



## Corso di dottorato di ricerca in Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Ciclo (XXX)

### Titolo della tesi

*"This wide gap of time since first  
We were dissevered.*

*Alchemy, Time, Water, and Royalty in The Winter's Tale"*

Dottoranda:  
Martina Zamparo

Supervisore:  
prof. Milena Romero Allué

Anno (2018)



# CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	p. 5
<b>Abbreviations</b>	p. 7
<b>List of Plates</b>	p. 9
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	p. 17
<b>Introduction</b>	p. 19
<b>1. Alchemy and Hermeticism: An Introduction</b>	
1.1. Alchemy: From its Ancient Origins to the Renaissance	p. 25
1.2. The ‘True’ and the ‘False’ Art of Alchemy	p. 39
<b>2. The Alchemical Context</b>	
2.1. Alchemy: Between Science and Esoteric Philosophy	p. 49
2.2. Some Methodological Remarks	p. 68
<b>3. Alchemical Culture in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages</b>	
3.1. Alchemy in Elizabethan England. The Historical Context	p. 75
3.2. Queen Elizabeth as a Symbol of Alchemical Art	p. 89
3.3. King James’s <i>Daemonologie</i> and Renaissance Hermeticism	p. 118
3.4. King James’s Relationships with John Dee, Walter Raleigh, Arthur Dee, Michael Maier, Cornelis Drebbel, and Tycho Brahe	p. 136
<b>4. Alchemical Literature and Imagery in Early Modern England</b>	
4.1. Alchemy in Shakespeare’s Plays	p. 151
4.2. Alchemical Texts in Shakespeare’s England	p. 162
4.3. Alchemical Emblems and Allegories	p. 173

**5. ‘Tears shed there shall be my recreation’.  
Leontes’s Alchemical Re-Creation**

- 5.1. The Alchemical Journey Towards the Renewal of the *Rex Chymicus* p. 183
- 5.2. ‘A sad tale’s best for winter’.  
The Beginning of Leontes’s Story of Death and Rebirth p. 193
- 5.3. ‘If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, /  
Heat outwardly or breath within’. Leontes as *Rex Chymicus* p. 200
- 5.4. ‘Therefore betake thee / To nothing but despair’.  
Leontes’s *nigredo* p. 213
- 5.5. ‘It is a gallant child; one that, indeed, physics the subject,  
makes old hearts fresh’.  
The Alchemical Parable of the *Senex-Puer* p. 226
- 5.6. ‘Be cured of this diseased opinion / And betimes for ‘tis most dangerous’.  
Alchemy, Medicine, and Leontes’s Ablution p. 241

**6. ‘Thou met’st with things dying, I with things newborn’.  
The Alchemical Symbolism of Time and Water**

- 6.1. ‘Into their own first matter kindly retrograde’.  
The Significance of Water in Alchemical Literature p. 259
- 6.2. ‘We have landed in ill time. The skies look grimly’.  
The Alchemical Power of Water in *The Winter’s Tale* p. 269
- 6.3. ‘The white sheet bleaching on the hedge’.  
The Reborn World of Bohemia and the Alchemical Stage of *albedo* p. 278
- 6.4. ‘For the red blood reigns in the winter’s pale’.  
The Alchemical Symbolism of Saturn-Time in *The Winter’s Tale* p. 290
- 6.5. ‘I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing /  
As you had slept between’.  
The Inversion of Time and the *opus contra naturam* p. 307

<b>7. ‘<i>The art itself is nature</i>’.</b>	
<b>The Alchemical Conception of Art and Nature in <i>The Winter’s Tale</i></b>	
7.1. ‘ <i>This method of perfection is called Alchemy</i> ’.	p. 321
Alchemy within the Art-Nature Debate	
7.2. ‘ <i>This is an art / Which does mend Nature</i> ’.	p. 331
Alchemy and the Art-Nature Debate in <i>The Winter’s Tale</i>	
7.3. ‘ <i>What you do / Still betters what is done</i> ’.	p. 342
Perdita as the ‘philosophical child’.	
<b>8. ‘<i>What were more holy / Than to rejoice the former queen is well?</i>’</b>	
<b>Alchemy and Hermeticism in the Statue-Scene</b>	
8.1. ‘ <i>That rare Italian master Giulio Romano</i> ’.	p. 351
The Lifelike Art of Giulio Romano and His Breathing Statues	
8.2. ‘ <i>Had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work</i> ’.	p. 359
Hermetic Symbolism in the Statue Scene	
8.3. ‘ <i>The statue is but newly fixed</i> ’.	p. 373
The Alchemical Re-Creation of Queen Hermione	
8.4. ‘ <i>My true Paulina, / We shall not marry till thou bidd’st us</i> ’.	p. 387
Paulina as Lady Alchymia	
8.5. ‘ <i>If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating</i> ’.	p. 401
King James’s Political and Religious Attitude and his Possible Reception of <i>The Winter’s Tale</i>	
<b>Conclusion</b>	p. 417
<b>Bibliography</b>	p. 421
<b>Plates</b>	p. 467



## Abstract

The aim of this study is to offer a reading of one of William Shakespeare's last plays, *The Winter's Tale*, in the light of alchemical and Hermetic imagery and language. Moving from the theoretical apparatus of the history of ideas, first theorised by Arthur Lovejoy, this dissertation provides a new perspective from which to interpret a play much debated as *The Winter's Tale*. The dissemination of Hermetic and alchemical ideas reached a climax in both England and the rest of Europe precisely in-between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries: a number of editions of older alchemical sources were amply circulating either singularly or in wide collections, such as *Theatrum Chemicum*, first published by Zetzner in 1602, and *Artis auriferae*, that was issued in two volumes in 1593. Roger Bacon's *Speculum alchemiae* was translated into English and published in London in 1597, a few years after the first edition of George Ripley's *Compound of Alchymie* (1591), originally composed in the 1470s. Among the most renowned writings of the time, well known to Shakespeare and his audience, were the treatises of the Swiss alchemist and physician Paracelsus. Interestingly enough, Shakespeare's son-in-law, the physician John Hall, employed Paracelsian remedies, as attested by his medical diary. As a matter of fact, the controversy between Galenists and Paracelsians is explicitly evoked in one of Shakespeare's comedies: *All's Well That Ends Well*.

