchemical coin's value: it would possess as much purchasing power as individuals granted to it.<sup>2</sup> "Of, Alchymists doe coyners prove," Donne writes in his poem "The Crosse", echoing the widely held belief that alchemical currency lacked intrinsic worth (l. 37).<sup>3</sup> Like an alchemist attempting to

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<sup>1</sup>"To my Honoured friend M. George Garrat" in Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London, 1651), 264.

<sup>2</sup> Alchemical currency is still invoked in modern times as a metaphor for "fiat-money"—such as inconvertible paper currency—that is "made legal tender by a "fiat" of the government, without having an intrinsic or promissory value equal to its nominal value" ("fiat," n., in *OED Online* <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> accessed 30 June 2015). For example, in *The Alchemists: Three Central Bankers and a World on Fire* (2013), Neil Irwin compares alchemy to central bankers' attempts to restore faith in credit and paper currency after the 2008 financial crisis. See Neil Irwin, *The Alchemists: Three Central Bankers and a World on Fire* (New York, 2013); see also Kevin Dowd and Martin Hutchinson, *Alchemists of Loss: How modern finance and government intervention crashed the financial system* (Chichester, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> *The Online Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Jeffrey Johnson, Gary A. Stringer, et al. <<http://donnevariorum.tamu.edu>> accessed 5 April 2016. Subsequent citations from Donne's verse will be to this edition, with titles and line numbers included in the text.

convince others of his creation's authenticity, Donne must persuade patrons that his praise is genuine, meriting their continued support.

Donne's references to alchemy in these verse letters offer fresh insights into the shifting power dynamics and complex attitudes towards patronage that characterized the Jacobean court. He attempts to portray his epistles as being current, in terms of both social relevance and monetary value. These two meanings of current are related. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, money is current when it is "passing from hand to hand; in circulation; in general use as a medium of exchange"—all of which could refer to Donne's verse, as well.<sup>4</sup> In his sermon on Psalms 6.8-10, Donne highlights these related meanings of the word "currant" as he describes the structure of the Psalms, a type of "Metricall compositio[n]". "The whole frame of the Poem is a beating out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is as the impression of the stamp, and that is it that makes it currant", he writes.<sup>5</sup> The poem's final clause makes it ready to enter circulation, just as the stamp on a gold coin—the final stage of its production—signals that it now has value in monetary exchanges. Being part of the coterie culture that Arthur Marotti has described, Donne knew that numerous courtiers, in addition to his intended recipient, were likely to read his verse.<sup>6</sup> As a result, his verse must be relevant, or current, in the sense of relating to the court's interests. (Not coincidentally, these interests included alchemy, as I will show in this article.) His verse must be current also in the sense of having purchasing power. Donne is attempting to present the figurative gold of his letters as a sort of credit, to secure a patron's endorsement and financial support in the future.

With his references to alchemical essences, Donne claims in verse letters that his poetry's value is intrinsic rather than extrinsic. In reality, though, he recognized that poetic value was a slippery, subjective concept. Proving his value objectively as a poet would have been challenging, as the court's literary tastes were in near-constant flux. Michael Schoenfeldt notes, "As a result of the various pressure that figures of power could exert upon writers, styles and genres blossomed and faded, subject to the

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<sup>4</sup> "current," adj. 4a., in *OED Online* <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> accessed 30 June 201

<sup>5</sup> Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley, 1953-62), vol. 6, 41. Subsequent citations from Donne's sermons will be to volume and page number of this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison, 1986).

taste of a prince or patron as well as to the ever-changing vagaries of court fashion.” When James I succeeded Elizabeth I in 1603, for example, his preferences meant a change in England’s “predominant literary genre from Petrarchan lyrics to works of theology, philosophy, and history.”<sup>7</sup> Rather than treating patrons as mere dupes, on a par with an alchemist’s gullible customers, he tends to address them as co-conspirators. “If you can think these flatteries, they are, / For then your judgment is below my praise”, he tells the Countess of Huntington in a verse letter (“Man to God’s image,” ll. 49-50). His praise is as true or as false—as valuable or as worthless—as she chooses to believe. His compliment has a catch, however. If she suspects his motives, she is already less worthy than he thinks (or claims, at least), and that in turn devalues his verse tribute to her. Donne relies on patrons to suspend their incredulity and accept, if not believe, his hyperbolic praise for the short duration of a verse letter. He argues, as I will show, that patrons need him as much as he needs them. If he can persuade them to accept—momentarily—his claim that he will extract their virtue like an alchemist extracting cures, he might have a chance in the future to extract their wealth, as well.

#### I. “An Hereditary Eloquence”: Alchemy and patronage in the court

Critics discussing Donne’s references to alchemy have focused on his recurring themes and sources. Edgar Hill Duncan identifies the main “alchemical figures” that appear in Donne’s collected works, while Joseph A. Mazzeo traces the influence on Donne of Paracelsus’s theories.<sup>8</sup> Stanton J. Linden presents four types of alchemical imagery in Donne’s verse.<sup>9</sup> Theresa M. DiPasquale suggests that, in *The*

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt, “Courts and Patronage,” in Glyn P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 3, The Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1999), 375-6.

<sup>8</sup> E. H. Duncan, “Donne’s Alchemical Figures,” *English Literary History*, 9 (1942), 257-85; Joseph A. Mazzeo, “Notes on John Donne’s Alchemical Imagery,” *Isis*, 48 (1957), 103-123.

