

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 21 : Reading alchemical poetry

A considerable amount of alchemical writings are in the form of poetry, or perhaps we should say written in 'verse'. Very little of this can be ranked even with the poorest of poets. Instead alchemists were using an established literary form, which was often used to express philosophical ideas not just poetic sentiments. The beauty of the poetic form lies in its use of rhyme, the beat of the syllables in the metre of the line and the delight of poetic imagery and expression. Few alchemical verses can aspire to these heights.

In order to read such alchemical poetry, which does not seem to be blessed with beauty of form and expression, I believe we must aim more at grasping the meaning of the text rather than respecting the format in which it is expressed. In the hands of a poor poet, the necessity to rhyme each line, means struggling with word order at the expense of clarity. In my study course on the Early English alchemical texts in Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* I chose to demonstrate the meaning contained in these 15th, 16th and 17th century verses by translating them into modern English. I suspect this is the only way to clearly grasp the ideas in a piece of almost barbarous alchemical poetry.

Here is an example from some verses written by Sir Edward Kelley, *Concerning the Philosopher's Stone written to his especial good Friend, G. S. Gent.*

The heavenly Cope hath in him Natures fower,
Two hidden; but the rest to sight appeare:
Wherein the Spermes of all the Bodies lower;
Most secrett are, yet spring forth once a yeare,
And as the Earth with Water, Authors are,
So of his parte is Drines end of care.

The heavenly vault has four Natures in itself,
Two are hidden; but the rest appear to sight:
Wherein the sperms of all the lower bodies ;
Are most secret, yet spring forth once a year,
And as the Earth with Water, are the authors,
So is dryness, of his part, the end of care.

The method I advise is firstly to 'translate' the verse into a modern word forms and modern word order, inserting punctuation as necessary, and creating a blank verse (which need not scan syllabically). Of course, we can push this process too far and inadvertently press an interpretation onto the text, and rather than just making it more comprehensible, we find that we have added our own layer of interpretation. So we must constantly remain alert to this. This blank verse can act as an intermediate step to our reading the meaning out of the text. We can then attempt to read this as connected prose. Thus for the Kelley piece we might say

In the world under the vault of heaven there are four natures. Two of these are hidden but the other two are visible. Kelly is here referring to the four elements, fire and air being the hidden ones, while water and earth are the more visible elements. In the visible ones, water and earth, are the seeds of all the bodies in the lower world. These are hidden there, but show themselves once a year. It is earth and water which are the authors out of which the plants grow, but dryness plays its part also in this process.

Let us now look at a substantial and key work of Sir George Ripley, one of the most important of English alchemists. This is his *Cantilena* or ‘Song’, probably originally written in Latin. This English translation by was made over a century after the original was written. You will find it extremely useful to have access to the full Oxford English Dictionary in order to understand the early word forms. From this we see that a ‘Cantilena’ is the plain-song or canto-fermo in old church music, the melody or ‘air’ in any composition, the ‘fixed song’ around which the harmonies are attached, now usually the highest part.

Behold ! and in this Cantilena see
The hidden secrets of Philosophy :
What Joy ariseth from the Merry veins
Of Minds Elated by such dulcid Straines !

Behold and see in this song
The hidden secrets of philosophy
What joy arises from the merry veins
Of minds elated by such dulcet strains.

Through Roman Countreys as I once did passe
Where Mercuries Nuptiall Celebrated was,
And feeding stoutly (on the Bride-Groomes score)
I learn'd these Novelties unknowne before.

As I once did pass through Roman countries
Where the wedding of Mercury was celebrated
And feeding stoutly (on the bridegroom's score)
I learned these new things before unknown.

Having thus ‘translated’ this into more modern English we could perhaps read it as follows. George Ripley is going to show us through his song, the hidden secrets of the alchemical philosophy, so that the very veins of our mind will be filled and elated by these sweet verses. He begins by telling us that he once travelled though Italy where he saw that the wedding of the God Mercury was still celebrated, and he fed well at the bridegroom's [the Italians'] expense and learned many things that before were unknown to him. Ripley as a churchman indeed visited Italy and studied philosophy there.