In England, under the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James, alchemy was a highly controversial subject: even though it offered poets, dramatists, and artists a rich set of allegorical images and symbols with which to praise the monarchs and their court, it was also perceived as a dangerous and fraudulent activity. Elizabeth, defined as the "vndeluding alchemist" by William Warner and as an "Alchymist diuine" by John Davies, was praised as both a patron and a symbol of the alchemical art, even though her attitude towards alchemy was not always straightforward: the queen, who devoted herself to alchemical practices with John Dee, usually employed intermediary figures, such as William Cecil and Francis Walsingham, when dealing with alchemists who sought for royal patronage. Unlike Queen Elizabeth, King James is usually considered as totally hostile to the world of Renaissance Hermeticism. However, significant evidence exists that testifies to James's refusal of black magic and witchcraft and attests, instead, that he liked to be identified with Hermes Trismegistus and Solomon, the 'fathers' of alchemy. Francis Bacon himself, in the epistle dedicatory of *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), defines the Stuart monarch as "invested of that triplicity which in great veneration was ascribed to the ancient Hermes". Michael Maier, one of the greatest Hermeticists and

alchemists of Europe, arrived at the Jacobean court from Prague, in 1611, and offered both James and his son Henry two Christmas greeting cards: the two documents are composed of enigmatic imagery and obscure emblems and epigrams, some of which were supposed to be accompanied by music, in the model of Maier's most renowned alchemical work, *Atalanta fugiens* (1617-18).

*The Winter's Tale*, almost contemporary with Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and performed by the same theatre company, the King's Men, questions several of the issues that were at the core of Renaissance Hermetic culture. The most evident reference to Hermeticism that is to be found in Shakespeare's romance is provided by the statue scene: by putting on stage a sculptural work of art that seemingly comes to life, Shakespeare points to the Egyptian magic and art that is recounted in the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius*. This dissertation, however, also investigates several aspects of the play that have never been read in this light before. The protagonist of the romance, King Leontes, is submitted to a process of symbolical death and rebirth, a pattern that recalls the cycle of the *opus alchymicum* and all those alchemical parables that dwell upon the allegory of the transmutation of the so-called *rex chymicus*, emblem of philosophical gold. In the healing, and obliquely alchemical, journey of the drama, Paulina plays a central role: the woman, who employs her magical art to restore life and 'mend' nature, functions as a personification of the alchemical art. Furthermore, time and water are essential in the redemptive and circular journey of the play: as in alchemical imagery, they are conceived of as both destroying and healing, contributing to 're-create' the diseased microcosm of Leontes and the macrocosm of nature.

## ABBREVIATIONS

TCB	Elias Ashmole, <i>Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum</i> (1652).
OED	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>
ODNB	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
AP	Robert M. Schuler (ed.), <i>Alchemical Poetry</i> (1995)
BCC	Jean-Jacques Manget (ed.), <i>Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa</i> (1702)
MH	<i>Musaeum Hermeticum</i> (1678)
HM	<i>The Hermetic Museum</i> (transl. Elias Ashmole, 1893)
AA	<i>Artis auriferae</i> (1593).
HAWP	<i>The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus</i> (transl. Elias Ashmole, 1894).



## LIST OF PLATES

Given the high number of illustrations, all the plates have been collected at the end of this dissertation according to seven categories: “The Chemical Wedding or *Coniunctio*”, “The Transmutation of the *Rex Chymicus*”, “The Phase of Ablution”, “The Phases of Dissolution, Putrefaction, and *nigredo*”, “Alchemy and Women”, “Alchemical Art and Nature”, and “Other Plates”.

### The Chemical Wedding or *Coniunctio*

- Plate 1** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “The king and queen”, BL. MS. Harley 3469, f. 10. (all the plates from *Splendor solis* are reproduced from BL. MS. Harley 3469. Courtesy of the British Library).
- Plate 2** J. Mylius, *Anatomia auri* (1628), “The King, the Queen, and the Alchemical Flowers”, (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 204).
- Plate 3** J. Mylius, *Anatomia auri* (1628), “Conceptio”/”Praegnatio”, (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 202).
- Plate 4** *Materia Prima Lapidis Philosophorum*, MS. beginning XVIII cent. “The Chemical Couple and the Philosophical Child”, (reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 357).
- Plate 5** *Donum Dei*, beginning XVII cent., “The *Coniunctio* and the Philosophical Child”, (reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 359).
- Plate 6** *Donum Dei*, beginning XVII cent., “The Chemical Couple and the Philosophical Child”, (reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 358).
- Plate 7** *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550), “The Chemical Wedding of King Sol and King Luna” (reproduced from *Artis auriferae*, vol. 2, p. 227).
- Plate 8** *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550), “Coniunctio sive coitus”, (reproduced from *Artis auriferae*, vol. 2, p. 245).
- Plate 9** *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550) (reproduced from *Artis auriferae*, vol. 2, p. 303).
- Plate 10** *Rosarium pilosophorum* (1550) (reproduced from *Artis auriferae*, vol. 2, p. 236).

- Plate 11** *Pandora* (1582), “The *Coniunctio* and the Philosophical Child”, (reproduced from J. Fabricius, *Alchemy*, p. 71).
- Plate 12** A. Libavius, *Alchymia* (1606), “The Chemical Wedding”, (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 48).
- Plate 13** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622), “The *Coniunctio*”, (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 170).
- Plate 14** B. Valentinus, *Zwölff Schlüssel* (1602), “The Chemical Couple and Time-Saturn with a Scythe”, (reproduced from *The Hermetic Museum*, 1893, p. 159).
- Plate 15** J. Mylius, *Anatomia auri*, “The *Coniunctio* and the Philosophical Child”, (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 201).
- Plate 16** A. Libavius, *Alchymia* (1606)  
“The Seven Steps to the Completion of the *Opus*”  
(reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 50).
- Plate 17** M. Maier, *Tripus aureus* (1618), “The Chemical Wedding”, (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 121. All the plates from *Atalanta fugiens* are reproduced from Id, *Atalanta fugiens*, translated and edited by Joscelyn Godwin, 1989 and from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, 1988).

