

Classic Poetry Series

John Gower

- poems -

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Concerning the Philosophers Stone. (alchemical verse .)

And also with great diligence,
Thei fonde thilke Experience:
Which cleped is Alconomie,
Whereof the Silver multiplie;
Thei made, and eke the Gold also.
And for to telle howe itt is so:
Of bodies seven in Speciall,
With fowre Spirites joynt withall;
Stant the substance of this matere,
The bodies which I speke of here,
Of the Plannets ben begonne,
The Gold is titled to the Sonne:
The Moone of Silver hath hi part,
And Iron that stonde uppon Mart:
The Leed after Saturne groweth,
And Jupiter the Brasse bestoweth;
The Copper sette is to Venus:
And to his part Mercurius
Hath the Quicksilver, as it falleth,
The which after the Boke it calleth,
Is first of thilke foure named
Of Spirits, which be proclymed,
And the Spirite which is seconde,
In Sal Armoniake is founde:
The third Spirite Sulphur is,
The fourth Sewende after this,
Arcennium by name is hotte
With blowyng, and with fires hote:
In these things which I say,
Thei worchen by divers waye.
For as the Philosopher tolde,
Of Gold and Sylver thei ben holde,
Two Principall extremittees,
To which all other by degrees,
Of the mettals ben accordant,
And so through kinde resemblant:
That what man couth awaie take,
The rust, of which they waxen blake,
And And the favour of the hardnes;
Thei shulden take the likeness;
Of Gold or Silver perfectly,
Bot for to worche it sykerly;
Between the Corps and the Spirite,
Er that the Metall be parfite,
In seven forms itt is sette
Of all, and if one be lette,
The remnant may not avayle,
But otherwise it maie nought fayle;

For thei by whome this Arte was founde,
To every poynt a certayne bounde,
Ordeinen that a man may finde,
This Craft is wrought by wey of kinde;
So that there is no fallace in;
But what man that this werke begyn;
He mote awaite at every tyde,
So that nothyng be left asyde.

Fyrst of Distillacion,
Forth with the Cogelacion,
Solucion, Disscencion,
And kepe in his entencion,
The poynt of Sublimacion,
And forthwith Calcinacion,
Of very Approbacion,
So that there be Fixacion,
With temperate hetes of fyer,
Tyll he the perfite Elixer,
Of thilke Philosophers Stone,
Maie gette, of which that many one
Of Philosophers, whilome write,
Of thilke Stone with other two,
Which as the Clerkes maden tho;
So as the Bokes itt recorden,
The kinde of hem I shall recorden.

These old Philosophers wise,
By wey of kynde in sondry wise;
Thre Stones made through Clergie,
The fyrst I shall specifie,
Was cleped Vegetabilis;
Of which the proper vertue is,
To mans heale to serve,
As for to keepe, and to preserve,
The body fro sickness all,
Till death of kinde upon hym fall.
The second Stone I the behote,
Is Lapis Animalis hote:
The whose vertue, is proper and couth,
For Eare and Eye, Nose and Mouth;
Whereof a man may here, and see,
And smell and tast, in his degree,
And for to feele and for to goe,
Itt helpeth a man of both two:
The witts five he undersongeth
To keepe, as it to hym belongeth.

The third Stone in speciall
by name is cleped Minerall,
Which the Mettalls of every myne,
Attempred, till that thei ben fyne;
And pureth hem by such a wey,
That all the vice goth away,
Of Rust, of Stynke, and of Hardnes:

And when they ben of such clennes,
 This minerall so as I fynde,
 Transformeth all the fyrst kynde,
 And maketh hem able to conceive,
 Through his vertue and receive
 Both in substance and in figure,
 Of Gold and Silver the nature.
 For thei two ben the extremittees,
 To which after the propertees,
 Hath every mettall his desire,
 With helpe and comforte of the fyre.
 Forth with this Stone as it is said,
 Which to the Sonne and Moone is laide:
 For to the Red, and to the White,
 This Stone hath power to profite;
 It maketh Multiplicacion
 Of Gold and the fixacion,
 It causeth and of this babite,
 He doth the werke to be parfite:
 Of thilke Elixer which me call
 Alconomy, as is befalle
 To hem, that whilome were wise;
 But now it stant all otherwise:
 Thei speken fast of thilke Stone,
 But how to make it now wote none.
 After the sooth Experience,
 And nathles greate diligence,
 Thei setten up thilke dede,
 And spillen more then thei spede;
 For alwey thei fynde a lette,
 Which bringeth in povertie and Dette;
 To hem that rich were to fore,
 The Losse is had the Lucre is lore:
 To gette a pound thei spendeth five,
 I not how such a Craft shall thrive:
 In the manner as it is used,
 It were better be refused,
 Then for to worchen upon wene,
 In thinge which stant not ast thei wene:
 But not for thy who that it knew,
 The Science of himselfe is trew:
 Uppon the forme as it was founded,
 Whereof the names yett be grounded;
 Of hem, that first it founden out:
 And thus the fame goth all about,
 To such as soughten besines,
 Of vertue and worthines,
 Of whom if I the names call,
 Hermes was one the first of all,
 To whom this Art is most applied,
 Geber thereof was magnified,
 And Ortolane and Morien,