There was a certaine Barren King by Birth,
Composed of the Purest, Noblest Earth,
By Nature Sanguine (which is faire) yet hee
Sadly bewailed his Authoritie.

There was a certain King, barren by birth,
Composed of the purest and noblest earth,
Sanguine (which is fair) in his nature
Yet he sadly bewailed his authority.

Wherefore am I a King, and Head of all
Those Men and things that be Corporeall ?
I have no issue, yet (I'll not deny)
Tis Mee both Heaven and Earth are Ruled by.

Wherefore [for what reason] am I a king
And head of all those men and corporeal things,
For I have no issue, and yet I will not deny
That it is me that rules both Heaven and Earth.

Yet there is either a Cause Naturall
Or some Defect in the Originall:
For though the Wombe I never opened
I under Titan's wings was nourished.

Yet there is either a natural cause
Or some defect in the original
For though I never opened the womb
I was nourished under Titan's wings.

Among these new things that Ripley learned in Italy was that some alchemical knowledge which he is here going to tell us through an allegory. He begins his story by telling us of a certain mythological king who though barren and having no offspring, yet being composed of the purest and most noble matter, ruled over all things in heaven and earth, even though he could have no children. He did not know if this was due to some natural cause or some defect in his origins, for this king himself had not been born from the womb, though he had been nourished under the wings of a Titan. This King thus appears to stand outside the lineage of the Gods, perhaps even emerging before the world came into being.

Each vegative which from the Earth proceeds
Ariseth up with its own proper Seeds :
And Animalls (at Seasons) speciously
Abound with Fruit, and strangely Multiply.

But yet my Nature is so much Restrain'd
No Tincture from my Body can be gain'd :
And therefore it is Infoecund : nor can
It ought availe, in Generating Man.

My Body's Masse is of a Lasting-Stuffe,
Exceeding Delicate, yet hard enough :
And when the Fire Assays to try my Sprite,
I am not found to weigh a grain too light.

Each growing thing that proceeds from the Earth
Rises up with its own proper seeds.
And animals in the season proper to their species
Abound with fruit [sperm] and strongly multiply.

But yet my nature is so much restrained
That no tincture can be gained from my body
And therefore it is infecund.
Nor can it avail in any way in generating Man.

My body's mass is of a lasting stuff
Exceedingly delicate, yet hard enough
And when the fire assays to test my spirit
I am not found to weigh a grain too light.

Every plant that grows on the earth creates its own particular seed from which more can grow. Similarly with animals, which multiply through their sperm at the time proper to the particular species. Yet the king's nature is more restrained, so that no tincture can be made from his body so that he is infecund, that is producing no offspring. Neither can he assist in the creation of humans. The king's body is made from a more enduring material than plants, animals or men, which though very delicate is strong enough to endure the test of the fire, so much so that he is found not to weigh even a grain too light.

My Mother got me of a Sphaere, that I
Might contemplate the Globes Rotunditie ;
And be more Pure of kind than other things,
By Right of Dignity Assisting Kings.

Yet to my Griefe I know, unlesse I find
Forthwith Assistance out of my owne Kind
I cannot Generate ; My Blood Growes Cold :
I am amaz'd to think I am so Old.

My mother begot me of a sphere
That I might contemplate the roundness of the globe
And be more pure of kind [nature] than other things.
By right of dignity, assisting kings.

Yet to my grief, I know, that unless I find assistance
From my own kind
I cannot generate, and my blood grown cold
I am amazed to think I am so old.

The king believes that his mother begot him of a heavenly sphere, so that he might better contemplate the roundness of the earth, and become more pure in nature than all other things, so that by right of this dignity, he would be able to assist other kings. Yet he now realises that unless he finds help from those of his own kind, he cannot reproduce and his blood will grow cold. He is becoming aware just how old he now is.

