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## *Lady Hester Pulter and the Poetics of Self-Transmutation*

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# Lady Hester Pulter and the Poetics of Self-Transmutation

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The poetry of Lady Hester Pulter (1605-1678) is driven by a fascination with posthumous changes of state. We see this throughout her corpus: from the ‘liberty’ of ‘atom[istic]’ dissolution in ‘Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined’ to the apocalyptic visions of personal and worldly disintegration in ‘Universal Dissolution’.<sup>1</sup> As we can infer from the latter poem’s title, her depictions of material transformation are often channelled with the language of alchemical process. Alchemy was the transmutation of base metals to gold and silver through a process of laboratory experiments, which also promised to grant its practitioners eternal life through, as the Polish alchemist Michael Sendivogius tells us, ‘The separation of that which is impure from a purer substance’.<sup>2</sup> As we will see, the purifying promise of alchemy was integral to Pulter’s attraction to the discipline.

Pulter’s manuscript folio, containing one hundred and twenty poems, was discovered by Mark Robson in 1996 in the University of Leeds’s Brotherton Library.<sup>3</sup> The poems, mostly written between 1640 and 1665, have been studied by critics for their engagement with topics such as politics, theology, astronomy, natural history, and alchemy.<sup>4</sup> One foundational paradox that arises from these poems is that, whilst on the one hand, they insist on the inevitability of

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<sup>1</sup> Hester Pulter, ‘Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined’ (Elemental Edition, 4, 102), ed. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, ed. by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall (2018), <http://pulterproject.northwestern.edu>. All further citations of Pulter’s poetry will be from *The Pulter Project*, with numbers in parentheses referring to line numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Sendivogius, *A New Light of Alchymy*, trans. by John French (London: Thomas Williams, 1674), p. 306.

<sup>3</sup> Hester Pulter, ‘Poems Breathed forth by the Nobel Hadassas’, Leeds University Library, Brotherton MS Lt q 32.

<sup>4</sup> On politics, see ‘The Complaint of Thames, 1647’ ed. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall; on astronomy, see ‘The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge’ ed. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall.

dissolution and the loss of individuation, on the other, they are also profoundly interested in the agency that instigates these transmutative processes, specifically the configuration of Pulter's own poetic agency. Through the language and processes of alchemical discourse, Pulter confronts this central dilemma. This article will investigate the paradoxical nexus between agency and inevitability by focusing on Pulter's alchemical poetry and will explicate how and why she seeks recourse within imagined acts of self-transmutation from the griefs and traumas that engender her poetic writing. Through close readings of her alchemical metaphors, I argue that Pulter's poems engage in a poetics of self-transmutation where metaphors, hinge words, and verse form closely interact to enact transmutations upon the poetic self. Her alchemical use of metaphor imparts a reflexive, self-referential mode into her poetry, where alchemy was a discourse that actively and consciously reflected on its reliance of metaphor; where, moreover, the alchemists' capacity to write and understand metaphors spoke to their greater understanding of the natural world. The speaker of Pulter's poems is both alchemist, and *prima materia* (the 'original substance' from which base metals could be transmuted into gold and silver): both poetic architect and subject matter.<sup>5</sup> Drawing upon the signifying capacities of alchemy, Pulter's lyric poems identify the alchemists' transmuted matter with the speaker's body and soul.

Scholars have stressed the importance of alchemy to Pulter's poetic practice. Jayne Archer, for instance, demonstrates the importance of circular motifs and repetition to her alchemical allusions, arguing that alchemy's regenerative, life-giving promises were a particular source of interest for Pulter in the face of the death of her teenage children, as well as a medium through which to reflect on 'the refinement of the human soul'.<sup>6</sup> However, Archer's article does not comment on the connections between metaphor and alchemy in

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<sup>5</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Jayne Archer, 'A 'Perfect Circle'? Alchemy in the Poetry of Hester Pulter', *Literature Compass* 2.1 (2005), 1-14 (p. 10)

Pulter's poetry, and to the valences of alchemical imagery for royalist rhetoric. Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, meanwhile, has argued that Pulter rejected alchemy alongside the sonnet tradition and that she demonstrated 'the shared vanity of both alchemical processes and the sonnet's heritage'.<sup>7</sup> Though Scott-Baumann importantly identifies the scornful attitude with which Pulter addresses earthly alchemists she does not address the importance of alchemy to Pulter's relationship to the divine and how she reflects on the possibilities of poetry.

Beyond Pulter studies, the most influential literary-critical study of alchemy is Katherine Eggert's monograph on early modern alchemical allusions, wherein she identifies allusions to alchemy as a form of 'disknowledge' practice: 'the conscious act of choosing one system, body, or mode of knowledge over another'. In her scheme, writers that sought recourse within alchemy deliberately picked 'the fanciful over the empirical, the obfuscatory over the explanatory, and the outdated over the innovative'.<sup>8</sup> Eggert's theory of 'disknowledge' persuasively posits that allegory and metaphor have a complex relationship to alchemy; in my view, however, she is misled in arguing that alchemy is a form of 'disknowledge'. Eggert has misrepresented alchemy by describing it as 'patently false' and a discourse that promotes 'the wrong way to go about knowing things', an argument that is largely dismissive of alchemy's technical tradition and role in the emergence of experiential science such as can be witnessed in the founding of the Royal Society by alchemists such as Boyle, Newton, and Ashmole.<sup>9</sup> Later in my article, I show how 'disknowledge' can be reformulated to understand Pulter's conception of faith, though I chiefly seek to argue that a fuller appreciation of alchemy's technical contexts and political connotations help us better understand Pulter's relationship to

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, 'Hester Pulter's Well-Wrought Urns: Early Modern Women, Sonnets, and New Criticism', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 20. 2 (2020), 120-143 (p. 124).

<sup>8</sup> Katharine Eggert, *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p.40-41.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the limitations of Eggert's argument, see Vera Keller's review, 'Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England.' *Isis*, 107.4 (2016), p.831-32.