## The Transmutation of the *Rex Chymicus*

- Plate 18** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “The King” (f. 29).
- Plate 19** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “A drowning king” (f. 16v).
- Plate 20** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 48
- Plate 21** *The Book of Lambspring*, Figure IX  
(reproduced from *The Hermetic Museum*, transl. A.E. Waite, 1893, p. 143).
- Plate 22** *The Book of Lambspring*, Figure XIII  
(reproduced from *The Hermetic Museum*, transl. A.E. Waite, 1893, p.147).
- Plate 23** *Le Don de Dieu* (15<sup>th</sup> cent.),  
“The King and the Rose as Symbols of Alchemical Perfection”,  
(reproduced from M. Gabriele (ed.), *Le Precieux Don de Dieu – Biblioteca dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, Verginelli-Rota Ms. 3).
- Plate 24** *Donum Dei*, beginning XVII cent., “Rosa Rubea”,  
(reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 363)

**Plates 25-26** E. Kelly, *Alchemical Writings*, “The Transmutation of the Chemical King” (reproduced from *The Alchemical Writings of E. Kelly*, 1893, pp. 143 and 145).

**Plate 27** *Coronatio naturae*, XVII cent., “The projection of the red tincture”, (reproduced from L. Abraham, *A Dictionary*, p. 158).

**Plates 28-34** Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita novella* (1546), “The Transmutation of the King”.

## The Phase of Ablution

**Plate 35** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 28

**Plate 36** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 31

**Plate 37** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “A man bathing” (f. 21v).

**Plate 38** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “A black man and a winged queen” (f. 18).

**Plate 39** M. Palombara, *La Bugia* (1656) “The ablution of the king”, (reproduced from Mino Gabriele, “La signification de la ‘Porte magique’ de Rome et la doctrine alchimique de Massimiliano Palombara”, in D. Kahn and S. Matton (eds.), *Alchimie, art, histoire et mythes*, 1995, p. 714).

**Plate 40** *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550), “Ablutio vel Mundificatio”, (reproduced from *Artis auriferae*, vol. 2, p. 275).

**Plate 41** Goosen van Vreeswyck, *De Goude Leeuw* (1672) “The biblical waters of destruction and salvation inundating the laboratory” (reproduced from J. Fabricius, *Alchemy*, p. 19).

**Plate 42** J. C. Barchusen, *Elementa chemiae* (1718) “Producing the primal matter by putrefaction, or a reversal of the creation process” (reproduced from J. Fabricius, *Alchemy*, p. 18).

## The Phases of Dissolution, Putrefaction, and *nigredo*

**Plate 43** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622), “The King and Queen in a grave, and Time-Saturn next to them”, (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 174).

**Plate 44** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622), “The King, the Queen, and Time-Saturn”,

(reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 171).

- Plate 45** *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550), “Conceptio seu Putrefactio”,  
(reproduced from *Artis auriferae*, vol. 2., p. 254).
- Plate 46** *Donum Dei*, beginning XVII cent., “Putrefactio”,  
(reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 360).
- Plate 47** *Buch von Vunderwerken*, 17<sup>th</sup> cent., “A Man on the Philosophical Wheel”  
(reproduced from L. Abraham, *A Dictionary*, p. 138)
- Plate 48** D. Stolcius, *Viridarium chymicum* (1624), “The nigredo”,  
(reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 175).
- Plate 49** *Mutus Liber* (1677),  
“The *Prima Materia* as Saturn devouring his children”,  
(reproduced from C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, p. 317)

## Alchemy and Women

- Plate 50** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 3.
- Plate 51** M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 22.
- Plate 52** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622) “Women washing”  
(reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 172).
- Plate 53** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “Women washing clothes” (f. 32v).
- Plate 54** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 26.
- Plate 55** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622) “Lady Alchemy”  
(reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 176).
- Plate 56** L. Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia* (1570) “Alchymya”.
- Plate 57** L. Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia* (1574) “Alchimia”.
- Plate 58** K. Gesner, Frontispiece to *The newe Jewell of Health* (1576).
- Plate 59** K. Gesner, Frontispiece to *The Practice of the new and old Physicke* (1599).  
(reproduced from J. E. Archer, “*Rudeness itselfe she doth refine: Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia*”).

**Plate 60** *Donum Dei*, beginning XVII cent., “Rosa Alba”,  
(reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 362).

**Plate 61** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “The White Queen” (f. 27).

**Plate 62** G. della Porta, *De distillationibus* (1609),  
“The Mercurial Serpent and the Uterus”,  
(reproduced from J. Fabricius, *Alchemy*, p. 11).

## **Alchemical Art and Nature**

**Plate 63** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 42.

**Plate 64** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622) “The Alchemical Tree”  
(reproduced from L. Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, p. 151).

**Plate 65** *Alchemica*, XVI sec., “Nature-Alchemy”  
John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Rylands German Ms. 1,  
(reproduced from M. Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente.*).

**Plate 66** H. Reussner, *Pandora*, Basilea, 1588, “Nature-Alchemy”,  
(reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 407).

**Plate 67** *Le Don de Die* (15<sup>th</sup> cent.) “The Flowers in the Alchemical Alembic”  
(reproduced from Mino Gabriele (ed.), *Le Precieux Don de Dieu*, 1988 –  
Biblioteca dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Verginelli-Rota Ms. 3).

**Plate 68** *Alchimistiche Manuskript*, Basel, 1550, “The Alchemical Flowers”,  
(reproduced from L. Abraham, *A Dictionary*, p. 79).

**Plate 69** A. Eleazar, *Uraltes chymisches Werk*, 1760,  
“The Alchemist and the Alchemical Flowers”,  
(reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 416).

**Plate 70** R. Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi historia* (1616-1621),  
“Integrae Naturae speculum Artisque imago”,  
(reproduced from J. Fabricius, *Alchemy*, p. 46).