Among the which is Avicen.
Which founde and wrote and greate partie,
The practicke of Alconomie,
Whose bokes plainlie as thei stonde,
Uppon this Craft few understonde.
But yet to put hem in assay,
There be full manie now a day,
That knowen litle that thei mene,
It is not one to wite and wene,
In forme of words thei it trete;
But yet thei failen of beyet.
For of to much, or of to lite,
There is algate found a wite:
So that thei follow not the line,
Of the perfect Medicine,
Which grounded is upon nature;
But thei that written the Scripture;
Of Greke, Arabe, and Caldee,
Thei were of such Auctoritee,
That thei firste founden out the wey,
Of all that thou hast herd me sey,
Whereof the Cronicke of her Lore,
Shall stonde in price for evermore.

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John Gower

Confessio Amantis, Book III

Appolinus his lev{.e} tok,
To God and al the lond betok
With al the poeple long and brod,
That he no lenger there abod.
The king and queen{.e} sorw{.e} mad{.e},
Bot yit somdiel thei weren glad{.e}
Of such thing as thei herden tho:
And thus betwen the wel and wo
To schip he goth, his wif with child{.e},
The which was ever{.e} meke and myld{.e}
And wold{.e} noght departe him fro,
Such lov{.e} was betwen hem tuo.
Lichorida for hire offic{.e}
Was tak{.e}, which was a norric{.e},
To wend{.e} with this yong{.e} wif,
To whom was schape a woful lif.
Withinne a time, as it betidd{.e},
Whan thei were in the see amidd{.e},
Out of the north they sihe a cloud{.e};
The storm aros, the wynd{.e}s loud{.e}
Thei blewen many a dredful blast,
The welkn{.e} was al overcast,
The derk{.e} nyht the sonne hath under,
Ther was a gret tempeste of thunder:
The mone and ek the sterr{.e}s both{.e}
In blak{.e} cloud{.e}s thei hem cloth{.e},
Wherof here briht{.e} lok thei hyd{.e}.
This yong{.e} ladi wepte and crid{.e},
To whom no confort myhte avail{.e};
Of child{.e} sche began travail{.e},
Wher sche lay in a caban clos:
Hire woful lord fro hire aros,
And that was longe er eny morw{.e},
So that in anguisse and in sorw{.e}
Sche was deliver{.e}d al be nyht{.e}
And ded in every mannes syht{.e};
Bot nath{.e}les for al this wo
A maid{.e} child was bor{.e} tho.

Appolinus whan he this knew,
For sorwe a swoune he overthrew,
That noman wiste in him no lif.
And whanne he wok, he seide, "Ha, wif,
Mi lust, mi joi{.e}, my desir,
Mi welthe and my recoverir,
Why schal I live, and thou schalt dy{.e}?
Ha, thou fortune, I thee deffi{.e},
Nou hast thou do to me thi werst{.e}.
Ha, hert{.e}, why ne wolt thou berst{.e},
That forth with hire I myht{.e} pass{.e}?
Mi pein{.e}s weren wel the lass{.e}."
In such wepinge and in such cry

His ded{.e} wif, which lay him by,
 A thousand sith{.e}s he hire kist{.e};
 Was nevere man that sih ne wist{.e}
 A sorwe unto his sorw{.e} lich;
 For evere among, upon the lich
 He fell swounende, as he that soght{.e}
 His oghn{.e} deth, which he besoght{.e}
 Unto the godd{.e}s alle abov{.e}
 With many a pitous word of lov{.e};
 Bot such{.e} word{.e}s as tho wer{.e}
 Yit herd{.e} nevere mannes er{.e},
 Bot only thilk{.e} whiche he seid{.e}.
 The maister schipman cam and preid{.e}
 With othr{.e} suche as be therinn{.e},
 And sein that he mai nothing winn{.e}
 Ayein the deth, bot thei him red{.e},
 He be wel war and tak hied{.e},
 The see be weie of his natur{.e}
 Receiv{.e} mai no creatur{.e}
 Withinne himself as forto hold{.e},
 The which is ded: forthi thei wold{.e},
 As thei conseilen al about{.e},
 The ded{.e} body casten out{.e}.
 For betre it is, thei seiden all{.e},
 That it of hir{.e} so befall{.e},
 Than if thei scholden all{.e} spill{.e}.