<sup>9</sup> Donne’s four types of alchemical verse include “(1) poems treating alchemy satirically; (2) poems that reveal alchemical ideas about the nature, attributes, and production of gold; (3) poems that make reference to the types of equipment,

*First Anniversary*, Donne presents the memory of Elizabeth Drury as an alchemical agent that purifies “both the language of poetry and the metal of the human soul”.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Andy Mousley focuses on alchemy as a type of transubstantiation, noting that Donne’s “poetry and prose invite the use of terms, such as alchemy, metamorphosis, transformation, translation and so forth, which, while they may be linked to the religious concept of transubstantiation, can be independently deployed”.<sup>11</sup>

Critics have explored also how Donne uses alchemy to comment on monetary value. Albert C. Labriola argues that the alchemical terms that appear in Donne’s “The Canonization” “pertain specifically to practices in the London mint and in other English mints in the Tudor and Stuart eras, when both metal and monetary values were transmuted in the process of manufacturing and stamping coins.”<sup>12</sup> David Hawkes claims that Donne was sceptical of these practices, viewing “monetary value as inauthentic and illusory”. This “loss of authenticity”, Hawkes maintains, “provokes the epistemological and emotional crises that play such predominant roles in the intellectual dramas of Donne’s verse”.<sup>13</sup> Donne’s scepticism with literal forms of currency is a component of this article’s argument, but I will look primarily at metaphorical types of purchasing power, rather than literal ones. I aim to show how

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materials, and procedures that alchemists used in their experiments; and (4) poems especially concerned with transmutation and the making of elixirs and philosophers’ stones,” Linden claims. See Stanton J. Linden, “‘A True Religious Alchimy’: The Poetry of Donne and Herbert,” in *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington, 1996), 156.

<sup>10</sup> Theresa M. DiPasquale, “‘to good ends’: The Final Cause of Sacramental Womanhood in *The First Anniversary*,” *JDJ*, 20 (2001), 150.

<sup>11</sup> Andy Mousley, “Transubstantiating Love: John Donne and Cultural Criticism,” in Douglas Burnham and Enrico Giaccherini (eds.), *The Poetics of Transubstantiation* (Aldershot, 2005), 56.

<sup>12</sup> Albert C. Labriola, “Altered States in Donne’s ‘The Canonization’: Alchemy, Mintage, and Transmutation,” *JDJ*, 27 (2008), 120-21.

<sup>13</sup> David Hawkes, “Alchemical and Financial Value in the Poetry of John Donne,” in *Idols of the Marketplace: Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in English Literature, 1580–1680* (Basingstoke, 2001), 144.

Donne presents his verse as something patrons should value, so he can exchange it for their financial and social support.

Donne pursued patronage primarily during the period between his marriage and ordination, from 1602 to 1615. This was a challenging time, socially and financially. When his clandestine marriage to Ann More was announced in 1602, he lost his secretaryship to Sir Thomas Egerton, More's uncle. "The loss of that place with its practically assured promise of further advancement at court or in the law meant disaster for a promising career," Michael Donnelly notes.<sup>14</sup> Donne's verse letters from this period record his extensive, often fruitless attempts to secure patronage. His struggle to stave off social, literary, and financial ruin can be glimpsed in other works, as well. Donnelly argues that Donne's sermon on Proverbs 22:11, preached in 1617 at Paul's Cross, "echoes the more or less desperate and eagerly straining letters and verses of his days of secular application and ambition."<sup>15</sup> Heather Dubrow argues likewise that Donne's 1613 epithalamium on the marriage of his patron, the Earl of Somerset, offers "an examination and critique of his [Donne's] own participation in the courtly system"—patronage—"that inspired it [the poem]."<sup>16</sup> Although critics have shown how Donne was responding to alchemy and to Jacobean England's culture of patronage, none has looked closely at how he draws parallels between these two frameworks. References to alchemical cures occur with remarkable frequency in his verse letters to and about patrons, offering insight into his views of the complex relationships between patron and poet, praise and truth, verse and value.

Alchemy was central to seventeenth-century England's "new science," an evolving concept that blended medieval and classical theories with new, empirical evidence. An early form of chemistry, alchemy had never fitted neatly into a single discipline. It had been seen as a philosophy and a religion, as well as a practical craft, since its inception in ancient China, India, Egypt, and Greece. In the twelfth century,

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<sup>14</sup> M. L. Donnelly, "saving the King's Friend and Redeeming Appearances: Dr. Donne Constructs a Scriptural Model for Patronage," in Cedric C. Brown (ed.), *Patronage, Politics, and Literary Traditions in England, 1558-1658* (Detroit, 1993), 81.

<sup>15</sup> Donnelly, 79.

<sup>16</sup> Heather Dubrow, "The Sun in Water: Donne's Somerset Epithalamium and the Poetics of Patronage," in Dubrow and Richard Strier (eds.), *The Historical Renaissance* (Chicago, 1988), 210.

Latin translations of Arabic texts introduced alchemy gradually to medieval Europe. “By the Middle Ages there was not one alchemy but several, with distinctive as well as overlapping traditions,” Margaret Healy notes.<sup>17</sup> Among these overlapping traditions was an emphasis on balancing and blurring opposites, imagined as male and female. Alchemists perceived the world though “degrees of airiness and subtlety or denseness and heaviness.”<sup>18</sup> They sought a balance between these extremes in an elixir, perfectly tempered, that could cure diseases and transmute common metals into gold.