## **Other Plates**

**Plate 71** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 12.

**Plate 72** Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 27.

- Plate 73** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “The Rising Sun” (f. 33v).
- Plate 74** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “The Black Sun” (f. 30v).
- Plate 75** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “The Peacock / Cauda Pavonis” (f. 28).
- Plate 76** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “The Amorous Birds of Prey” (f. 24).
- Plate 77** *Aurora consurgens*, XVI cent., “Amorous birds of prey” (reproduced from A. Roob, *Alchimia & Mistica*, p. 383).
- Plate 78** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, “Children at play” (f. 31v).
- Plate 79** M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 14.
- Plate 80** University of Glasgow Library Ferguson MS. 6, f. 117, “Mercurius with the caduceus”, (reproduced from L. Abraham, *A Dictionary*, p. 125).
- Plate 81** Manuscript (15<sup>th</sup> century) National Library, Florence (MS BR 52, III, II, 27; fol. CCLXVI), “The Alchemist carrying a living statuette”, (reproduced from G. F. Hartlaub, *Opera Chemica*, p. 99).
- Plate 82** B. Aneau, Emblem “Sine iustitia, confvsio” (reproduced from *Picta poesis, Vt Pictvra Poesis Erit*, Lyons, 1552, p. 49).
- Plate 83** G. Whitney, Emblem “Sine iustitia, confusio” (reproduced from *A Choice of Emblemes*, Lovell Reeve & Co., London, 1866, p. 122).
- Plate 84** M. Maier, *Strena natalitia* to Prince Henry (1611) (BL Royal Mss. 14B XVI, Courtesy of the British Library)
- Plates 85-86** Printer’s Devices (England, 16<sup>th</sup> century), (reproduced from R.B. McKerrow, *Printers’ & Publishers’ Devices in England & Scotland 1485-1640*, 1949).
- Plate 87** T. Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchymy*, 15<sup>th</sup> cent., “The Master offering a book to the disciple” (reproduced from Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchymy, written, in verse, by Thomas Norton, of Bristol; containing the first five chapters*. On vellum, of the XV<sup>th</sup> century. Small Quarto – Add MS 10302; courtesy of the British Library).
- Plate 88** H. Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (1602), “The Alchemical Laboratorium” (reproduced from K. De Rola, *The Golden Game*, p. 33).
- Plate 89** A. Libavius, Title-page to *Alchymia* (1606).

- Plate 90** Title-page to F. Anthony, *Panacea aurea sive Tractatus duo de ipsius Auro Potabili* (1618).
- Plate 91** Frontispiece to King James I, *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince* (1616)  
(reproduced from V. Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, p.70).



To professor Milena Romero Allué and professor Brunello Lotti,  
for their unceasing support and trust.



## Introduction

Alchemical literature reached its apogee in-between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries in England and the rest of Europe. Older texts attributed to early medieval thinkers, namely Roger Bacon, Arnald of Villanova, Thomas Aquinas, and Albertus Magnus, were newly published and circulated either singularly or in large compendia. In a span of time of almost fifteen years, from the 1590s to 1605, a number of alchemical works appeared: the anthology entitled *Theatrum Chemicum*, first published by Zetzner in four volumes in 1602, evidently testifies to the huge demand of alchemical texts. Given the success of the endeavour, *Theatrum Chemicum* was later reprinted twice, with the addition of more volumes. A wide range of alchemical writings in Latin, among which was Roger Bacon's *Speculum alchemiae*, had already been published in 1541 in the collection *De alchimia*, issued by Petreium in Nuremberg. On the continent, then, alchemical literature was thriving, as attested also by the treatises of Basilius Valentinus, Lamsprinck, Sendivogius, and, later, Michael Maier. As Michela Pereira observes, from the late Middle Ages onwards the flow of the alchemical written production became almost overwhelming<sup>1</sup>. A variety of alchemical writings were printed also in England: these treatises were either written by native authors, as in the case of George Ripley's *Compound of Alchymie* (1591), or newly translated into English, as Roger Bacon's *The Mirror of Alchimy* (1597), originally composed in Latin. Figures as the clergyman Thomas Tymme and the physician George Baker further contributed to bring alchemical texts written by foreign alchemists to the attention of the English readers. Equally worth mentioning are the works of the Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus, known as 'the Luther of Medicine'. Paracelsus's revolutionary ideas on both alchemy and medicine were especially renowned in late sixteenth-century England, where a whole school of Paracelsians battled against the supporters of Galenic medicine, as testified also by the Shakespearean comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*.

The alchemical texts that circulated in early modern England and Europe display a wide variety of approaches: technical experimentations on matter and metals went hand in hand with soteriological concerns. Alchemy was regarded either as a fraud, as a kind of proto-chemistry, and even as a religious, philosophical pursuit, aimed at recovering the prelapsarian Golden Age and capable of reconciling the earthly and heavenly dimensions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michela Pereira, *Arcana sapienza. L'alchimia dalle origini a Jung*, Carocci, Roma, 2001, pp. 194-5.

The first two chapters of this dissertation are an attempt to assess the meaning or, rather, the meanings of alchemy, from its origins in ancient Egypt to the Renaissance, when alchemical practices and studies were enhanced thanks to Marsilio Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, first published in 1471. Chapter I, in particular, focuses on the development of alchemy from a metallurgical craft, concerned with the transformation of physical substances in the context of the myth of the *homo faber*, to an esoteric, Hermetic discipline. Chapter II deals with the contribution of alchemy to the new scientific theories emerging in the sixteenth century: Francis Bacon, more than others, testifies to the complex interaction and coexistence of 'old' and 'new' conceptions of the relationship between man and the cosmos.

The controversial and multifaceted role held by alchemy in Renaissance England is particularly evident in numerous literary writings of the time, such as those by Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare. Their works reflect, in diverse ways, the attitude towards Hermeticism that was displayed by the Tudor and Stuart sovereigns, notably Queen Elizabeth and King James. The climax of interest in alchemical and Hermetic practices in general corresponds to the period in which the English literary production reached one of its highest degrees of excellence, i.e. in the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages<sup>2</sup>. Alchemy offered poets and playwrights an articulated imagery and language that could be employed either to distance themselves from that world-view or to celebrate the monarch in highly emblematic terms. As will be considered in chapter III, Queen Elizabeth, defined as an "vndeluding alcumist"<sup>3</sup> and "an Alchymist diuine"<sup>4</sup>, was oftentimes praised in alchemical terms. The queen, who constantly devoted herself to alchemy under the supervision of her personal astrologer John Dee, usually adopted a "definite" but somewhat "covert"<sup>5</sup> position towards alchemists who sought for royal patronage. King James's view of Hermeticism is even more disputed than that of his predecessor. The king abhorred demonic magic and witchcraft, as testified by *Daemonologie* (1597), but was, rather surprisingly, associated with Hermes Trismegistus and Solomon, who were traditionally considered as the 'fathers' of alchemy. In the epistle dedicatory that precedes *The Advancement of Learning* (1605),