Death me Assail'd, even in my Strength of yeares,
But yet Christ's voice did penetrate the Sphaeres,
And (to Amazement) told me from above
I should Revive ; I know well by whose Love.

By other meanes I cannot enter Heaven :
And therefore (that I may be Borne agen)
I'll Humbled be into my Mother's Breast
Dissolve to what I was. And therein rest.

Death assailed me, even in my strength of years,
But yet Christ's voice did penetrate the spheres
And (to my amazement) told me from above
That I should revive. I know well by whose love.

By no other means can I enter Heaven
And therefore (in order that I will be born again)
I will be humbled into my mother's breast
Dissolved into what I was, and rest there.

Death attacked him even in his old age, but then Christ's voice penetrated the heavenly spheres and to his amazement told him that he should revive. He knows that this was through Christ's love.

Ripley was, of course, a churchman, ultimately becoming a Canon in the Monastery at Bridlington in Yorkshire, so it is not surprising that his alchemy has a Christian dimension. Only by being reborn can the king enter Heaven and in order to do this he must return to his mother's breast and dissolve back into what he was before, and rest there.

Hereat the Mother Animates the King,
Hasts his Conception, and doth forthwith bring
And hide him closely underneath her Traine
Till (of herselfe) sh'had made him Flesh againe.

'Twas wonderfull to see with what a grace
This Naturall Union (made at one Imbrace)
Did looke ; and by a League both sexes knitt,
Like to a Hill and Aire surrounding it.

At this his mother animates [gives life to] the king
Hastens his conception, and brings him forth
And hides him closely underneath her traine [gown]
Until she had made him flesh (of herself) again.

It was wonderful to see with what grace
This natural union (made at one embrace) did look
And by a league both sexes were knit
Like to a hill and the air surrounding it.

Hearing this his mother appears and gives life to the king, hastening his conception and brings him to birth, hiding him under her gown until she had made him into her own flesh again. It was wonderful to see how graceful this natural union was, and how by this agreement both sexes (him and his mother) were united together, just as a hill is united to the air that surrounds it.

The Mother unto her Chast Chamber goes
Where in a Bed of Honour she Bestowes
Her weary'd selfe, 'twixt Sheets as white as Snow
And there makes Signes of her approaching woe.

Ranke Poison issuing from the Dying Man
Made her pure Orient face look foule and wan :
Hence she commands all Strangers to be gone
Seals upp her Chamber doore, and lyes Alone.

Meanwhile the Peacocks Flesh she kindly Eate,
And Dranke Greene-Lyons Blood (with that fine Meate)
Which Mercury (although in Passion :)
Brought in a Golden Cupp of Babilon.

The mother goes into her chaste chamber
And bestows her weary self on a bed of honour
Between sheets as white as snow
And there makes signs of her approaching woe.

Rank poison issuing from the dying man
Made her pure orient [lustrous] face look foul and wan
She commands all strangers to be gone from there
Seals up her chamber door, and lies alone.

Meanwhile she kindly ate the peacock's flesh
And with that fine meat drank green lions' blood
Which Mercury (although in passion)
Brought in a golden cup of Babylon.

The mother takes herself into her chamber in order to give birth, and lies in a bed of pure white sheets. She there makes all the signs of the approaching birth. From the king, now dying, a rank poison emerges which stains her pure lustrous pearl-like complexion, making her look foul, dark and livid, like a bruise. She command all strangers depart and seals up the door of her chamber to lie alone. There she eat the meat of peacocks and drank the blood of the green lion which the God Mercury brought to her in a golden cup made in Babylon. Here he have a key alchemical reference to two major alchemical ideas, that of the peacock with its multi-coloured tail and the green lion.