Tracts employed deliberately obtuse and metaphorical language. They hid instructions “In Poyses, Parable, and in Metaphors alsoe, / Which to Schollers causeth peine and woe,” Thomas Norton admits in his own challenging text, *The Ordinall of Alchimy* (1477; printed in 1591). Norton and his peers were trying to limit alchemical knowledge to those who deserved it: to pious intellectuals, in other words, and not those who would use it simply to advance their wealth.

Like poets, alchemists sought patronage, as did many scholars and artists.<sup>19</sup> Just as Donne’s verse letters to patrons tended to be “copies, not originalls,” so were many alchemists’ pleas for patronage strikingly similar. “For all their individual diversity,” Jenny Rampling notes, “alchemists often adopted similar styles of self-presentation, by appealing to longstanding traditions, not only of technical writing, but also of poetry and art.”<sup>20</sup> Texts such as Elias Ashmole’s *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* argued that alchemical theories should be written in verse, not prose, since it has “an Hereditary Eloquence proper to all Mankind.” Ashmole was catering to his aristocratic, well-educated patrons when he refers to hereditary entitlement, and

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<sup>17</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy, and the Creative Imagination* (Cambridge, 2011), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> By the 1530s, Graham Perry writes, the English nobility had accepted that “the encouragement of learning was one of the functions of power and authority”. See Parry, “Literary patronage,” in David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge, 2002), 117.

<sup>20</sup> See Jenny Rampling’s paper, “Alchemy and Patronage in Tudor England,” given at London’s Royal Society on 7 November 2011 <[www.royalsociety.org](http://www.royalsociety.org)> accessed 20 July 2015.

when he claims that “verse is the securest from Prophane and Vulgar Wits.”<sup>21</sup> But alchemists stressed also the practical applications of their art, in addition to its elitist, esoteric appeal. Competition for funding was fierce, and ‘success relied on alchemists’ ability to interpret the obscure writings of past adepts, and to reliably translate them into practical procedures within a coherent natural philosophical framework,” Rampling argues.<sup>22</sup>

Foremost among these practical applications of alchemy were cures. Ashmole’s text stresses the patriotic modesty of English alchemists, who have played a secret, but pivotal, role in maintaining the health of English aristocrats. “Thus did I. O. ... in curing the young Earle of Norfolke, of the Leprosie; and Doctor B. in carrying off the virulency of the Small-pox, twice, from Queen Elizabeth; insomuch that they never appeared,” he writes.<sup>23</sup> The recipients of alchemists’ appeals for patronage were often aristocrats, and sometimes the queen herself, so this was another strategic move. Like Donne in his verse letters, alchemists were appealing to patrons’ pride in their wealth and education, and concern about their health, in fairly generic ways.

Thomas Norton presents alchemy as an exclusive, quasi-religious art, echoing Calvinist doctrine as he calls his text “A Booke of secrets given by God; / To men Elect” who have a ‘spotles-Minde.’<sup>24</sup> Tracts’ esoteric language appealed to courtly circles in Elizabethan England, for whom alchemical study was fashionable. Bacon, Sir Philip Sidney, and Mary, Countess of Pembroke, were among alchemy’s advocates. Even Elizabeth I was interested,<sup>25</sup> and alchemy featured in her court’s Christmas revels of 1594.<sup>26</sup> The privileged courtiers who favored alchemy were also Donne’s potential patrons. When he refers to alchemy in his letters to them, he caters

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<sup>21</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* (London, 1651), sig. B3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Rampling, “Alchemy and Patronage in Tudor England,” accessed 20 July 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Ashmole, sig. A2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchemy*, in Ashmole, *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* (London, 1651), sig. C2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge, 1982), 307.

<sup>26</sup> Healy, 49.

to their alchemical interests while suggesting that he, too, deserves a place in their elite courtly circles.

Alchemists were attempting to join the four elements, mixing, heating, and distilling them repeatedly until they yielded an elixir of perfectly balanced, purified parts. The basic stages of alchemy are as follows: an alchemist slowly warms earth—in the form of metals—and water in a furnace. This heating process introduces air and fire, the other two elements. Eventually, this mixture starts to vaporize and the alchemist distils it, collecting the vapor and heating it again. Through five distillations, he or she monitors the mixture's color, taste, and smell. The alchemist tempers each quality with its opposite, adding something sweet if the mixture smells or tastes bitter, something light if its color is dark, and so on. Gradually, the mixture's color changes from black to red to white. If it has been tempered properly, its fifth distillation yields an elixir: a "quintessence" that can transmute metals to gold and cure illness.

But, as Norton's text suggests, alchemy involved more than metallurgical skill. Comparing each stage of joining to a different intellectual or creative activity, Norton shows how alchemy was understood as a mental, emotional, and spiritual process. Patient monitoring of alchemy's successive stages was thought to bring "All proude appetites to equalitie": a process as philosophical and religious as it was practical.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, to Renaissance readers, there was no clear separation between the craft's literal and abstract uses. Summarizing the period's multidisciplinary approach to alchemy, Healy asks, "Is Norton's elusive *Ordinall* outlining a process of chemistry, or creativity in the arts involving imagination ..., or an inner spiritual process? Actually, such a question misses the crucial point: in alchemy's holistic view of the universe, disciplinary boundaries as we know them today are irrelevant; categories of knowledge and experience have to be construed in much more fluid, interchangeable terms."<sup>28</sup>

## II. 'so good an Alchemist': Donne's views towards alchemy

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Healy, 24.