---

<sup>2</sup> See Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> William, *Albions England a continued historie of the same kingdome, from the originals of the first inhabitants thereof: and most the chiefe alterations and accidents there happening: vnto, and in, the happie raigne of our now most gracious soueraigne Queene Elizabeth. With varietie of inuentiue and historicall intermixtures, First penned and published by William Warner: and now reuised, and newly enlarged by the same author*, Printed by the widow Orwin, for Ioan Broome, London, 1597, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> John Davies, Hymne 1, "Of Astraea", l. 12, in Id., *Hymnes of Astraea in acrosticke verse*, Printed by R. Field for I. Standish, London, 1599, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. 17.

Bacon defines James as “invested of that triplicity which in great veneration was ascribed to the ancient Hermes”<sup>6</sup>. On the whole, alchemical and Hermetic symbolism was complexly intertwined with King James’s iconography. Moreover, the monarch maintained significant relationships with contemporary figures that were overtly connected with alchemical and Hermetic studies. The fact that one of the most renowned Hermeticists and alchemists of Europe, Michael Maier, arrived at the Jacobean court in 1611, where he stayed for five years, suggests that James was very close to the world of Renaissance Hermeticism. Upon his arrival, Maier offered both the Stuart monarch and his son, Prince Henry, two Christmas greeting cards (see plate 84), decorated with enigmatic imagery, emblems, and epigrams, some of which were supposed to be accompanied by music, in the model of his most praised work, *Atalanta fugiens* (1617-18). Considering that Maier came to England from Prague, where he was employed in the service of Emperor Rudolf II, it can be assumed that significant connections existed between Rudolf’s court, where all sorts of alchemical and Hermetic studies were welcomed, and that of the Stuart king.

Since the stage was the place where current issues were constantly probed and alchemical culture was such an essential component of the English Renaissance mindset, I believe that the language and imagery of alchemy offer an enlightening perspective from which to read *The Winter’s Tale*, especially moving from the theoretical apparatus of the history of ideas, first theorised by Arthur Lovejoy. According to the scholar, a study of the “the general background in the intellectual life and common moral and aesthetic valuations” of the age in which great writers produced their works and of “the ideas then generally prevalent” is essential in order to appreciate the original context that gave birth to a specific work<sup>7</sup>. As Marcello Pagnini remarks, every literary creation is “a cut” on a diachronic axis, that intersects other structures, namely the coeval social, religious, scientific, and artistic situations<sup>8</sup>. In the light of Pagnini’s suggestions, it can be assumed that nothing is more contingent than a theatrical performance, because it is profoundly rooted in the historical, social, and literary context in which it is born and completely dependent on it. Almost contemporary with Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, performed by the King’s Men in 1610, Shakespeare’s romance allows modern readers of the play to delve into a now lost philosophy of man and nature. *The Tempest* and *The Winter’s Tale*, that respectively open and close the section of *Comedies* in Shakespeare’s 1623-Folio, are the

---

<sup>6</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, “To the King”, in Id., *Collected Works of Francis Bacon*, with a new introduction by Graham Rees, Routledge, London, 1996, vol. III, Part I p. 263.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., [1936] 1964, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Marcello Pagnini, *Struttura letteraria e metodo critico*, D’Anna, Messina, 1967, p. 93.

two Shakespearean plays that most evidently deal with the world of Hermeticism. Chapter IV actually provides the reader with an overview of the alchemical texts and authors that were known in Shakespeare's time. Chapter V is mainly concerned with the protagonist of the romance, King Leontes. The latter undergoes a path of expiation and rebirth, of "recreation" (III, iii, 237), a process that evokes the high number of alchemical parables whose protagonist is the *rex chymicus*, the 'chemical king', who equally goes through a process of suffering and symbolical renewal. Chapter VI discusses the elements of time and water in relation to alchemical symbolism: according to this reading, *The Winter's Tale* is structured as a circular and alchemical journey that, through the 'destroying' and 'healing' effects of time and water, leads to the final *coniunctio* between the king and queen and to the reconciliation of opposites. As if following the stages of the *solve et coagula*, dissolve and reunite, the characters in *The Winter's Tale* are first "dissevered" in order to be reconciled after a "wide gap of time" (V, iii, 154), as Leontes himself remarks in the very end. Chapter VII and VIII consider the treatment of the art-nature debate in the play in the light of the alchemical theories of the time and reflect upon the most stunning moment of the romance: the seeming resurrection of the queen of Sicily, Hermione. In the final scene of the play, Shakespeare concretely puts on stage the issue of nature versus art, by hinting at the Egyptian rituals of statue animation recounted in the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius*, that was attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus and that was known to the Elizabethans and Jacobean thanks to a Latin translation fathered upon Apuleius. In an alchemical way, the inner "recreation"<sup>9</sup> of Leontes is reflected in the actual 're-creation' of Hermione, thus completing the cycle of the *rota alchemica* with a sort of 'chemical wedding' and the recovery or, better, 'rebirth', of the 'philosophical child', Perdita, the result of the alchemical journey of death and rebirth, loss and recovery. A key role in the regenerative pattern of the romance is played by Paulina, wife to the Sicilian lord Antigonus: the woman employs her 'magical' and healing art to "mend"<sup>10</sup> Leontes's diseased microcosm, somehow performing the role of alchemy itself.

The very last section of chapter VIII is devoted to King James's possible reception of *The Winter's Tale*. The monarch was the patron of the Shakespearean theatre company when the play was composed and, as a consequence, he was the main addressee of the romance when it was performed at court, as, for instance, in the occasion of the

---

<sup>9</sup> After the death of his son Mamilius and the presumed death of his wife, Queen Hermione, King Leontes resolves to undertake a process of expiation, of "recreation", as he himself remarks: "Once a day I'll visit / The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there / Shall be my *recreation*" (III, ii, 235-7).

