

Title: ALCHEMY

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Venue: Acappella

Vico Santa Maria a Cappella Vecchia 8/A, Naples

Opening: October 11, 2018

Till: December 8, 2018

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Alchemy (from Arabic “al-k ımiy a”) is a philosophical and protoscientific tradition practiced throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia. It aims to purify, mature, and perfect certain objects (1). Common aims were crysopoeia (2), the transmutation of “base metals” (e.g., lead) into “noble metals” (particularly gold); the creation of an elixir of immortality; the creation of panaceas (3) enabling to cure any disease; and the development of an alkahest, a universal solvent. The perfection of the human body and soul was thought to permit or result from the alchemical magnus opus and, in the Hellenistic and western tradition, the achievement of gnosis (5).(6) In Europe, the creation of a philosopher’s stone was variously connected with all of these projects.

In English, the term is often limited to descriptions of European alchemy, but similar practices existed in the Far East, the Indian subcontinent, and the Muslim world. In Europe, following the 12th-century Renaissance, produced by the translation of Islamic works on science and the Recovery of Aristotle, alchemists played a significant role in early modern science (particularly chemistry and medicine). Islamic and European alchemists developed a structure of basic laboratory techniques, theory, terminology, and experimental method, some of which are still in use today. However, they continued with the ancient belief in four elements and guarded their work in secrecy including cyphers and cryptic symbolism. Their work was guided by Hermetic principles related to magic, mythology, and religion (7).

Modern discussions of alchemy are generally split into an examination of its exoteric practical applications and its esoteric spiritual aspects, despite the arguments of scholars like Holmyard (8) and von Franz (9) that they should be understood as complementary. The former is pursued by historians of the physical sciences who examine the subject in terms of early chemistry, medicine, and charlatanism, and the philosophical and religious contexts in which these events occurred. The latter interests historians of esotericism, psychologists, and some philosophers and spiritualists. The subject has also made an ongoing impact on literature and the arts. Despite this split, which von Franz believes has existed since the Western traditions’ origin in a mix of Greek philosophy that was mixed with Egyptian and Mesopotamian technology, numerous sources have stressed an integration of esoteric and exoteric approaches to alchemy as far back as Pseudo-Democritus’s (10) first-century *On Physical and Mystical Matters* (Greek: *Physika kai Mystika*).(11)

Alchemy is several philosophical traditions spanning some four millennia and three continents. These traditions’ general penchant for cryptic and symbolic language makes it hard to trace their mutual influences and “genetic” relationships.

Found and edited from Wikipedia entries, this is a first attempted rapprochement to the topic. I seek to learn more and dissect into more detailed pieces.

- Melanie Ohnemus

*With generous support of the Forum Austriaco di Cultura, Rome*

<sup>1</sup> Malouin, Paul-Jacques (1751), “Alchimie [Alchemy]”, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers*, Vol. I, Paris: translated by Lauren Yoder in 2003 for Michigan Publishing’s The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project. See also: Linden, Stanton J., *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restauration*, University Press of Kentucky, 1996, pp. 7 & 11.

<sup>2</sup> 2 In alchemy, the term *chrysopoeia* (Ancient Greek: χρυσοποιία, *khrusopoia*) means transmutation into gold (from the Greek χρυσός, *khrusos*, “gold”, and ποιεῖν, *poiein*, “to make”). It symbolically indicates the creation of the philosopher’s stone and the completion of the *Great Work*. (The Great Work (Latin: *Magnum opus*) is an alchemical term for the process of working with the *prima materia* to create the philosopher’s stone. It has been used to describe personal and spiritual transmutation in the Hermetic tradition, attached to laboratory processes and chemical color changes, used as a model for the individuation process, and as a device in art and literature. The *magnum opus* has been carried forward in New Age and neo-Hermetic movements which sometimes attached new symbolism and significance to the processes.)

<sup>3</sup> The *panacea* /pænəˈsiːə/, named after the Greek goddess of universal remedy *Panacea*, is any supposed remedy that is claimed to cure all diseases and prolong life indefinitely. It was in the past sought by alchemists as a connection to the elixir of life and the philosopher’s stone. A *panacea* (or *panaceum*) is also a literary term to represent any solution to solve all problems related to a particular issue. The term *panacea* is also used in a negative way to describe the over use of any one solution to solve many different problems especially in medicine.

<sup>4</sup> *Alkahest* is a hypothetical universal solvent, having the power to dissolve every other substance, including gold. It was highly sought by alchemists for what they thought would be its invaluable medicinal qualities. The famous alchemist *Philippus Paracelsus* described *alkahest* in the 1500s. *Paracelsus*’ own recipe was based on caustic lime, alcohol, and carbonate of potash. He believed that *alkahest* was, in fact, the philosopher’s stone.

<sup>5</sup> *Gnosis* is the common Greek noun for knowledge (γνώσις, *gnōsis*, f.). The term is used in various Hellenistic religions and philosophies. It is best known from *Gnosticism*, where it signifies a knowledge or insight into humanity’s real nature as divine, leading to the deliverance of the divine spark within humanity from the constraints of earthly existence. It is often used for personal knowledge compared with intellectual knowledge (εἶδεν εἶδεν).

<sup>6</sup> Linden (1996), pp. 7 & 11.

<sup>7</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *Eric John Holmyard* (1891–1959) was an English science teacher at Clifton College, and historian of science and technology. His scholarly work included rectification of accounts of the history of alchemy, particularly in relation with Islamic science.

<sup>9</sup> *Marie-Louise von Franz* (1915–1998) was a Swiss Jungian psychologist and scholar, renowned for her psychological interpretations of fairy tales and of alchemical manuscripts. She edited, translated and commented on *Aurora Consurgens*, attributed to *Thomas Aquinas*, on the problem of opposites in alchemy. During her last years of life, she commented on the Arabic alchemical manuscript of *Muhammad Ibn Umail Hal ar-Rumuz* (Book of the explanation of the symbols). For alchemists, *imaginatio vera* was an important approach to matter. It resembles in many aspects the active imagination discovered by C. G. Jung. *Marie-Louise von Franz* lectured 1969 about active imagination and alchemy.

<sup>10</sup> *Pseudo-Democritus* was an unidentified Greek philosopher writing on chemical and alchemical subjects under the pen name “*Democritus*,” probably around 60 AD. He was the second most respected writer on alchemy (after *Hermes Trismegistus*). Four of his books survived, including *Natural and Secret Questions*. His works are quoted extensively by *Zosimos of Panopolis* and by early medieval Byzantine alchemical writers, and he is mentioned in the *Stockholm papyrus*. *Natural and Secret Questions* describes “An art, purporting to relate to the transmutation of metals, and described in a terminology at once Physical and Mystical”; the book includes straightforward recipes for making imitation gold and silver. See: *Allen G. Debus* (ed.), *Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry, Papers from Ambix*. *Jeremy Mills Publishing*, 2004, pp. 30–42.

<sup>11</sup> *Matteo Martelli*, *The Four Books of Pseudo-Democritus: Sources of Alchemy and Chemistry: Sir Robert Mond Studies in the History of Early Chemistry*, *Routledge*, 2014.