“No chymique yet th’Elixar got, / But glorifies his pregnant pot,” Donne writes in “Loves Alchymie” (ll. 7-8). He sees the alchemist or “chymique” as an object of ridicule, who reveres a process that rarely yields anything of value. Alchemists deceive themselves. “Having by subtle fire a soule out-pull’d,” Donne writes in “The Bracelet,” referring to the process of extracting essences, alchemists “are dirtely and desperately gull’d” (ll. 45-6). Moreover, they deceive others, creating an aura of mystery around their craft to entice gullible individuals to buy their products or accept their coins of base, rather than precious, metal. “Loves Alchymie” scoffs at this aura of mystery, equating it with that which surrounds women. Women have an innate virtue, which the speaker identifies by the Paracelsian term “*Mummy*” (l. 24). Beyond that, the speaker concludes cynically, they are sweet and stupid at best.<sup>29</sup> “Oh, ‘tis imposture all”, he maintains, referring both to women and to alchemical processes (l. 6). Still, alchemy can have useful by-products: it can “by the way” yield ‘some odorif’rous thing, or med’cinal,” releasing from metals a healing substance (ll. 9-10). Donne is dubious about these by-products, though, as he suggests here and in a letter to his close friend, Sir Henry Goodyer, from 19 August 1614. Describing a failed attempt to obtain financial support from Thomas Egerton, his former employer and uncle-in-law, he writes bitterly, “My Lord Chancellor [Egerton] gave me so noble and so ready a despatch, accompanied with so fatherly advice and remorse for my fortunes, that I am now, like an alchemist, delighted with discoveries by the way though I attain not mine end.” Egerton’s patronizing sympathy does nothing to relieve Donne’s financial woes, proving as useless as an alchemist’s “discoveries by the way.”<sup>30</sup>

Donne’s ambivalence towards both alchemy and patronage tempers even his most effusive praise of patrons. In a recurring trope, Donne claims his subject material—a particular patron—is like an alchemical elixir that transforms his verse into something lasting and valuable. But he suggests also, however subtly, that his poetry’s value stems from his insights and talents as a writer. He is the poet-alchemist whose skill, as much as his subject matter, makes his verse enduring. His poetic

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<sup>29</sup> Robin Robbins notes that “it is implied that any “wit” that women possess in addition to this natural virtue comes from men.” See *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins (New York, 2010), 222.

<sup>30</sup> Donne, *Letters*, 172, as cited in *Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robbins, 222.

abilities set him apart from others seeking patronage, he implies, making him uniquely worthy of a patron's social and financial backing.

If Donne presents himself as the alchemist in these epistles, his recipients—patrons—are either gullible clients, deceived by his inflated claims, or co-conspirators, eager to mock and take advantage of a corrupt court. He invites his friend Garrat to be the latter. Garrat and Donne were fellow lodgers at a house in the Strand from approximately 1607 to 1611, when Donne was most in need of patronage. The two “became firm friends”, according to Donne’s biographer R. C. Bald, who notes that Garrat (also spelled Garrard) admired Donne’s poetry: “Writing to Viscount Wentworth several years after Donne’s death, Garrard says that he encloses “Verses made in the Progress. I that never had Patience in all my Life to transcribe Poems, except they were very transcendent, such as Dean *Donn* writ in his younger Days, did these with some Pain” (*The Earl of Strafforde’s Letters and Dispatches*, i. 338).” Garrat was part of “a wealthy merchant family” and was in a position to support Donne financially.<sup>31</sup>

In a sort of extended joke, Donne pretends in his letter to lay bare his less-than-noble intentions. He writes that, like an alchemist, he wishes he could “perswade” Garrat to believe that his creation—this letter—has true value as it conveys its author’s affection. Also like an alchemist (he claims), he plans to use his creation as a form of currency. Short letters are like “single money,” and dealing in them “becomes my fortune,” Donne puns: it fits both his finances and his situation in life. He can afford only small pieces of paper, and not more expensive sheets. Moreover, short requests for money are less obnoxious than long ones, so his “little Letters” suit his “fortune,” or fate, as a poet reliant on patrons. Extending his comparison of letters to pieces of metal, Donne switches analogies: no longer coins, his letters are now “hail-shot” with which he hits potential patrons. (Longer letters, meanwhile, are like “great bullets” less likely to hit targets.)

But then, in an inversion of roles, Donne invites Garrat to be the alchemist. He asks him, as a favor, to write letters to Donne’s potential patrons, telling them that Donne has permission to “keep” Garrat’s name. This permission was a type of

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<sup>31</sup> Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford, 1970), 159.

currency in England's courtly circles.<sup>32</sup> It could open doors for Donne, compelling other patrons to pledge their support. Donne compares Garrat's letters to yet another type of currency. "The gold of your Letter" will be Garrat's endorsement, Donne tells his friend, while the rest—"as much newes as you will"—will serve as "allay". The effect will be like that of mixing a precious metal with an inferior one: it will create an alloy that is stronger and more resistant to corrosion than the precious metal.<sup>33</sup> Patrons are more likely to believe and be swayed by Garrat's endorsement if he mentions it casually, in letters on unrelated subjects. Garrat must take these precautions because most declarations of loyalty in courtly circles are suspected—rightly—of being insincere. Like base metals, Donne contends, these pledges of friendship have little value; still, they are used like money to buy social advancement or, as in Donne's case, patronage.

Even as Donne mocks the convention of professing one's affection for a patron, he succeeds in conveying such affection for Garrat, casting his friend as a fellow alchemist and conspirator. Donne cannot pay Garrat for his services; he can, however, share with him the satisfaction of knowing that both friends are superior to—and taking advantage of—the court's foolishness. There is a value to be derived from maintaining their friendship, Donne suggests, that is greater and more permanent than the fluctuating worth of a patron's endorsement or a poet's praise.