Thus great with Child, 9 months she languished
And Bath'd her with the Teares which she had shed
For his sweete sake, who should from her be Pluckt
Full-gorg'd with Milke which the Greene-Lyon suckt.

Her Skin of divers Colours did appeare
Now Black, then Greene, anon 'twas Read, and Cleare:
Oft-times she would sitt upright in her Bed,
And then again repose her Troubled Head.

Thus great with child she languished nine months
And bathed herself with the tears she had shed
For his sweet sake. He who should be plucked from her
Fully engorged with milk, which the green lion sucked.

Her skin did appear in diverse colours
Now black, then green, later was red and clear
Sometimes she would sit upright in her bed
And then again repose her troubled head.

In this way she lay nine month growing her child, bathing herself with the tears she had shed for his sake. Perhaps here we have a reference to the laboratory alchemy process of circulation, where a substance is heated in a flask and gives off vapour which condenses as drops on the cooler part of the flask which run down (like tears) onto the substance, and this process continuing and cycling indefinitely. The body of her child would be engorged with this milk, which the green lion sucked, perhaps another reference to the corrosive green lion sucking out the 'milk' from the body of the child substance. The mother (which here, if we allow this to be seen as an actual laboratory process, could be seen as the mother liquor) goes through a series of colour changes, from black, through green to a clear red. Sometimes she would sit upright in her bed, and other times lie down. Seen as a laboratory process this might mean that the mother liquor sometimes thickens and hardens into a solid mass which stands up in the flask, and at other times entirely liquefies and lies down in the vessel.

Thrice Fifty Nights she lay in grievous Plight,
As many daies in Mourning sate upright :
The King Revived was in thirty more
Whose Birth was Fragrant as the Prim-Rose Flower.

Three times fifty nights she lay down in a grievous state
And for as many days sat upright in mourning.
The king, whose birth was as fragrant as the primrose
Was revived in thirty more days.

Her wombe which well proportion'd was at First
Is now Enlarg'd a Thousand fold at least :
That of his Entrance Men might witness this
The End, by Fires, the best approved is.

Her womb, which was at first well proportioned
Became at least a thousand times larger
So that men might witness his entrance
The end is best approved by fires.

Ripley continues this allegory of the alchemical process with that of human birth. The mother lies 150 nights in a grievous state at the bottom of the flask, then for as many days she sat upright within the flask. The king was revived in only thirty days, and his birth was seen as a fragrant or pleasant process, like to the beautiful perfume of the primrose. The mother's womb enlarged a thousand times, so that men could see the birth of her son the king. This is to be brought about by fire.

Her Chamber's without Rocks, it smoothly stands,
With walls Erected like her Ivory Hands.
Or else the Fruit (for want of Fertile ground)
Had been nought worth, the Sonnes (to beare) unsound.

Her chamber is without rocks and stands smooth
With walls erected like her ivory hands
Or else the fruit for want of a fertile ground.
Had been of no worth, for the son to bear unsound.

One Staffe was placed underneath her Bed,
And on the same another Flourished :
Trimmed up with Art, and very Temperate,
Least her fine Limbs should freeze for lack of heate.

One stove was placed underneath her bed,
And another flourished in the same way
Trimmed up with art, and very temperate
Lest her fine limbs should freeze for want of heat.

Her Chamber doore was Lock'd and Bolted fast,
Admitting none to Trouble her, First, or Last :
The Furnace-Mouth likewise contrived, so,
That thence no vapourous Matter forth could goe.

Her chamber door was locked and bolted fast
Admitting none to trouble her, at the beginning or end
The furnace mouth was likewise contrived,
That no vapourous matter could go forth.