God and poetry, and how she utilizes alchemy's tendencies towards metaphor and political discourse. I will contextualize Pulter's alchemical metaphors by juxtaposing her poems to a variety of alchemical poems, such as those contained in Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. This contemporary mid-seventeenth century anthology, highly popular amongst practitioners, is of relevance for its view that 'Poesy has a life, a Pulse, and such a secret Energy' making it the ideal vehicle for alchemical learning.<sup>10</sup> My essay argues that a fuller appreciation of alchemy's relationship to verse and metaphor expands our understanding of Pulter's alchemy and her relationship to God, as well as providing an important early modern case study for the overlap between science and literature.<sup>11</sup> Pulter's self-transmutative poetics is an integral part of how she conceptualizes the writing of poetry as a form of emotional control and relief. I suggest that characterizing her poems as specifically alchemical processes allows Pulter to draw upon alchemy's implicit insistence on human agency, its complex relation to meaning and metaphor, and its affordances for royalist rhetoric, where alchemy's insistence on regeneration and mobility can be witnessed in her alchemical pseudo-sonnets.

*'Consumed with Love': Pulter's Alchemical Pseudo-Sonnets*

Pulter's self-transmutative poetry experiments with the signifying capacities of metaphor and verse form in hopes of a spiritual and emotive efficacy, where the regenerative and healing powers of alchemy are embedded into her lyric poetry. We see this in what I will term her alchemical pseudo-sonnets, poems that formally and thematically invoke the

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<sup>10</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (London: Nathan Brooks, 1652), sig. B3v.

<sup>11</sup> The interface between science and literature is an exciting, thriving, and current area of research in early modern studies. For other work in this area, see Claire Preston, *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016); Elizabeth Swann, *Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020); Debapriya Sarkar, *Possible Knowledge: The Literary Forms of Early Modern Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023); Kevin Killeen, *Biblical scholarship, science and politics in early modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Eric Langley, *Shakespeare's Contagious Sympathies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018)

expectations of sonnets but deflate them through transmutative processes. In these poems the collaboration between metaphor and verse form functions to both emulate the metamorphic promises of alchemy and reaffirm her poetic authority. As Scott-Baumann observes, the sonnet's formal conventions insist on its 'monumentalizing aspirations', associating the sonnet's preservation of beauty and passion with alchemy's immortalizing impulses.<sup>12</sup> In her four poems titled 'The Circle', Pulter presents the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth as functioning within a divine scheme. Throughout these poems, the divine cycle of life is couched in alchemical technical terminology, such as the 'extracted Light' of 'nature's mass' ('The Circle [4]', 3) or the 'raref[action]' ('The Circle [1]', 8) of 'tears' (7), allowing Pulter to frame spiritual cycles as alchemical processes.<sup>13</sup> Through the adoption of alchemical terms and concepts, Pulter draws upon her detailed knowledge of alchemical thought to frame her poems as alchemical processes, where self-transmutation allows her to reestablish her connection to the divine and assuage feelings of grief and loss.

The second of these poems confronts specifically the futility of earthly alchemists' endeavours, matching it against the greater governing alchemical cycles in the poem as a whole. As a poem of fourteen lines, 'The Circle [2]' evokes and subverts sonnet convention through its seven rhyming couplets, rather than the sestet or octet of a sonnet. Through these fourteen lines, the poem depicts alchemists striving towards 'posterity' (5) and 'glory' (7) through their experiments before revealing how they themselves function within a larger scheme of alchemical rebirth and renewal.<sup>14</sup> The eponymous 'Circle' looms over this poem as an allusion to the ouroboros, an ancient Egyptian symbol of a serpent swallowing its own tail

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<sup>12</sup> Scott-Baumann, p. 135.

<sup>13</sup> Hester Pulter, 'The Circle [4]', (Poem 36, Elemental Edition, 3), ed. by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall; Hester Pulter, 'The Circle [1]', (Poem 17, Elemental Edition, 7), ed. by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall.

<sup>14</sup> Hester Pulter, 'The Circle [2]', (Poem 21, Elemental Edition, 5, 7), ed. by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall.

that was adopted by alchemists to represent the ‘perfection of art and completion of knowledge’.<sup>15</sup> Pulter draws upon form’s alchemical potential in manifesting the alchemical ouroboros, with the seven couplets of juxtaposing rhymes enacting and re-enacting the circular motions of the poem. Additionally, the regularity of rhymes confirms the assertion and totality of poetic control. Even though the poem is not formally a sonnet, it retains the form’s habit of a volta in the ninth line, where Pulter’s earthly alchemists are revealed as having also been ‘once refined’ (metallurgically purified) and part of a larger alchemical scheme.

Channelling a sonnet’s Petrarchan expectations, her metaphorization of alchemists as ‘prying, pandering’ (Headnote) lovers affirms her poetic control as she simultaneously refashions them as alchemical principles within a larger divine scheme.<sup>16</sup> This depiction manifests immediately in the pseudo-sonnet’s opening lines:

Those that the hidden chemic art profess  
And visit Nature in her morning dress,  
To Mercury and Sulfur philters give  
That they, consumed with love, may live  
In their posterity (1-5)<sup>17</sup>

Her alchemists are depicted with the ‘language and imagery of love poetry’, bearing agency as petitioning lovers attempting to induce the sexual union of ‘Mercury and Sulfur’ through the application of ‘philters’.<sup>18</sup> Seductively ‘visit[ing] Nature’, the alchemists’ actions connote the chemical wedding, where the ‘triumphant [...] chemical combination’ of ‘opposite states and qualities [such] as sulphur and mercury’ was allegorized in alchemical traditions as a sexual union between opposing principles.<sup>19</sup> We see this in such alchemical treatises as *Zoroaster’s Cave*, where we are told, ‘The Generation of Metalls and the Philosophers Stone is to conjoyn

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<sup>15</sup> Archer, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> ‘The Circle [2]’, (Poem 21, Elemental Edition, Headnote), ed. by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall.

<sup>17</sup> Pulter, ‘The Circle [2]’.