### III. "The tincture of your name": The alchemical basis of Donne's flattery

Donne's analogies linking alchemical medicine to patronage offer competing ways to measure value. He discusses the value of his lyrics to patrons; of their endorsements to him; of verse, generally; of flattery; of written pleas for patronage; of virtue, relative to the court and to Platonic ideals. Knowing his addressees expect

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<sup>32</sup> A patron's name could serve also as protection: as Graham Parry notes, "A seriously unpleasant social scene is revealed by many [printed volume] dedications of the sixteenth century, and one can understand why a patron's name might make wanton censors hold their tongues for fear of retaliation from a powerful hand." See Graham Parry, "Literary Patronage," in *History of Early Modern English Literature*, ed. Loewenstein and Mueller, 118.

<sup>33</sup> "alloy," n., in *OED Online* <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> accessed 30 June 2015.

flattery, he will do his part, often playfully. But when he mentions alchemy in these contexts, he tends to be alluding—however discreetly—to the tediousness and insincerity of a patronage culture in which he must participate. This is true even of his addresses to Lucy Russell, the Countess of Bedford, whose intellect and integrity Donne clearly respected. He knew his verse letters to Russell and others would be circulated at court, so any critique of patronage rituals is not necessarily targeted at letters’ recipients.<sup>34</sup>

Before exploring how this subtle cynicism pervades Donne’s verse letters, I want to address the alchemical basis of a fundamental claim of these letters—that their addressees will transform Donne’s lyrics. We see one version of this premise in his verse letter (“To E. of D. with six holy sonnets”) from 1592 to the Earl of Derby, a friend and fellow poet from his coterie at Lincoln’s Inn. He teases his friend by calling him an alchemist, a term that—at least for Donne—was not exactly complimentary (l. 13). The sonnet is about crafting verse, and Derby is an alchemist because a poet, Donne suggests. Derby’s verse inspires Donne’s, “mak[ing] good things of bad,” like alchemical fire (l. 14). Fire “doth ... ripen, and digest all things,” as Michael Sedziwoj claims in *New Light of Alchymie* (1650).<sup>35</sup> Derby’s judgment is like purifying “fire” in an alchemical furnace, while his wit is like an alchemist’s “one spark” (ll. 11, 14). The poem’s analogies offer Derby praise that is jokingly hyperbolic. Would a fraction of Derby’s wit, the equivalent of “one spark,” actually “make good things of bad” in Donne’s verse? Probably not, as both friends knew.

In his verse letters to patrons, Donne refrains from taking the same liberties that he takes with Derby. He portrays his addressees—or, more specifically, their names—as purifying agents, not deceitful alchemists. He discusses the ways in which Russell purifies his verse in a verse letter (“On New-yeares day”) that invokes alchemy.<sup>36</sup> “Mine [rhymes] are short liv’ d;” he writes:

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of how Donne’s verse letters were circulated beyond their original recipients, see Daniel Starza Smith, “Donne’s Verse Letters,” in *John Donne and the Conway Papers: Patronage and Manuscript Circulation in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 2014), 175-195.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Sedziwoj, *New Light of Alchymie* (London, 1650), 99.

<sup>36</sup> For more on Bedford’s role as an influential literary patron of the period, see Mary Ellen Lamb, “The Countess of Pembroke’s Patronage,” *ELR* 12 (1982), 162-79; and

... the tincture of your name  
Creates in them, but dissipates as fast,  
New spirit: for, strong agents with the same  
Force that doth warme and cherish, us doe wast;  
Kept hot with strong extracts, no bodies last: (ll. 16-20)

By consenting to be Donne's subject, Bedford lends her name to his lyrics, injecting them with "tincture": an elixir that revives their vital essence, or spirit. Donne is referring to an alchemical process that uses 'strong agents'—such as the sun or nitric acid—to heat metals, sparking a reaction that releases metals' essence.<sup>37</sup> Like those agents, Bedford's name releases the essence of Donne's verse, inspiring his most eloquent writing. Her name also transforms his verse in the eyes of readers, signaling that it merits her highly sought-after respect. But her name makes his lyrics 'short liv'd' (l. 16). Strong agents were thought to destroy an alchemical mixture before releasing its spirit.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Bedford's name dooms Donne's "just praise" to being dismissed as flattery, rendering it as lifeless as alchemical by-products (l. 21).

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Barbara Lewalski, "Lucy, Countess of Bedford: Images of a Jacobean Courtier and Patroness," in Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (eds.), *Politics of Discourse* (Berkeley, 1987).

<sup>37</sup> Robbins, 667.

<sup>38</sup> Lyndy Abraham's *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge, 1998) describes the process of "killing" a metallic mixture to release its essence: "After the union of the male and female seeds [or essence] of metals ... the united pair are killed and their bodies lie putrefying in the bottom of the alembic while their vital seed or virtue (sometimes called soul, other times spirit) is released. Alchemical theory stated that generation could not take place unless there had first been a death and corruption of the body to release the vital seed. An abstract made by Isaac Newton from *La Lumiere sortant par soy meme des tenebres* stated: "But this seed is unprofitable unless it rot and become black, for corruption always precedes generation ..." (Dobbs, *Janus*, 281). At the death of the body or bodies, the seed or soul flies to the top of the vessel while the blackened body below is washed and cleansed of its impurities." See Abraham, 85.

