

Simon Forman - Of the Division of Chaos

This alchemical poem by the physician, astrologer, magician and alchemist, Simon Forman (1552-1611) is in the Bodleian Library Oxford, MS Ashmole 240. For my transcription I have modernised the spelling and adjusted the punctuation. - Adam McLean.

Into darkness then did descend the spirit of God,
Upon the watery chaos, whereon he made his abode.
Which darkness then was on the face of the deep,
In which rested the Chaos, and in it all things asleep.
Rude, unformed, without shape, form or any good,
Out of which God created all things as it stood.
But first he commanded a light to appear,
That all might be seen, that before was hid.
And God saw that the light was good and clear,
And the darkness and light he did then divide,
Calling the one day, and the other night,
For darkness [to] obscure (and day for shining bright).
And a firmament then God did let make,
To sever the waters above from those below;
And divided the Earth from the waters also,
Wherein greatly his power he did show.
Then out of this Chaos, the four elements were made:
Heat and cold, moist and dry, in like wise,
Which are the beginning of all creatures wide,
That under the globe of Luna do abide.
The quintessence (that some men it call)
Was taken out of the Chaos before the four elements all:
Which is the first being, as we may descry,
And uncorruptible, whereof was made the sky,
And celestial bodies all, which do never die.

So that of Hyle, nor Chaos, nor quintessence high,
Is there any generation to multiply,
In species or kinde here in Earth below,
Of creatures abiding under the sky,
But the four elements do make influence,
By their special power into all things below;
And into every specific thing do put quintessence,
To reap such seed thereof: as men do sow,
But of themselves. As they are simple and pure in kind,
In every species together conjoined we do them find,
Creating Sulphur, Salt, and Argent vive -
The inward bodies of things that make them thrive.
Whose gross bodies to destroy, if we them have,
We must not spare thereof to deprave.

Next after this, four elements pure, simple and clear,
That is, hot and cold, moist and also dry,
Are assigned to work on four bodies gross,
The last substance of the Chaos, and of the highest the dross.
Earth, water, air and fire, therein to show their might,
And therein to make generation and bring forms to light;
In every one severally, out creatures to bring,

Which is the beginning and generation of all things.
For heat is assigned to the fire, which doth burn;
Moisture to the air, which doth corrupt and round turn;
Dryness to the earth, the mother of each thing;
And coldness to the water, from whence all do spring.
Heat and moisture are active to generation;
Cold and dryness are passive, in and to each thing;
Fire and air, active by elementation;
Water and earth, passive to generation.
For in dryness of the earth and in water clear.
All things are engendered, before they appear.
According to the conjunction of the four elements,
In each of their subjects severally,
Are engendered and brought forth every creature,
Living or being under the Moon's sky.
The earth is fixed, durable for ever to abide;
The air continually moveth from place to place beside,
And is the life of the fire which purges all;
And the water (for coldness) destructive, men call.
But when they are commixed, one with another,
Not simple, but compound in their elemental qualities,
Then work they in kind by diversities,
More or less as they are commixed by degrees.

If these four elements do work in the fire,
To engender and bring forth some creature,
As the Salamander, ever living therein,
You must conceive well of his commixtion,
Which is by Nature and elements tempered so well,
That he delights as gold in the fire to dwell.
For to the creatures of the fire and his region,
The fire is always most natural.
For that in their commixture it is most predominate,
Which maketh them the more able the fire to endure,
By reason of much heat and dryness in their temperature.
The water to the fire is most enemy.
Therefore, keep fire in water, and moisten that which is dry,
And it will perish and die, and soon putrefy.
For as the fire is hot of himself, and of the earth dry,
So the water is cold and moist of the sky,
Which causes creatures of the fire to die and putrefy.
For cold doth destroy and moist doth putrefy,
Except you know this, study not philosophy.

Likewise, the creatures that in the air do live,
Of the airy substance are most compact.
The other elements which do under drive,
As water, earth and fire, of which they are facte (made).
Yet in the air they most delight, and of it do feed,
And in their contrary full ill do they speed.
For it is omne oppositum under the sky,
Which is the only cause all creatures do die.
For in their simile all things do rejoice,
And of their simile they all ways make choice.

And creatures engendered in the waters cold and moist,

Are sluggish and heavy, are given to much rest,
And feed of such things as that Element doth hold.
For their bodies are gross and of a moist mould,
As fishes, frogs and herbs: milk, butter and cheese,
To feed so grossly, they are nothing greasy.