<sup>18</sup> Scott-Baumann, p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> Abraham, p. 35.

proper principles; videlicet, Man with Woman, Active with Passive, Sulphur with Mercury'.<sup>20</sup>

Drawing upon this alchemical discourse, Pulter invokes alchemy's semiotic power to ironize alchemists' pretension to creative, orchestrating agency.

An understanding of the importance of metaphor and verse to alchemy gives us a new lens through which to understand Pulter's relationship to poetry, and to the possibilities of man's agency in the natural world. Alchemy was a rich scientific tradition that relied on a dense network of metaphors, allegories, and codenames through which to conceal its processes and ingredients, often within verse form. Jennifer Rampling has identified the importance of 'practical exegesis' in the dissemination of alchemy, where students would decipher alchemical metaphors through a continuous process of alchemical experimentation, and the correct interpretation of metaphors was ensuring that you were worthy enough to inherit the secrets of alchemy.<sup>21</sup> Robert Schuler argues that metaphor was an important correlation between poetry, magic, and the sacred, wherein poets, magicians, and alchemists were privy to the 'similitudes, analogies, and sympathies that connected things in the macrocosm, with those in the microcosm, man'.<sup>22</sup> Schuler's argument importantly identifies the attractiveness of poetry to alchemy but does not theorize on how the relationship between verse and alchemy manifests in lyric poetry like that of Pulter. I wish to extend Schuler's argument to explicitly identify those 'sympathies' at work in poetry and alchemy as metaphors, and suggest that through encoding their knowledge in metaphors, alchemists practised the transmutative processes of alchemy through writing, and that similarly, Pulter's deployment of metaphor allows her to engage alchemically with the world. Through metaphorically identifying earthly alchemists as

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<sup>20</sup> Raphael Iconus Eglinus, *An Easie Introduction To The Philosophers Magical Gold* (London: Matthew Smelt, 1667), p. 69-70.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 97-99.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Schuler, *Alchemical Poetry 1575-1700*. (New York: Garland, 1995), p. xxxix.



alchemical principles, Pulter frames herself as both alchemist and poet, bearing alchemical agency through the writing of poetry and metaphor.

Though they attempt to orchestrate the sexual union of alchemical principles, Pulter's alchemists instead find themselves involved within the amorous dynamics of the poem, as they are depicted as 'consumed with love'. In the poem's alchemical context 'consumed' suggests evaporation or burning (*OED*), as well as romantic obsession.<sup>23</sup> The phrase depicts the alchemists as unrequited, pining lovers, themselves integrated into the larger alchemical allegory of sexual dynamics. Her scornful mockery of alchemists is underpinned by their desire to 'shine in gold and silver'. As Ashmole tells us in the *Prolegomena* of his *Theatrum*, gold and silver were the basest objects of alchemy, rather than the more spiritually refined goals of the alchemical quest:

It [transmutation of metals to gold] is the least share of that Blessing which may be acquired by the Philosophers [...] scarce any intent of the ancient Philosophers, and the lowest use the *Adepti* made of this Materia [the Philosopher's Stone].<sup>24</sup>

Whilst initially bearing agency in moving to 'profess' their 'art' and 'visit Nature' in the opening lines, they are then instead 'consumed', refashioned as both limited in their endeavours and rendered inert as grammatical object. We understand them as in themselves alchemical principles or ingredients, anticipating the revelatory volta announcing they were once 'refined' (9):

By time and fate to dust are all calcined,  
Lying obliviaded in their urn  
Till they to their great ancestors return;  
So man, the universe's chiefest glory,  
His primitive's dust (alas) doth end his story. (10-14)

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<sup>23</sup> 'consume, v.1' *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39973>. [Accessed 12 June 2022]

<sup>24</sup> Ashmole, sig. A4r.

By the poem's close, Pulter ruminates on the apparent futility of earthly alchemical aspirations against the all-encompassing movements of life and death located in the natural world. With cruel irony, the alchemists whose 'chemic art' was 'hidden' are now 'obliterated' and forgotten themselves. They are rendered mere principles and alchemical objects rather than the creative orchestrators of alchemical processes, as they themselves were once 'refined'. Rather than 'liv[ing]' (4) in 'posterity' (5) they are rendered 'obliterated in their urn' (11). Scott-Baumann interprets the scorn with which she treats alchemists as indicative of Pulter's rejection of the discipline altogether.<sup>25</sup> However, I would like to suggest that Pulter envisions alchemy as functioning within the divinely-ordained world, rather than within the microcosmic laboratories of alchemists. By framing the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in alchemical terms ('By time and fate to dust are all *calcined*') she identifies alchemical processes as operating in the divinely-ordained world.<sup>26</sup> The allusion to 'His primitive's dust' helps relocate this cycle within a divine scheme. 'Dust' bears a crucial doubleness as both a product of alchemical refinement and a substance of theological importance. Most immediately, 'dust' signals towards Genesis, where we are told, 'God also made the man of the dust of the ground' (*Gen. Gen 2:7*), as well as the declaration in Ecclesiastes that 'all shall return to dust' (*Gen. Ecclesiastes 3: 20*).<sup>27</sup> The dusty fate that alchemists must eventually succumb to is entwined with Biblical allusion.

Her suggestion that all beings will eventually be 'calcined' alludes to the alchemical process of calcination, which was commonly depicted in alchemical treatises as a crucial, initial stage towards alchemical refinement. 'Calcine' derives from the medieval Latin term

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<sup>25</sup> Scott-Baumann, p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> Pulter, 'The Circle [2]'. Emphasis mine.