Contemporary readers would have known that Bedford was a famous patron of the arts, making them suspect Donne's motives for calling her "a thing so high" (l. 29). Donne must rein in his praise of Bedford for it to be taken seriously, he claims—before he does just the opposite.

Even if Donne's tone here is not as mocking as when he addressed Derby, it is still tongue-in-cheek. A strong agent "doth warme and cherish" metals, he writes. He depicts these agents fawning over the alchemical process to an extent that invites mockery, like the alchemist who "glorifies his pregnant pot" in "Loves Alchymie". He extends his ironic tone when he claims that readers:

... will doubt how I  
One corne of one low anthills dust, and lesse,  
Should name, know, or expresse a thing so high,  
And not an inch, measure infinity. (ll. 27-30)

Next to Bedford's infinite greatness, Donne is a tiny speck of dust in a miniscule anthill; actually, he is "lesse" than that. Readers cannot doubt Bedford's virtue but they might doubt Donne's ability, as the lowliest of all beings, to portray it. Jacobean England's culture of patronage encouraged such sycophantic gestures in verse letters to patrons. Even by the genre's standards, though, Donne's praise of Bedford and deprecation of himself is excessive. He is teasing Bedford, a frequent addressee and friend as well as patron. Their personal relationship is built on a business transaction that requires him to fulfill certain duties, such as eternizing Bedford in verse. He will do his part, he seems to say, but only with humor, despite the risk that other readers of the circulated letter will not catch his irony.

In his letters to patrons, Donne suggests that he alone has the ability to recognize, appreciate, and preserve an addressee's virtue in verse. He will be an exegete of sorts for his recipients, interpreting them so the rest of the court can appreciate their value. When he writes that he will decipher the "darke text" of Russell's virtue—in a verse letter I will discuss in the next section—he suggests that her virtue requires explanation because the court is too corrupt to appreciate it.<sup>39</sup> But

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<sup>39</sup> Donne, "Madame, you have refin'd mee," l. 11.

there is also the teasing implication that, like an alchemist, he is transmuting a substance into something better: a claim Russell might have found less than flattering.

A key aim of Renaissance epideictic was to make addressees better by showing them idealized versions of themselves.<sup>40</sup> In verse letters, Donne is not proposing that his pseudo-medical claims about patrons' virtue are actually true. He is attempting, rather, to make them see themselves—and him, by extension—in a new way. This is slightly different from what a contemporary poet, Ben Jonson, offers patrons in verse letters. Arthur Marotti cites a letter of Jonson's to his patron, the Earl of Pembroke, in which Jonson argues that if patrons "answere not, in all numbers, the pictures I have made of them: I hope it will be forgiven me, that they are no ill pieces, though they be not like ther persons."<sup>41</sup> Jonson claims posterity will value his poetic gifts regardless of his addressee's merits: his poems are not "ill pieces," after all, although his addressees might be. His not-so-implicit challenge to Pembroke is to live up to his praise, establishing a reputation through actions rather than a poet's compliments. "The would-be morally superior poet thus patronizes patrons," as Marotti notes.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of these patrons' worthiness, Jonson will build them a monument that preserves them as paragons of virtue, not as individuals. Donne, too, offers to disguise patrons' failings in his verse, as in his epistle to the Countess of Huntingdon, which I discuss in the final section. But he provides also elaborate, inventive conceits, based on medical theories, that will remain in the minds of patrons after they finish reading his letters. He offers inspiration, in addition to inflated praise.

#### IV. "By despis'd dung": Teasing the Countess of Bedford

Donne's footing with patrons was precarious. As Aers and Kress have argued, his letters to patrons express a delicate blend of assertion and meekness as he both

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<sup>40</sup> Laurence Stapleton, "The Theme of Virtue in Donne's Verse Epistles," *Studies in Philology*, 55 (1958), 187.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Marotti, "Patronage, Poetry, and Print," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 21 (1991), 23.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

declares his value and defers to patrons.<sup>43</sup> In a characteristic letter to Lucy, Countess of Bedford (“Madame, you have refin”d me”), that Aers and Kress cite, Donne insists that he can offer Bedford a unique service. He will serve as her exegete, interpreting and preserving her essence—virtue—for posterity; “For, as darke texts need notes: there some must bee / To usher vertue, and say, *This is shee*” (ll. 11-12). Bedford’s virtue needs an interpreter, especially in the corrupt “Court, which is not vertues clime” (l. 7). Her virtue has relative value against this corruption, and objective value as part of the world’s “worthiest things” (l. 1). Despite Donne’s own lowly status, he is able to appreciate both the relative and objective merit of her virtue and can, moreover, convey its essence in writing, as he demonstrates in his letter. As such, he can be as useful to Bedford as she is to him, he argues. Like an alchemist, she “refin”d” him during the course of their friendship, introducing him to virtue that cured some of his innate human frailties. Now it is his turn to serve as alchemist, distilling her essence into verse (l. 1).

Donne’s wry awareness of the absurdities of seeking patronage tempers his praise. In another letter to Bedford (“Honor is so sublime perfection”), he revives his promise to interpret Bedford’s virtue and convey its essence in his verse. He is especially suited to this task, he argues, because of his lowly status. He justifies this claim with a reference to chemical medicine’s techniques:

For when from herbs the pure part must be wonne  
From grosse, by Stilling, this is better done  
By despis”d dung, then by the fire or Sunne.  
Care not then, Madame, how low your prayes lye;  
In labourers balads oft more piety  
God findes, then in *Te Deums* melodie. (ll. 10-15)

As Robbins notes, Donne is “referring to the extraction of plant-essences for medicinal purposes.”<sup>44</sup> His allusion is unusually precise. Typically, his mentions of

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<sup>43</sup> David Aers and Gunther Kress, ““Darke Texts Need Notes”: Versions of Self in Donne’s Verse Epistles,” in *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur Marotti (New York, 1994), 102-22.