<sup>10</sup> In the art-nature debate between King Polixenes and Perdita, the former says to the latter: "This is an art Which does *mend* Nature – change it rather – but / The art itself is Nature" (IV, iv, 95-97, italics mine).

celebrations for the Palatine Wedding (1613) between Princess Elizabeth Stuart and Frederick V, the Elector Palatine. The play actually pays homage to some of the king's own ideals. In particular, his peaceful policy, aimed at conjoining rather than erasing differences, both at domestic and international level, acquires extra value if read in the light of the inclusive rationale of the alchemical philosophy, whose main symbols are precisely the hermaphrodite and the caduceus, representing unity out of duplicity and harmony out of discord. The caduceus, the rod of the god Mercury-Hermes, was also strongly connected with James, as testified by Rubens's painting in the ceiling of the Banqueting House: in the fresco, that celebrates the Stuart monarch as Solomon, the king of peace, the caducean rod appears next to James. Displaying a world that is "mended" by human art and, in a circular way, ending where it began, at the Sicilian court of King Leontes, *The Winter's Tale* obliquely hints at the cycle of the *rota alchemica*, whose end is to unite microcosm and macrocosm in order to "accomplish the miracles of one thing"<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula Smaragdina*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader. From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 28.



# Chapter 1

## Alchemy and Hermeticism: An Introduction

### 1.1. Alchemy: from its Ancient Origins to the Renaissance

Alchemy still arouses a great deal of interest among scholars at international level, possibly because its ancient and elusive origins are hardly identifiable with precision, both from a geographical and historical point of view<sup>12</sup>. The presence of alchemy in various areas of the world, from China to Western Europe, has prompted a search for answers concerning its birth<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, the variety of scopes that has always been a distinguishing trait of alchemical practices has allowed researchers from different fields to approach the study of alchemy by employing varied methodologies: historians of literature, art, science, philosophy, and religions, as well as philologists and chemists, have offered their contribution to alchemical studies<sup>14</sup>. It is precisely the heterogeneity of the alchemical

---

<sup>12</sup> As Linden remarks, “despite the recent deaths of pioneers like Frances Yates and D. P. Walker, it [alchemy] continues to attract the attention of scholars internationally and in a variety of fields: literature, history, philosophy, religion, art history and iconography, and the history of science and medicine”. Stanton J. Linden, General Introduction to Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry 1575-1700. From Previously Unpublished Manuscripts*, Garland, New York and London, 1995, p. xi.

<sup>13</sup> “Neither in China nor in the West can scholars approach with certitude the origins of alchemy, but the evidences in China appear to be slightly older”. Robert P. Multhauf, “Alchemy”, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica. Macropaedia. Knowledge in Depth*, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 1981, vol. 1, p. 432. In a similar way, Halleux remarks that the Chinese alchemical tradition is undoubtedly older than the Western one and that the former began to exercise a certain amount of influence on the latter only from the thirteenth century: “Le più antiche teorie alchemiche furono indubbiamente quelle cinesi, che tuttavia sembrano avere esercitato una certa influenza in Europa soltanto a partire dal XIII sec., attraverso vie di trasmissione ancora non identificate”. Robert Halleux, “L’alchimia nel medioevo latino e greco”, in *Storia della Scienza*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Fondata da Giovanni Treccani, Roma, 2001, vol. IV, p. 542. Hereafter quoted as *Storia della Scienza* followed by the volume and the page number. On the Chinese alchemical tradition, see, among others, Nathan Sivin, *Chinese Alchemy: Preliminary Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1968. See also the invaluable research of Joseph Needham: Joseph Needham, *The Shorter Science and Civilisation in China. An Abridgement of Joseph Needham’s Original Text*, edited by Colin A. Ronan, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978-1995, 4 vols.

<sup>14</sup> See, among others, the studies of Stanton J. Linden: Id., *Darke Hieroglyphicks. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 1996 and Id. (ed.), *Mystical Metal of Gold. Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture*, AMS Press, New York, 2007. See also the works of Margaret Healy, especially focused on the relationship between alchemy and early modern English literature, and those of Lyndy Abraham: Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination. The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011; Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, Scholar Press, Aldershot, 1990; Id., “‘The Lovers and the Tomb’: Alchemical Emblems in Shakespeare, Donne, and Marvell”, *Emblematica* 5:2, 1991, pp. 301-320. Lyndy Abraham also edited a dictionary of alchemical imagery that will be widely quoted in the present study: see Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998. On the relationship between alchemy and science it is worth mentioning the works of Allen G. Debus: see, among others, Id., *The English Paracelsians*, Franklin

tradition that makes alchemy a field of study worth perusing from diverse, equally enlightening, perspectives.

Mircea Eliade argues that profound connections existed between the art of alchemy and the ancient practices of metallurgy, mining, and pottery<sup>15</sup>. According to the celebrated historian of religions, these primeval attempts to act on matter, in the light of the myth of the *homo faber*, gave birth to the first alchemical operations:

Si nos analyses et nos interprétations sont fondées, l'alchimie prolonge et consomme un très vieux rêve de l'*homo faber*: collaborer au perfectionnement de la Matière, tout en assurant à soi-même sa propre perfection<sup>16</sup>.

Reflecting the human desire to understand the inner mechanisms of nature and the will to 'perfect' the world, the activities of blacksmiths, miners, ceramicists and, later, alchemists were conceived of as a possibility to perform a role in the sphere of the sacred. In particular, alchemy inherited the religious attitude towards Mother Earth that was typical of the activities of archaic societies<sup>17</sup>. Since working on matter implied a ritualistic and reverential approach towards the cosmos, the secrets related to these practices were transmitted by means of initiation rites. In a similar way, early alchemical procedures, Eliade remarks, were never intended as simple transformations of metals and physical substances but were always accompanied by a mystico-religious conception of the relationship between man and nature<sup>18</sup>. Close to Eliade, Mino Gabriele maintains that the