<sup>27</sup> *The Geneva Bible: a facsimile of the 1560 edition*, ed. by William Wittingham and Lloyd Eason Berry (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969)

‘calcinare’, ‘to burn like lime’, probably arising in Italy where ‘calcina’ meant ‘lime or quick-lime’ (OED).<sup>28</sup> In his 1598 Italian-English dictionary *A vworld of wordes*, Florio defines calcination as a ‘part of alchimie, or transmutation’, and elsewhere writes that the process aimed to ‘burn minerals to correct the malignitie of them’, rendering them a fine powder or dust, otherwise known as calx.<sup>29</sup> Yet ‘dust’ also appears in alchemical discourse as ‘the whitened, purified body of the Stone attained through sublimation’, with sublimation being a later stage of the alchemical process to calcination.<sup>30</sup> Alchemical dust, therefore, bears a cyclical nature, an idea that is enacted through the poem’s form, as it is invoked in the tenth line and returned to in the final line. As Eggert reminds us, alchemists saw themselves imitating and furthering alchemical processes at work within the natural world.<sup>31</sup> True alchemical processes are to be found in the natural workings of the divinely understood world, a world that Pulter’s poetic voice is allowed access to through her channelling of alchemical semiotics. Though Pulter has ostensibly discredited human alchemists, she has successfully located alchemical processes at work within the divinely-understood, natural world, an ouroboros of alchemical generativity that her poetic vision is rendered privy to. The speaker of ‘The Circle [2]’ is paradoxically both woven into this endless cycle of death and rebirth, as well as governing, superordinating poetic agent, and is thus lent metaphorical mastery over her poetic body. Through the creative act of writing poetry, Pulter is able to reinvest in the generative possibilities of alchemy where her ‘pandering’ alchemists have failed.

The implicit association between alchemy, circles, and hiddenness is worth pausing on. Much as Pulter encodes formal allusions to alchemical circles, her parenthetical enclosing of ‘alas’ within the poem’s final line injects a moment of hidden emotional investment into the

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<sup>28</sup> ‘calcine, v.’ OED Online (Oxford University Press) [www.oed.com/view/Entry/26231](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/26231) [Accessed 31 May 2022]

<sup>29</sup> John Florio, *A vworld of wordes* (London: Edward Blount, 1598), p. 84.

<sup>30</sup> Abraham, p. 62; Archer, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Eggert, p. 160.

poem. The elocutionary subordination of ‘alas’ through lunulae revisits the idea of hiddenness as espoused during the first line, containing, and sequestering a yearful but ultimately suppressed hope for the success of earthly alchemical endeavours. This notion is concretized through its specific deployment in manuscript, in an otherwise sparsely punctuated poem (Fig. 1). ‘Alas’, therefore, presents itself as a moment that desires to surpass the divine cycle of death and heavenly Resurrection, graphically realizing the alchemical circle within the sphere of the poetic form. As Archer notes, the aspirations of alchemists to ‘create life and overcome death’ attains a ‘particular poignancy’ when held against Pulter’s emotional trauma at the loss of her teenage children.<sup>32</sup> ‘Alas’ in this context bespeaks a contained moment of emotive urgency in the face of her children’s death, where emotion has been transmuted and contained within the vehicle of the pseudo-sonnet.

In addition to maternal grief, her alchemical metaphors express her royalist sympathies. Whilst Archer notes that alchemy was a vehicle through which to understand ‘the experience and ethics of political and religious change’, she does not explore in detail the potential royalist connotations of alchemical discourse.<sup>33</sup> Alchemy bore the capacity to justify royalism: for instance: throughout alchemical literature, the philosopher’s stone itself was frequently allegorized as a king, linking monarchical rule to the successful completion of the alchemical quest. We see this in texts such as the pseudepigraphic *Book of Bernard*, which allegorizes the philosopher’s stone as a triumphant and ascending king.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, alchemical discourse often reflected on its monarchical connections, such as when Norton yearns for a ‘just, and glorious king’ that will ‘change the old for better things’, implicitly associating the king’s

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<sup>32</sup> Archer, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Schuler, p. xxxviii.

political capacity for social reform and betterment with the transmutative actions of alchemists.<sup>35</sup>

We see the adoption of alchemy by Royalists prominently in Interregnum writings as writers adopted alchemical images as metaphors for a potential royalist return to power. For instance, Vaughan, adopting the obscurity of alchemical knowledge, repurposes the Paracelsian metaphor of an ‘empowering’ seed as an encoded allusion to Royalism:

Dear, secret *Greenness!* nurst below  
 Tempests and winds, and winter-nights,  
 Vex not, that but one sees thee grow,  
 That *One* that made all these lesser lights. (‘The Seed Growing Secretly’, 25-28)<sup>36</sup>

As Nigel Smith conjectures, the principles at work in this poem function similarly as in Vaughan’s ‘Cock-Crowing’, which writes of ‘a sunnie seed’ imbued with the ‘glance of day’ by divine influence.<sup>37</sup> Allusions to a divine ‘glance’ and the latently potent ‘sunnie seed’ directly interpolate the language of Vaughan’s translation of Paracelsian texts such as *The Chymists Key*. The ‘sunnie seed’ was an essential Neoplatonic belief, which Ashmole describes as an ‘Universall and All-piercing Spirit’ that ‘God in the beginning infused into Chaos’.<sup>38</sup> Alchemists often interpreted the ‘seed’ as the arcanum, the invisible material present through all of creation that comprised the building blocks of all things. The successful extraction of the spirit is what lent the alchemist manipulative and shaping control of the natural world.

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<sup>35</sup> Ashmole, p. 5. For more on alchemy as a vehicle for social reform, see Eoin Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2022)

<sup>36</sup> Henry Vaughan, *The Works of Henry Vaughan, Vol 2: Texts 1654-1678, Letters and Medical Marginalia*, ed. by Donald R. Dickson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Nigel Smith, ‘Henry Vaughan and Thomas Vaughan: Welsh Anglicanism, “Chymick”, and the English Revolution’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution*, ed. by Laura Lunger Knoppers (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), p. 409-424 (p. 417-418).

<sup>38</sup> Ashmole, p. 443-445.