The mother's chamber, the alchemical vessel, is smooth and without rough parts. Its walls are like polished ivory. Otherwise the fruit which was growing within, would not have found a fertile ground and have come to nothing, so that her son would be born unsound. One stove or furnace was placed underneath this and another which was well trimmed by the alchemical art to be very temperate, made sure that her fine limbs should not freeze for lack of proper heat. The door of her chamber was fastened tight. Here we can see this as the flask being hermetically sealed, so that nothing could enter

in or leave. The mouth of the furnace was made in the same way so that no vapours could escape and ruin the process. We find Ripley here, as a celibate monk, seeing the female body as a kind of alchemical vessel within which the king/child could develop.

And when the Issue there was Putrified
The Fine from Filthy flesh she did Divide :
Resembling Phoebe in her Fullest Light
And Breathing, Sol himself was not more Bright.

And when the issue [the child] was putrefied there
She divided the fine from the filthy flesh
So as to resemble Phoebe in her fullest light
And Sol himself was not any more bright in his breathing.

Her time being come, what she conceiv'd before
Is now Re-borne, (sets ope her Chamber-door ;
And being soe) resumes a Kingly State
Possessing fully Heaven's Propitious Fate.

Her time had come.
What she had before conceived is now reborn
Sets open her chamber door and resumes a kingly state
Fully possessing the propitious fate of heaven.

When the child was properly putrefied she was able to divide the fine from the corrupted flesh. In this way she resembled Phoebe, the moon, in her brightest full phase, so that the sun, Sol, was not any brighter. Now her time to give birth had come and what she had earlier conceived is now reborn, so that the door of her chamber is opened and her son emerges reborn in a kingly state, with the blessing of the heavens. Here in laboratory alchemical terms, the flask is opened and the product of the operation is removed successfully.

The Mother's Bed which erst stood in a Square
Is shortly after made Orbicular :
And on each side the Covering (as Round)
With Luna's Lustre Rightly doth Abound.

The mother's bed which earlier stood in a square
Shortly after is made orbicular [round]
And on each side the covering all around
Does abound rightly with the lustre of Luna.

Thus from a square, the Bed a Globe is made
Fair, white, and cleare emerges from the shade
Of Night, whence doth a Ruddy Nature spring
T'enjoy the Merry Scepter of a King.

Thus the bed is made from a square into a globe
From the shades of night, emerges fair, white and clear
From which a ruddy red nature springs out
To enjoy the merry sceptre of a king.

The mother's bed, which firstly was square now becomes round, and is surrounded on all sides with the lustre of Luna, the moon. Perhaps, in alchemical laboratory terms, this bed is the furnace within which the mother was being heated. This turns from a square form to a round one. Out of the darkness this white clear light emerges, which later becomes glowing red in the form of the sceptre of the king.

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

God set open the Gates of Paradise
Where Cythia decked him [king] in celestial garments
Sublimed him up to heaven, and when she had done
Crowned him in glory, equal with the sun.

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

God gave him four elements, brave arms, well polished
In the midst whereof did dwell a crowned maid
Ordained to be
In the fifth circle [of the Mystery]

God now set open the Gates of Paradise, and Cynthia the sister of Apollo, the Sun God, dressed the reborn king in celestial garments, and sublimed or raised him up into heaven, and crowned him in glory, as equal to the sun. God gave him four elements, and strong arms. In the midst of the heavenly space of the fifth circle of the mystery, there lived a crowned maiden. Exactly what the fifth circle

can be is unclear. In the 15th century view, the cosmos consisted of a number of spheres separating the earth from the highest heavens. There are eight of these spheres from the lowest that of the Moon through, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sphere of the Fixed stars, and the sphere of the Prime mover. Perhaps we have a reference to the fifth circle as the quintessence, completing the mastery over the four elements, given to the king by God.

With all delicious unguent flowed she
When Purg'd from Bloody Menstruosity :
On every side her Count'nance Brightly shone,
She being adorn'd with every Precious Stone.

She flowed with all delicious unguents
When purged from bloody menstruosity
Her countenance shone brightly on every side
She being adorned with every precious stone.