<sup>44</sup> Robbins, 689.



chemical medicine focus on elixir and tinctures, as when he compares the “tincture” of Bedford’s name to hot, alchemical agents in his New Year’s letter. But here, he refers to a particular method of distillation that relies on dung. Hieronymus Brunschwig explains this method in his *The vertuose boke of distyllacyon ... or all maner of herbes*, translated from Dutch and published in English in 1528. In a chapter called “To dystylle in horse dounge,” Brunschwig explains that the distilling apparatus, or alembic, should be placed in warm horse dung. This will cause water vapor to condense on the inner walls of the alembic, heating and moistening its contents. “Thus ye haue the fourthe maner of dystyllacyon with out fyer,” Brunschwig concludes, offering the context for Donne’s reference to using dung instead of fire.<sup>45</sup>

By referring to this method and comparing himself to dung, Donne is contrasting himself with Bedford to stress his own insignificance—in terms of his finances, his social standing, his virtue, and his value as an individual. As in the two letters to Bedford this article cited previously (“On New Year’s Day” and “Madame, you have refin’d me”), he expounds his nothingness. He claims he is “despis’d dung” even though he knows he is a favorite of Bedford. (He wrote the letter around 1609–11, when he and Bedford were well acquainted.<sup>46</sup>) According to his letter’s argument, his lowliness means he is distanced enough from Bedford to see and express her virtue with clarity. He compares his poetry to a related art form, music, arguing that a laborer’s humble lyrics are often more sincere than ostentatious shows of devotion. Again, he is being jocular—he is not a laborer, however dire his finances—but his lines imply a challenge to other elaborate displays, such as alchemy and pleas for patronage. There is greater value in simpler procedures, he suggests, making his obsequious show of deference in this letter slightly ridiculous. Sometimes, dung is more effective than complex alchemical processes; likewise, he implies, more direct exchanges might be more effective—or at least more genuine—than extended pleas for patronage. He highlights the distinction between sincerity and ceremonial show when he contrasts ballads with “*Te Deums* melodie” (l. 15). Ballads offer a simple, spontaneous expression of faith, whereas the ancient Latin hymn of praise ritualizes

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<sup>45</sup> Hieronymus Brunschwig, *The vertuose boke of distyllacyon ... of all maner of herbes* (London, 1528), sig. V3<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Robbins, 689.

the process of giving thanks. The latter is less heartfelt because more formal, Donne suggests. He uses this distinction to imply that a simple, honest request for patronage might be preferable to a series of exaggerated compliments.

These extended pleas were nonetheless expected, even by addressees like Bedford who were friends as well as patrons. Donne's challenge, then, was to match a letter's tone to his rapport with a particular addressee, taking as many liberties as he safely could. The way a letter refers to alchemical medicine reveals the nature of Donne's relationship with a patron at a certain moment in time. With Bedford, he is able to relax his tone slightly, although he remains aware of her powerful position. He feels a sufficient level of intimacy to be self-referential about the genre. One of his earliest letters to her ("Reason is our soul's left hand") is more cautious than his epistle cited above. Its fourth line suggests he had only recently met her, and his tone is carefully fawning as he attempts to secure her patronage. As Robin Robbins notes, he was successful: within a year, "they were on close enough terms for her to stand godmother to Donne's daughter Lucy [likely named after Bedford] on 6 August 1608."<sup>47</sup>

When he refers to alchemical cures in this early letter to Bedford, his tone is more earnest than playful. He tells her,

In every thing there naturally growes  
A *Balsamum* to keepe it fresh, and new, ...  
Your birth and beauty are this Balme in you. (ll. 21-4)

Balms or *balsamum vitae* are the "all-healing, animating life-principle both internal and external to man, which preserves bodies from disease and putrefaction," according to Paracelsus.<sup>48</sup> Balsam is also the "quintessence" produced by alchemy's fifth and final distillation. Donne adapts Paracelsus's view that a person's internal balm will protect her from disease. He claims Bedford's inherent qualities—her ancestry and beauty—will preserve her from earthly threats until she assumes her rightful place in heaven. Extending his compliment, he also extends his references to contemporary medicine and health regimens. Bedford's "learning and religion" and

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<sup>47</sup> Robbins, 671.

<sup>48</sup> Abraham, 16.

“virtue” are like “methridate,” a universal cure against poisons, and like a good “dyet,” thought to prevent illness (ll. 25-30). She actively cultivates these qualities. Combined with her innate virtue, they will protect her from earthly corruption and frailties. With these references to various cures, Donne seems to be catering to Bedford’s pride in her “learning” (l. 25) while establishing his own learnedness and wit—qualities that could secure Bedford’s patronage.