Philip Major explicates Vaughan's 'secret greenness' as the image of a 'latent yet potent Royalism'.<sup>39</sup> Royalist writers such as Vaughan and Thomas Browne adopted Hermeticism as a metaphor for royalist potentiality. We see this throughout Browne's *Urne-Buriall*, where Major identifies Browne's urns as a promise for the 'eventual triumph' of Royalism:

these dead bones have already out-lasted the living ones of *Methusaleh*, and in a yard under ground, and thin walls of clay, out-worn all the strong and specious buildings above it; and quietly rested under the drums and tramlings of three conquests.<sup>40</sup>

Through his insistence on how the urns rest 'quietly' and their endurance in 'out-last[ing]' the Biblical figure '*Methusaleh*', as well as the politicized connotations of 'conquests', Browne deploys his subterranean imagery as alchemical injections of Royalist patience. Unlike Browne, Pulter's urns are couched in alchemical terms, and imbued with the potentiality of an alchemical process, allowing her to draw upon alchemy's monarchical imagery.

Therefore, Pulter's insistence on the hiddenness of 'chemic art' and the 'obliterated' urn reads as points of royalist potentiality, and the promise of a 'return' to one's 'great ancestors' a prophetic hope for the resurrection of monarchy, also expressed in poems such as 'Let None Sigh More for Lucas or for Lisle'. As Scott-Baumann argues, Pulter's urns are associated with 'movement and transformation' rather than containment'.<sup>41</sup> Much as Browne's urns 'arose as they lay', imbued with the potential for metamorphosis and resurgence, so too do Pulter's urns yearn for 'transformation'.<sup>42</sup> Hidden within this pessimistic vision of obscurity remains the optimistic hope for alchemical transmutation. Pulter's alchemical metaphors therefore allowed her to associate with other royalist writers interested in alchemy as well as a tradition whose

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Major, 'Urne-Buriall and the Interregnum Royalist', in *'A man very well studied': New Contexts for Thomas Browne*, ed. by Richard Todd and Kathryn Murphy (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 191-210 (p. 200).

<sup>40</sup> *Sir Thomas Browne: Religio Medici and Other Works*, ed. by L. C. Martin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964), p. 118.

<sup>41</sup> Scott-Baumann, p. 137.

<sup>42</sup> Browne, p. 84.

imagery championed monarchies. Rather than Archer's assertion that the 'alchemical vessel [...] becomes a place of darkness, despair, and death', I believe that Pulter's urns function as an allegory for the royalist cause, imbued with hopeful yearnings for the monarchy's restoration.<sup>43</sup> Just as Ashmole sees poetry as a source of 'secret Energy' and untapped potential for the alchemist to awaken, so too do alchemical metaphors and allegories, rather than statically concealing her explicit royalism and grief, brim with potentiality, constantly hinting towards and hoping for resolutions in royalist restorations or in the Christian afterlife.

Alchemy, as a discourse of revolution and metamorphosis, therefore functions in a poetic context to vivify emotional doubts, and instances of personal desire and sympathy are ultimately transmuted through poetic form. As well as a mode of political commentary, Pulter's alchemy allows her to affirm her poetic agency. The affirmation of poetic voice functions as a declaration of human agency, in alchemical processes that are emphatically conjoined with divine creation. Alchemy, as a science promising its practitioners manipulative power over the components of the natural world, was a discipline that promised its users agency; for instance, alchemists often understood laboratory experiments as recreating the creationary processes of Genesis. Thomas Tymme describes the separation of earth from heaven as a distillatory process, where Heaven was 'a fourth essence, separated out of the more subtile matter [...] which being so separated and extracted, is no other thing but a pure Aetheriall and most simple fire'.<sup>44</sup> Alchemists claimed agency over natural substances in a manner that framed their practice as imitative of God.

The speaker's body emerges more explicitly in 'The Hope', a pseudo-sonnet where self-transmutative poetics lends her agency over her poetic body. As with 'The Circle [2]', images of material dissolution are initially bound within seven rhyming couplets; but here,

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<sup>43</sup> Archer, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Tymme, *A Dialogue Philosophicall* (London: Clement Knight, 1652), p. 31.

Pulter adds a fifteenth line that flouts our metrical expectations of a sonnet. Her affirmation of faith situates her as both principal agent and poetic subject matter. In the style of a Donnean Holy Sonnet, after willing ‘Death’ to ‘dissolve’ (1) her mortal body, she moves onto an apocalyptic vision of cosmic dissolution before reaffirming faith that God will ‘raise [her] unto life’ (15).<sup>45</sup> Dissolution was an alchemical process that took place after calcination at the nigredo stage, the ‘initial, black stage of the opus alchymicum in which the body of the impure metal [...] is killed, putrefied and dissolved’.<sup>46</sup> Contemplations of cosmic dissolution arise throughout the Pulter corpus, such as in ‘Universal Dissolution’, which despondently hypothesizes on how the ‘globe’ (105) will ‘ere long [...] burn’.<sup>47</sup> Where this poetic speaker’s ‘soul’ must be contented that ‘all this universe must be dissolved’, ‘The Hope’ instead presents a renewed faith in corporeal resurrection. In contrast to ‘Universal Dissolution’, dissolution within ‘The Hope’ is distilled within a sonnet-adjacent form. In ‘The Hope’, it is this self-transmutative poetics that enables her to envision herself as a site of alchemical dissolution, where positioning herself as metaphorical subject matter affords her poetic alchemical agency:

Dear Death, dissolve these mortal charms,  
 And then I’ll throw myself into thy arms;  
 Then as thou may’st use my carcase as thou lust,  
 Until my bones (and little luz) be dust:  
 Nay, when that handful is blown all about,  
 Yet still the vital salt will be found out; (‘The Hope’, 1-6)

Initiating with an address to death, the poem tonally evokes a Donnean Holy Sonnet with its almost masochistic evisceration of the self. In both Donne and Pulter’s handling of the form, the speaker’s assumed position of vulnerability enables the confirmation of religious faith, and like ‘The Circle’, the alchemy is couched in the language of love poetry. As Donne’s speaker

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<sup>45</sup> Hester Pulter, ‘The Hope’ (Poem 65, Elemental Edition), ed. by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall.