A Lyon Greene did in her Lapp reside
(the which an Eagle fed) and from whose Side
Blood gushed out : the virgin drunck it upp,
Whilst Mercury's Hand did th'Office of a Cupp.

A green lion, which an eagle fed, did reside on her lap
From whose side blood gushed out.
The virgin drank it up
While Mercury's hand performed the office of a cup.

The Milk (admir'd) she hastened from her Breast
Bestow'd it frankly on the Hungry Beast,
And with a Sponge his face she likewise dry'd
Which her own Milke had often Madefy'd.

She hastened the admired milk from her breast
and bestowed it frankly on the hungry beast,
And with a sponge she likewise dried his face,
Which her own milk had often moistened

This maiden (of the fifth circle) flowed with delicious perfume oils when she was purged from bloody menstruousness. Her face shone brightly all around as she was adorned with every kind of precious gem and stone. A green lion sat on her lap and was fed by an eagle. From the side of the lion blood gushed out, which the God Mercury caught in his hand which he offered as cup for the virgin to drink. She expressed milk from her breasts. Here we are in the realm of the alchemical Virgins' milk we have met before in this course. She gives her Virgin's milk to the hungry beast, the green lion, and dried his face which she had wet with her milk using a sponge.

Upon her Head a Diadem she did weare
With Fiery Feete sh'Advanced into the Aire ;
And glittering Bravely in her Golden Robes
Tooke place ith' Middle of the Starry Globes.

Upon her head she did wear a diadem,
With fiery feet she arose into the air,
And glittering bravely [in splendour] in her golden robes
Took her place in the middle of the starry globes.

Thus Shee (by all the Planetes, Times, and Signes,
Dark, and Despised Clouds supported), Shines
and sits in Haire of Nett-worke, whilst the king
With his Glad Eyes, is, her Beleagreing.

Thus she shines (supported by all the planets, times
signs, and the dark and despised clouds)
And sits in a cloth of net work
While the king besieges her with his glad eyes.

She wore a crown on her head and with flaming feet she ascended into the heavens and glittering in splendour in her golden robes, she took her place in the middle of the starry spheres. Thus she becomes a constellation (possibly Virgo, though not identified here). She sits in a cloth of net work while the king gazes on her with eager eyes.

Thus she Triumphantly of kings is Chiefe
Of Body's sick the only Grand Reliefe :
Such a Reformist of Defects, that shee
is worshipped by Men of each degree.

Thus she is chief triumphant of kings
The only grand relief of sick bodies
She is such a reformed of defects
That she is worshipped by men of every degree.

To Priests and Kings she yields an Ornament
The sick and needy sort she doth content:
What Man is hee will slight so Rich a Store,
As drowns the very thought of being Poore ?

To priests and kings she gives an ornament
She does content the sick and needy sort of men
What man is there who would slight so rich a store
That drowns out the very thought of being poor.

Thus she stands triumphant above all kings, and is the only sure relief to sick bodies. She reforms and removes all defects, so that she is worshipped by all degrees of men. She provides an ornament to priests and kings, but she gives comfort and content to the sick and needy. Indeed her benevolence drowns out the very thought of being poor.

Wherefore (O God !) vouchsafe to graunt us this,
That through th' Encrease made of its species
And Second Birth, wee may ones and Agen
Enjoy its Firtile and Sweete Fruits. AMEN.

Therefore O God, promise to grant us this thing,
That through the increase made of its species
And second birth, we may once and again
Enjoy its fertile and sweet fruits. Amen

In concluding his allegory Ripley calls on his God to grant us one thing, that through the increase of the subject the king and his second birth, that we may again enjoy the good things, the fertile and sweet fruits of life.

We see in this *Cantilena* that Ripley focuses on the feminine as a redemptive or transforming power. The impotent king firstly works with the 'Mother' as an alchemical vessel, and then with the cosmic Virgin figure. Though God is all powerful, for Ripley his agents in his alchemy seem to be these feminine figures.