---

Watts, New York, 1965; Id., *The Chemical Dream of the Renaissance*, Churchill College Overseas Fellowship Lecture n. 3, W. Heffer & Sons, Cambridge, 1968; Id., *Man and Nature in the Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978; Id., "The Significance of Chemical History", *Ambix*, vol. 32, Part I, March 1985, pp. 1-14. A very recent study on alchemy from the point of view of a chemist is Salvatore Califano, *Storia dell'alchimia. Misticismo ed esoterismo all'origine della chimica moderna*, Firenze University Press, Firenze, 2015. See also the essential works of William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton: see, among others, William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions. Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, and William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (eds.), *Secrets of Nature. Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006. From the perspective of the history of religions, see the invaluable works of Mircea Eliade, such as Id., *Forgerons et alchimistes*, Flammarion, Paris, 1956 and Id., *Le mythe de l'alchimie*, translated by Ilena Tacou, in *Cahiers de l'Herne*, 33, 1978, pp. 157-67. Finally, the studies of the philologist and iconologist Mino Gabriele are fundamental for the study of the alchemical tradition. See, for instance, Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia a Iconologia*, Forum, Udine, 1997 and a very recent study that offers a complete bibliography for the study of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century alchemy: Id., *La porta magica di Roma: simbolo dell'alchimia occidentale*, Olschki, Firenze, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> "C'est dans les conceptions concernant la Terre-Mère, les minerais et les métaux, et surtout dans l'*expérience* de l'homme archaïque engagé dans les travaux de la mine, de la fusion et de la forge, qu'il faut chercher, pensons-nous, une des principales sources de l'alchimie". Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, Flammarion, Paris, 1956, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175.

<sup>17</sup> "Ce qu'il importe particulièrement de souligner, c'est la possibilité donnée à l'homme des sociétés archaïques de s'insérer dans le sacré par son propre travail d'*homo faber*, d'auteur et manipulateur d'outils". *Ibidem*, p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> "Il serait donc imprudent d'isoler, aux débuts historiques de l'alchimie gréco-égyptienne, les recettes de

roots of alchemy lie in the syncretism of philosophical and magical doctrines, metallurgical operations and mysticism, astrology and iatrochemistry<sup>19</sup>. Twenty years ago, when he published the essential text *Alchimia e Iconologia*, Mino Gabriele argued that no certainties concerning the birth of the alchemical tradition existed: “allo stato attuale i documenti e gli studi riguardanti l’alchimia non rispondono alla domanda circa il luogo ed il tempo della sua nascita”<sup>20</sup>. Nowadays, the situation regarding the roots of alchemy has remained almost unchanged.

The mention of the art of alchemy in a Chinese edict dating from 144 BC has long led scholars to enquire whether the discipline originated first in China or in Egypt. Holmyard concludes that Alexandria undoubtedly represented the main centre of development of Western alchemy: “whether the honour should go to China, or whether Egypt established a slight lead, there is no uncertainty about the fact that the main line of development of alchemy began in Hellenistic Egypt, and particularly in Alexandria”<sup>21</sup>. It should be pointed out that the belief according to which the Egyptian god Thot, also known to Greek culture as Hermes Trismegistus, invented all arts and crafts has widely contributed to assign to Egypt a primary role in the birth of the Western alchemical tradition<sup>22</sup>. Some researchers have supported this hypothesis by suggesting that the word ‘alchemy’, a transliteration of the Arabic *al-kīmijā*, would descend from the Egyptian *kmt*, meaning black soil or Egypt<sup>23</sup>. The Latin *alchimia*, or *alchemia*, then, would be a compound of *chēmia*, in its turn a derivative of *kmt*, and of the Arabic definite article *al*<sup>24</sup>. From the twelfth century onwards, when the first Latin translations of Arabic alchemical texts started to circulate, the word *alchemia* became more and more widespread. Multhauf observes that the origins of the root word *chem* are still uncertain since terms similar to it have been detected in the majority of ancient languages “with different meanings, but

---

‘teinture des métaux’: aucun métier, même dans l’antiquité tardive, n’était une simple technique . [...] les métiers gardaient encore leur caractère rituel, sans que le contexte hiérurgique fût nécessairement indiqué dans les recettes”. *Ibidem*, p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia e Iconologia*, Forum, Udine, 1997, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 13-4.

<sup>21</sup> Eric John Holmyard, *Alchemy*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1957, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> As documented by Burnett, the legend of the three Hermes is first attested in the astrological Arabic treatise *Kitāb Al-Ulūf*: “In this strange treatise of astrological history the legend of the three Hermes appears to have been first formulated: the first all-wise Hermes lived in Egypt before the flood, and is identical with Enoch; the second Hermes lived in Babylon and revived the sciences after the flood; the third Hermes is, once again, in Egypt. He taught alchemy and passed on his wisdom to Asclepius. This third Hermes corresponds to the Hermes of the *Corpus Hermeticum*”. See Charles Burnett, “The Legend of the Three Hermes and Abu Ma ‘Shar’s *Kitāb Al-Ulūf* in the Latin Middle-Ages”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (39), 1976, p. 231.

<sup>23</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia e iconologia*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

conceivably somehow related to alchemy”<sup>25</sup>. As documented by Halleux, at the core of the Latin word ‘alchimia’ is the Arabic *kīmiya*, that appears in the Greek language in several variants (*chēmēia*, *chymeía*, *chēmía*, and *chymía*), all of which contain the root of the verb *chéō*, that means melting metals<sup>26</sup>.

In Hellenistic times, Alexandria of Egypt was renowned for its thriving intellectual activities and its magnificent libraries. Alchemical practices and beliefs were inevitably enriched in the cradle of this wealthy culture, composed of Neoplatonic, Pythagorean, Gnostic, and Hermetic beliefs. When the Arabs conquered Egypt, in the seventh century, they further developed the already flourishing Greco-Egyptian alchemical tradition. At a later time, in the twelfth century, alchemical texts were gradually introduced into the Western world through Spain and Southern Italy, under Muslim rule since the eighth and ninth centuries respectively. As Burnett remarks, “the early history of Arabic alchemy and the means by which it was transmitted to the West are topics as elusive as the Philosopher’s Stone itself”<sup>27</sup>. One of the first Western intellectuals who went to Spain to translate Arabic sources was the English monk Robert of Chester<sup>28</sup>. Scholars generally agree that the latter produced the first Latin translation of an Arabic alchemical text, the so-called *Testamentum Morieni* or *Liber de Compositione Alchemiae*, translated in 1144<sup>29</sup>. However, Burnett draws attention to another source that testifies to a very early interest in alchemical practices both in the Arabic and in the Latin world. The scholar refers to Hugo of Santalla’s translation of an Arabic treatise known as “The Book of Questions”, a work composed of

---

<sup>25</sup> Robert P. Multhauf argues that the word alchemy “is a European one, derived from Arabic, but the origin of the root word, *chem*, is uncertain. Words similar to it have been found in most ancient languages, with different meanings, but conceivably somehow related to alchemy. In fact, the Greeks, Chinese, and Indians usually referred to what Westerners call alchemy as ‘The Art’, or by terms denoting change or transmutation”. Robert P. Multhauf, “Alchemy”, *Britannica. Macropaedia*, 1: 431.