<sup>46</sup> Abraham, p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> Hester Pulter, ‘Universal Dissolution’ (Poem 6, Elemental Edition), ed. by Leah Knight and Wendy Wall.



will call for God to ‘batter’ (‘Batter my heart’, 1) his heart or to be ‘scourge[d]’ (‘Spit in my face’, 2), so too will Pulter’s speaker yearn to be ‘dissolve[d]’ and ‘use[d]’ so that she might ‘throw’ herself into Death’s ‘arms’.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the Donnean parallel bears particular relevance as an instance of alchemical poetry. In his epistolary poem, ‘To E. of D. with six holy Sonnets’, Donne describes his religious sonnets as ‘drossie rhymes’ (11) that must be ‘purifie[d]’ to ‘gold’ (12) through the ‘fire’ (11) of discerning ‘judgement’ (9), with the poem’s addressee, the earl of Doncaster, framed as the ‘alchemist’ (13) who will turn ‘bad’ to ‘good’.<sup>49</sup> Embedded into the poetic process is the utility of alchemical refinement, a vision of the poem as process that allows Pulter to map alchemical onto spiritual refinement as she reconstitutes herself as amorous alchemical principle. Drawing upon this purifying poetics allows Pulter to metaphorize herself as alchemical subject matter. Yet whilst Donne’s alchemical ingredients are the verse epistles he offers (as well as a probable petition for patronage), in Pulter’s poetry it is the poetic self within the alchemical vessel, relaying an urgency and vulnerability at the heart of Pulter’s alchemy.

Pulter collapses the simultaneity of herself and alchemical vessel into a singularity, and renders herself ‘poetically metaphysical’ as she draws upon the ‘fertile semiotics’ of ‘alchemical word-magic’ for the sake of spiritual healing.<sup>50</sup> Through her use of metaphor, as Victoria E. Burke argues, Pulter can maintain a ‘space where she can exercise power while she is still alive’, where treating her body as a site of dissolution allows her to retain her creative ‘power’.<sup>51</sup> The interconnectedness of corresponding but distinct entities (as seen in metaphors) is an underlying tenet of alchemical thought. In *The Emerald Tablet*, a pseudepigraphic Hermetic text originally attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary, mythical founder of

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<sup>48</sup> John Donne, *The divine poems*, ed. by Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978).

<sup>49</sup> Donne, p. 5-6.

<sup>50</sup> Victoria E. Burke, ‘Playing Football with the Stars: Hester Pulter Rethinks the Metaphysical Astronomy Poem’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 20. 2, 169-191 (p. 187); Banna, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Burke, p. 188.

occult thought, and interpreted by some early moderns as a foundational source of alchemical doctrine, the correlation between macrocosm and microcosm is attested to: ‘That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above’.<sup>52</sup> This fundamental analogue between ‘above’ and ‘below’ enables the allegorizing of alchemical principles. As Eggert argues, ‘alchemy traffics in metaphor’, where metaphor’s capacity to enact ‘substitution and shape-shifting’ intersects with alchemy’s interest in a ‘doctrine of resemblance and similitude’.<sup>53</sup> She further suggests that the word ‘metaphor’ first enters the English language through an alchemical treatise. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the word’s first usage to Thomas Norton’s *Ordinal of Alchemy*, as he describes how the ‘Poyses, Parables’ and ‘Metaphors’ adopted by alchemical authors render alchemical knowledge ‘full derke’, or very dark (interpretatively obscure, concealed, and difficult), as opposed to the clarity or transparency of literal language.<sup>54</sup>

The yearned-for dissolution is enacted graphically in the manuscript, where there is an almost complete dearth of punctuation (Fig. 2). With only six punctuation marks in the manuscript, the poem is lent a breathless urgency as it hurriedly strives towards personal dissolution. Through the manifestation of the desired dissolution upon the material page, the materiality of verse is implicitly identified with Pulter’s poetic being, a trope we see in ‘Why Must I Thus Forever Be Confined’, and in relation to calcination in ‘Dear God From Thy High Throne Look Down’. Alchemical process therefore allows Pulter to convey an urgency towards self-dissolution, where the combination of atomistic and alchemical discourses allow the re-emergence of God as influencing agent.

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<sup>52</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *The Hermetic Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Eggert, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Ashmole, p. 8.

‘Vital salt’, meanwhile, directly introduces Paracelsian alchemical thought into her poetics. The early modern Swiss alchemist, theologian, and doctor, Theophrastus von Hohenheim, more famously known as Paracelsus, revolutionized alchemical discourse through the introduction of a third fundamental principle, salt, to the alchemical process, and in doing so ‘explicitly encouraged a sacramental interpretation of what happens when alchemists make base matter better’.<sup>55</sup> Paracelsus has been credited with effectively Christianizing alchemical discourse, through ‘revising the traditional Aristotelian four elements [...] into a trinity’ wherein salt represented the ‘principle of mass or solidity’.<sup>56</sup> In Pulter’s insistence that the ‘vital salt will be found out’, the Paracelsian ‘vital salt’ thus serves as another metaphor of latent potentiality, wherein there is a stout certainty attached to its discovery. Eggert suggests that the Paracelsian tria prima theory reveals a ‘Trinitarian life force’ at play within the building blocks of substance, with salt’s implicit solidifying capacity associating it with Christlike Eucharistic power. Salt, therefore, as a latently Christian metaphor functions collaboratively with the thematic expectations of a Holy Sonnet to anticipate the volta in the eleventh line, a return to divine considerations.