The king, which understod here will{.e}
 And knew here conseil that was trew{.e},
 Began ayein his sorw{.e} new{.e}
 With pitous herte, and thus to sei{.e}:
 "It is al reson that ye prei{.e}.
 I am," quod he, "bot on al on{.e},
 So wolde I noght for mi person{.e}
 There fell{.e} such adversité.
 Bot whan it mai no betr{.e} be,
 Doth thann{.e} thus upon my word,
 Let make a cofr{.e} strong of bord,
 That it be ferm with led and pich."
 Anon was mad a cofr{.e} sich,
 Al redy broght unto his hond;
 And whanne he sih and redy fond
 This cofr{.e} mad and wel enclow{.e}d,
 The ded{.e} bodi was besow{.e}d
 In cloth of gold and leid therinn{.e}.
 And for he wolde unto hir winn{.e}
 Upon som cooste a sepultur{.e},
 Under hire heved in aventur{.e}
 Of gold he leid{.e} somm{.e}s gret{.e}
 And of jeueals a strong beyet{.e}
 Forth with a lettre, and seid{.e} thus:

"I, king of Tyr Appollinus,
 Do all{.e} maner men to wit{.e},
 That hiere and se this lettr{.e} writ{.e},
 That help{.e}les without{.e} red
 Hier lith a king{.e}s doghter ded:
 And who that happeth hir to find{.e},
 For charité tak in his mynd{.e},
 And do so that sche be begrav{.e}
 With this tr{.e}sor, which he schal hav{.e}."
 Thus whan the lettr{.e} was full spok{.e},
 Thei have anon the cofr{.e} stok{.e},
 And bounden it with yren fast{.e},
 That it may with the waw{.e}s last{.e},
 And stoppen it be such a wei{.e},
 That it schal be withinn{.e} drei{.e},
 So that no water myhte it griev{.e}.
 And thus in hope and good believ{.e}
 Of that the corps schal wel aryv{.e},
 Thei caste it over bord als blyv{.e}.

The schip forth on the waw{.e}s went{.e};
 The prince hath chang{.e}d his entent{.e},
 And seith he wol noght come at Tyr
 As thann{.e}, bot al his desir
 Is ferst to seilen unto Thars{.e}.
 The wyndy storm began to skars{.e},
 The sonne arist, the weder cliereth,
 The schipman which behind{.e} stiereth
 Whan that he sih the wynd{.e}s saght{.e},
 Toward{.e}s Tharse his cours he straght{.e}.

Bot now to mi matiere ayein,
 To telle as old{.e} bok{.e}s sein,
 This dede corps of which ye know{.e}
 With wynd and water was forthrow{.e}
 Now hier, now ther, til at{.e} last{.e}
 At Ephesim the see upcast{.e}
 The cofre and al that was therinn{.e}.
 Of gret merveil{.e} now beginn{.e}
 Mai hier{.e} who that sitteth still{.e};
 That God wol sav{.e} mai noght spill{.e}.
 Riht as the corps was throwe alond{.e},
 Ther cam walkende upon the strond{.e}
 A worthi clerc, a surgi{.e}n,
 And ek a gret phisici{.e}n,
 Of al that lond the wisest on,
 Which hiht{.e} Maister Cerymon;
 Ther were of his discipl{.e}s som{.e}.
 This maister to the cofre is com{.e},
 He peiseth ther was somewhat in,
 And bad hem bere it to his in,
 And goth himselv{.e} forth withal.

Al that schal fall{.e}, fall{.e} schal;
 They comen hom and tari{.e} noght;
 This cofre is into chambr{.e} broght,
 Which that thei find{.e} fast{.e} stok{.e},
 Bot thei with craft it have unlok{.e}.
 Thei loken in, where as thei found{.e}
 A bodi ded, which was bewound{.e}
 In cloth of gold, as I seide er,
 The tresor ek thei founden ther
 Forth with the lettr{.e} which thei red{.e}.
 And tho thei token betr{.e} hied{.e};
 Unsowed was the bodi son{.e},
 And he, which knew what is to don{.e},
 This nobl{.e} clerk, with all{.e} hast{.e}
 Began the vein{.e}s forto tast{.e},
 And sih hire ag{.e} was of youth{.e},
 And with the craft{.e}s whiche he couth{.e}
 He soghte and fond a signe of lif.
 With that this worthi king{.e}s wif
 Honest{.e}ly thei token out{.e},
 And maden fyr{.e}s al about{.e};
 Thei leide hire on a couch{.e} soft{.e},
 And with a scheet{.e} warm{.e}d oft{.e}
 Hire cold{.e} brest began to het{.e},
 Hire herte also to flacke and bet{.e}.
 This maister hath hire every joingt
 With certein oile and balsme enoingt,
 And putte a liquour in hire mouth,
 Which is to few{.e} clerk{.e}s couth,
 So that sche coevereth at{.e} last{.e}:
 And ferst hire yhen up sche cast{.e},
 And whan sche more of strengthe cawht{.e},
 Hire arm{.e}s both{.e} forth sche strawht{.e},
 Hield up hire hond and pitously
 Sche spak and seide, "Ha, wher am I?
 Where is my lord, what world is this?"
 As sche that wot noght hou it is.
 Bot Cerymon the worthi lech{.e}
 Answerde anon upon hire spech{.e}
 And seith, "Ma dam{.e}, yee ben hier{.e},
 Where yee be sauf, as yee schal hier{.e}
 Hierafterward; forthi as nou
 Mi conseil is, conforteth you:
 For trusteth wel without{.e} fail{.e},
 Ther is nothing which schal you fail{.e},
 That oghte of reson to be do."

John Gower