#### V. “Copies, not originals”: Manipulating the Countess of Huntington

Donne returns to balms and elixirs in a verse letter (“Man to God’s image”) to Elizabeth Stanley, the Countess of Huntington, from 1609, about a year after he addressed Bedford in the above letter. Sir Henry Goodyer had encouraged Donne, his close friend, to write to Huntington to pursue her patronage. Donne claimed he was reluctant to do so because of his loyalty to “the other Countess,” Bedford, for whose “delight (since she descends to them) I had reserved not only all verses which I should make, but all the thoughts of women’s worthiness.”<sup>49</sup> Still, he decides to proceed, hoping “that she [Bedford] will not disdain that I should write well of her [Huntington’s] picture.” Huntington was the daughter of the Earl of Derby, whom Donne calls an alchemist in the verse letter (“To E. of D. with six holy sonnets”) I cited earlier in this article. Through her husband, she was also Bedford’s cousin. Goodyer had claimed that Huntington had a “lively interest” in Donne, Bald writes.<sup>50</sup> Donne agrees to address a verse letter to her, but is concerned that she is not ‘sufficiently intelligent to appreciate his verses’.<sup>51</sup> James Knowles contends, however, that Huntington was “respected by writers and intellectuals” for her intelligence and education, so she would have merited Donne’s praise of her learning. She gave substantial patronage to clients despite her relatively modest means.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Donne, *Letters*, 103-4, as cited by Robbins, p. 696.

<sup>50</sup> Bald, 179.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> James Knowles, “Hastings, Elizabeth, countess of Huntingdon (bap. 1587, d. 1633),” in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <[www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com)> accessed 20 Jul 2015.

Cheekily, after professing his loyalty to Bedford, Donne gives Huntington a compliment remarkably similar to the one he gave Bedford a year earlier. Again, he depicts virtue preserving his addressee as though it were alchemical medicine. He writes,

She [Virtue] gilded us: But you are gold, and Shee,  
Us she inform'd, but transubstantiates you,  
Soft dispositions which ductile bee,  
Elixarlike, she makes not cleane, but new. (ll. 25-8)

Donne's lines return to the theory that everyone has an internal "balm," or a healing, life-giving force. In Huntington, this balm is virtue, a quality that is only superficial in most people. Donne compares this virtue to an elixir of gold, a potent alchemical cure. He argues that virtue was once "in all men," but it was only "thinly scatter'd" (l. 23): it gilded men, coloring their appearance without changing their fundamental nature. Virtue has "inform'd" humans in the sense that it teaches them, shaping their minds and characters.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, virtue is so concentrated in Huntington that it transforms her, turning her into gold. The verb "transubstantiate" is an alchemical term with religious overtones, referring to the process of transmuting substances into gold. According to Paracelsus's *Book Concerning Long Life*, when a person imbibes an elixir of gold, her body turns "into the stuff of the elixir" yet it "retains its same outward form."<sup>54</sup> So, although Huntington is pure, heavenly virtue, she can continue to interact with humans: to react, almost chemically, with them. Like elixir that transmutes other metals to gold, she will turn acquaintances who are 'soft' and "ductile"—qualities required of metals undergoing transmutation—into new, better people.<sup>55</sup> By distinguishing between the effects of Huntington's virtue on her and on others, Donne refers subtly to the help she might afford him by being his patron and supporter.

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<sup>53</sup> "inform," v., in *OED Online* <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> accessed 30 June 2015.

<sup>54</sup> *Writings of Paracelsus*, ed. and tr. A. E. Waite, vol. 2, 333-4; as cited by Duncan, 273.

<sup>55</sup> Robbins, 699.

Donne's tone as he addresses Huntington is carefully assertive. Admitting that his excessive praise might look like flattery, he quickly turns his admission into additional flattery, in a passage I quoted earlier in this article: "If you can think these flatteries, they are, / For then your judgment is below my praise" (ll. 49-50). If she discredits his sincerity completely, she is not as virtuous as he has presented her. His claim is a move to assert his position, to offset his vulnerability as he vies for patronage. As it turned out, he was increasing his vulnerability by jeopardizing his relationship with Bedford, to whom he later insisted that other women were "Copies, not originals" of Bedford's virtue and beauty ("Though I be dead," l. 25).

"Copies, not originals" could apply as well to his compliments in verse letters, which draw often on the same theories of alchemical medicine. Despite their shared themes, however, his letters are remarkably varied. He realizes that his letters will be circulated at court; even so, he is careful to match the tone and content of letters" alchemical imagery to his relationship with an addressee at a certain moment in time. In a sense, this tailored product is precisely what he is selling to patrons. His letters argue—implicitly or explicitly—that he alone has the insight to interpret patrons; also, he alone has the poetic skills to express their essence in verse. As he tells Bedford, "darke texts need notes," and he is willing to be his patrons' exegete—to make their qualities and virtue apparent to everyone—in return for their endorsement and financial backing.<sup>56</sup> He will assess their value objectively, relative to ideals of virtue, and subjectively, relative to the court's corruption. He will also contrast their value with his own, stressing his lowliness while also asserting his utility as a poet. He uses chemical medicine as an analogy for his efforts to extract a patron's essence, referring both to her wealth and to her virtue. But this analogy also opens up discussion of other areas: of power struggles and commercial interactions within the court, and of currency, in terms of monetary value and of relevance. Donne's references to chemical cures are invitations to reflect on the complex social dynamics of his courtly setting; they are not, ultimately, about alchemy.

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<sup>56</sup> Donne, "Madame, you have refin'd mee," l. 11.

ABSTRACT:

Critics have discussed how Donne's writing responds to alchemy and to patronage, but none has examined how he draws parallels between the two frameworks. He sees both as convoluted, frustrating processes that rely on falseness. Comparing his praise to alchemical coins—the quality of which was considered dubious—he attempts to persuade patrons that his flattering epistles are nonetheless “currant” in possessing both social relevance and monetary value. Reading these letters alongside contemporary alchemical tracts, this article traces how Donne's references to alchemy explore the complex relationships between verse and value in the Jacobean court.

(95 words)