In spite of the potential conflagration of material ‘atoms’ (10), the volta in the eleventh line allows Pulter to reaffirm her faith in the Resurrection:

Yet still that God that can annihilate  
 This all, and it of nothing recreate,  
 Even He that hath supported me till now,  
 To whom my soul doth pray and humbly bow.  
 Will raise me unto life. I know not how. (11-15)

The hinge word ‘yet’ triumphantly announces the emergence of an omnipotent God into the poem, envisioned with the power to ‘annihilate’ or ‘recreate’ all. With the volta appearing in

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<sup>55</sup> Eggert, p. 56.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 56, 65.

the eleventh rather than expected ninth line, it appears as another sonnet feature Pulter borrows and repurposes for her self-transmutative poetics. Through adopting the language of destruction and creation, God is fashioned as the purifying alchemist, the dramatic force of which is strengthened through the assertion 'Even He that hath supported' her before will 'raise [her] unto life'. The trochaic inversion of 'Even he' intensifies her unwavering faith in God's resurrective capacities. As well as stressing her faith, the trochee emphatically identifies the annihilatory, creative Genesis-like God from the previous two lines with the more personal God who has been a source of personal strength and perseverance to Pulter. 'My soul' in the next line then further suggests her absolute faith in God, having already surrendered herself to the destruction of the body and self in favour of the afterlife. The fifteenth line, then, functions as an extension of poetic voice, reintroducing the first-person singular perspective, a confirmation of rhetorical control expanding beyond the metrical strictures of a sonnet, and final injection of personal subjectivity. Yet simultaneously, it functions as an assertion of ignorance that draws attention to the limits of her knowledge. As Eggert's *disknowledge* tells us, the adoption of alchemical bodies of knowledge represented the deliberate selection of the 'obfuscatory over the explanatory'.<sup>57</sup> However, whilst Eggert applies *disknowledge* to the rejection of bodies of knowledge such as gynaecology and transubstantiation, I wish to consider how the dismantling of form functions as the deliberate *disknowing* of formal convention, where poetic voice expands past the sonnet's expected strictures. *Disknowledge*, concerned as it is with 'choosing' what not to know, therefore helps us understand how Pulter retains poetic agency at the boundaries of human knowledge. She is delicately balanced in the last line between faith and *disknowledge*, certain in her ultimate Resurrection as much as ignorant as to how it will happen, where *disknowing* poetic form maps onto the positive *disknowledge* of matters of faith and religious doubt. Her faith in her ignorance is further reflected through the

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<sup>57</sup> Eggert, p. 41.

absence of an enclosing punctuation mark in the manuscript, connoting the open-ended nature of the poem's end. Pulter allows herself to invest in the wonder of resurrection both with and in spite of alchemical discourse, as her interlacing of sonnet and alchemical expectations allows her a moment of poetic self-realization at the point of formal dissolution. Her alchemically-tinged engagement with metaphor and verse form has lent her the experimental tools through which to repurpose sonnet form towards dreams of self-transmutation.

Through the insertion of a fifteenth line, Pulter transforms the concluding couplet into a triplet, formally evoking the Holy Trinity. Yet the last line also induces a feeling of incompleteness, anticipatory as it might be for both a completed couplet and apparent answer to 'how' God might resurrect her. Even the poem's title, 'The Hope', lends it an air of expectancy, where Pulter's alchemical poetics reveal the poem as a liminal space, brimming with potentiality.

### *Conclusion*

Whilst previous scholarship on Pulter has demonstrated the importance of alchemy for her poems' interest in material recycling and reconstitution, this essay has shown how alchemy allowed Pulter a self-reflexive mode through which to engage with poetry and metaphor. By alluding so heavily to alchemy, a discipline continuously reflecting on the didactic and semiotic merits of metaphor, Pulter was afforded a new mode through which to understand the correspondences that engender metaphor. Through her framing of her poetic voice as both prima materia, or alchemical substance, and alchemist, Pulter's poems function as alchemical experiments, relieving forms of doubt or emotional stress and renewing her faith in God. The processes of calcination, dissolution, and refinement enabled Pulter to reflect on the possibilities of spiritual renewal, as well as contemplate the possibility of a royalist return to power. By using a discipline that associated monarchy with the successful completion of the

alchemical quest, her alchemical metaphors thus function as a vehicle through which to express her political allegiances. Pulter's poetry demonstrates alchemy's capacity to relieve emotional stress and religious doubt, and express political affiliation, and, as a collection of private lyric poetry, remind us of the important emotional and devotional value of the alchemical tradition to non-practitioners.

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## Appendix - List of Illustrations

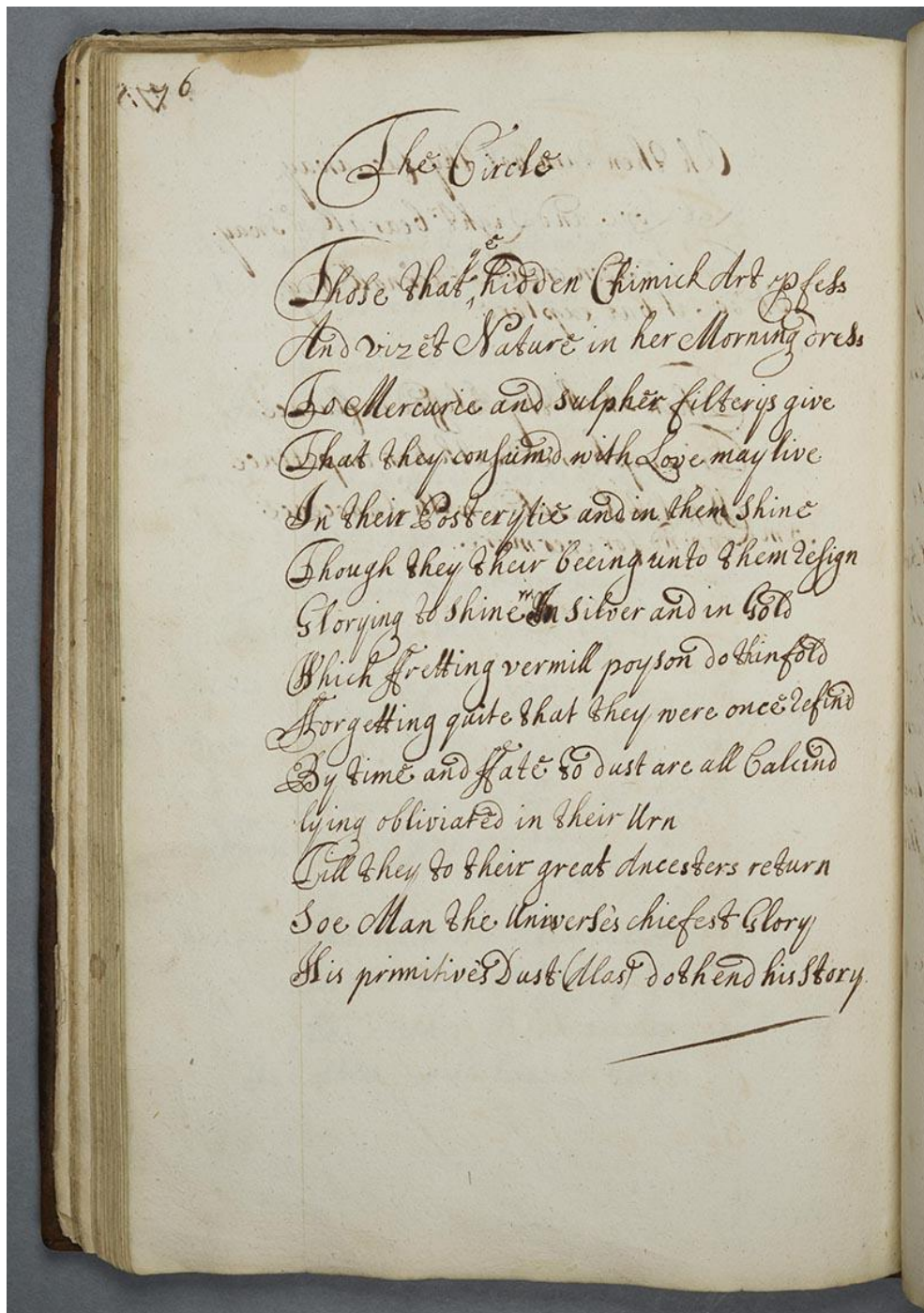


Fig. 1 'The Circle [2]', *Poems breathed forth by the noble Hadassas, and The Unfortunate Florinda*, by Lady Hesther Pulter (c. 1645-1665), BC MS LT q 32, fol. 39v, University of Leeds Library, Brotherton Collection, Leeds. Photograph provided by University of Leeds, Brotherton Collection.

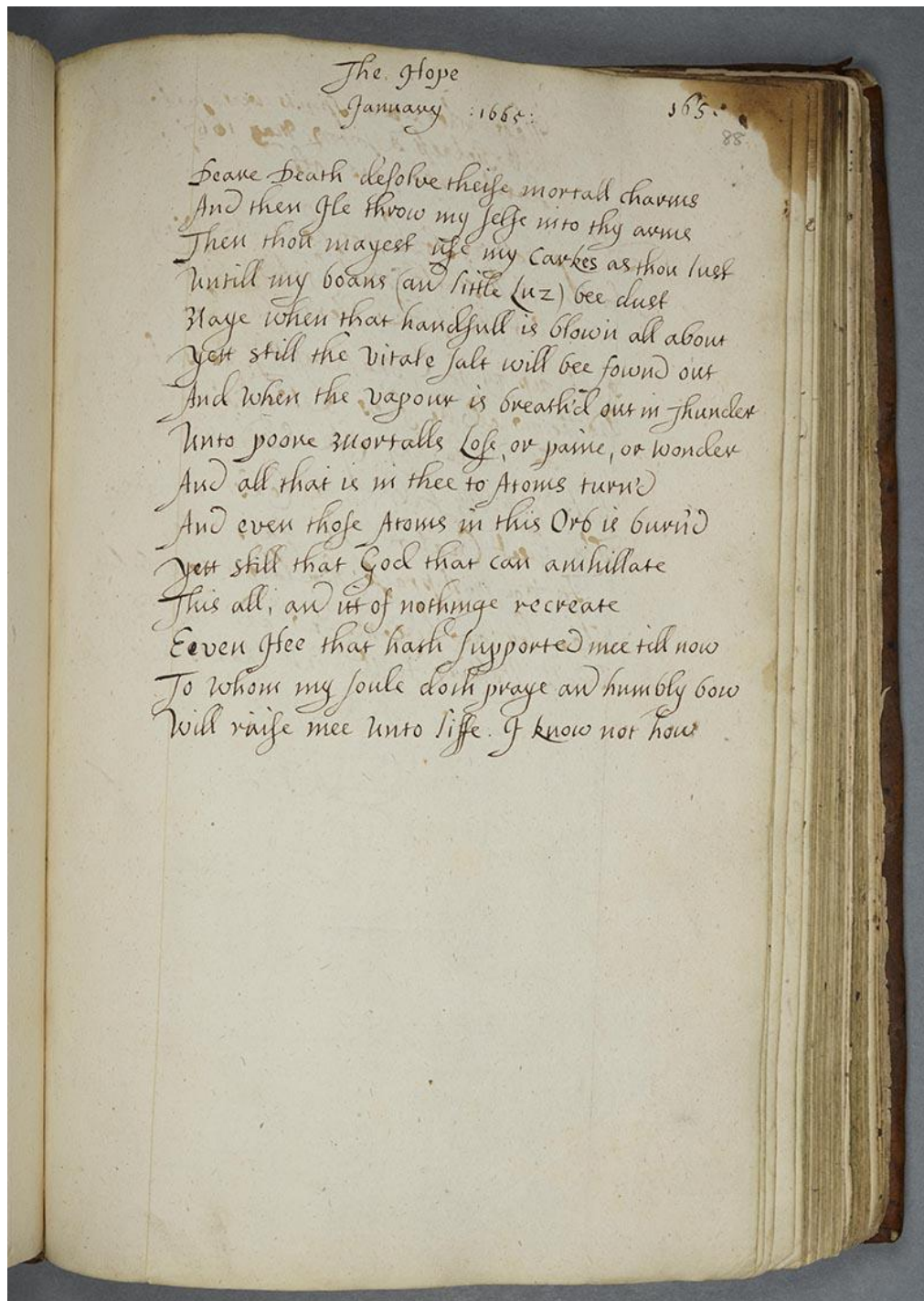


Fig. 2 'The Hope', Poems breathed forth by the noble Hadassas, and The Unfortunate Florinda, by Lady Hesther Pulter (cc. 1645-1665), MS LT q 32, fol. 88r, University of Leeds Library, Brotherton Collection, Leeds. Photograph provided by University of Leeds, Brotherton Collection.