<sup>26</sup> See Robert Halleux, “L’alchimia nel Medioevo Latino e Greco”, *Storia della scienza* 4: 542.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Burnett, “The Astrologer’s Assay of the Alchemist: Early References to Alchemy in Arabic and Latin Texts”, *Ambix*, vol. 39, Part 3, November 1992, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup> See Eric John Holmyard, *Alchemy*, cit., pp. 105-6. Multhauf points out that “Christian scholars were particularly attracted to Muslim Spain and Sicily and there pursued the arduous task of translation from both Arabic and Greek works. Much of what they translated was in some degree familiar, but some, including the literature of alchemy, was new”. Robert P. Multhauf, “Alchemy”, *Britannica. Macropaedia*, 1: 434.

<sup>29</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia e Iconologia*, cit., p. 17: “Viene generalmente accettato che la ricezione in Europa della letteratura araba a proposito (la cui genesi dottrinale va comunque ricondotta agli alchimisti egizio-ellenistici), vada fatta risalire al 1144, anno in cui Roberto di Chester tradusse per la prima volta in latino un’opera alchemica araba, il *Liber de Compositione Alchemiae* di Morieno”. As Pereira remarks, “1144 has recently been confirmed as the date of the translation of the *Testamentum Morieni* made by Robert of Chester”. See Michela Pereira, “Heavens on Earth. From the *Tabula Smaragdina* to the Alchemical Fifth Essence”, *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 5, n. 2, “Alchemy and Hermeticism”, 2000, p. 131. Morienus’s *Testamentum* and the Preface by Robert of Chester (*Praefatio Castrensis*) are collected in the second volume of *Artis auriferae*: see *Liber de compositione alchemiae, quem edidit Morienus Romanus, Calid Regi Aegyptiorum: quem Robertus Castrensis de Arabico in Latinum transtulit*, in *Artis auriferae, Excudebat Conr. Waldkirch, Expensis Claudij de Marne, Basileae, 1593*, vol. II, pp. 3-54. Hereafter all quotations from this collection will be marked as AA followed by the volume and the page number.

138 chapters, one of which is dedicated to alchemy. Hugo's translation dates from between 1141 and 1151 and, is, therefore, almost contemporary with Chester's Latin version of the *Testamentum Morieni*<sup>30</sup>. What is particularly remarkable about the two texts is that if, on the one hand, Chester presents the art of alchemy as an unknown discipline to the Latin public, Hugo, on the other hand, suggests that his readers are already familiar with what he calls *alkimia*, thus possibly demonstrating that alchemical practices were alive in Western Europe even before the first Latin translations of Arabic alchemical texts began to appear<sup>31</sup>.

Generally speaking, in the Latin Middle Ages alchemy was perceived as a *novitas* and, as a consequence, it was welcomed both with reverence and uncertainty<sup>32</sup>. Discussions concerning its validity and position within the Scholastic philosophy of the time engaged the most celebrated thinkers, namely Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, Arnald of Villanova, and Roger Bacon. In this respect, Shumaker points out that "alchemy had attracted the favourable attention of Roger Bacon, Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and many another man of distinguished intellect and achievement"<sup>33</sup>.

Even though alchemy was alive throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance was no doubt the golden age of alchemical culture and of all the disciplines that belong to the Hermetic tradition. Scholars usually agree that 'Hermeticism', rather than 'Hermetism', is the exact term to use to indicate the "syncretic body of knowledge, belief, and speculation that provides a basis for the theory and practice of magic, astrology, and, especially, alchemy"<sup>34</sup> in the Renaissance. Hermetism, conversely, designates only the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus and the interpretations they have been the subject of<sup>35</sup>:

---

<sup>30</sup> Charles Burnett, "The Astrologer's Assay of the Alchemist", cit., pp. 103-104.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>32</sup> "Per l'Occidente latino l'alchimia rappresentava una *novitas* gravida di promesse e di minacce; le sue pratiche sembravano poter svolgere un ruolo importante nelle arti e nei mestieri, e le sue teorie completavano la conoscenza del mondo minerale. Per quanto riguardava i minerali e i metalli, infatti, a quel tempo si conoscevano solamente le descrizioni di Plinio e di Isidoro, le informazioni farmaceutiche contenute negli erbari e le pratiche magiche dei lapidari; d'altra parte, il carattere divino, sacro e rivelato dell'alchimia, e le strategie linguistiche che ne derivavano, rappresentavano decisamente un ostacolo per l'integrazione del nuovo sapere". Robert Halleux, "L'alchimia nel medioevo latino e greco", *Storia della Scienza* 6: 544.

<sup>33</sup> Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance. A Study in Intellectual Patterns*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> Stanton J. Linden, General Introduction to Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry*, cit., p. xii. In like manner, Idel notes that "Renaissance thought may be described as confluence of medieval theology with some of the schools of thought of antiquity: Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and, at the end of the Renaissance, even atomism". Moshe Idel, "Hermeticism and Judaism", in Allen G. Debus and Ingrid Merkel (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance. Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, Papers Presented at a Conference Held in March 1982 at the Institute for Renaissance and Eighteenth-Century Studies in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington Folger Books, Washington, 1988, p. 59.

<sup>35</sup> Stanton J. Linden, General Introduction to Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry*, cit., p. xii. The first one to employ the term Hermeticism as distinct from Hermetism was Frances Yates. This distinction was still unknown to scholars in general, as one can infer from the introduction to the proceedings of the

alchemical ideas, however, are rooted in a wider and amorphous body of knowledge that includes natural magic, astrology, the Jewish kabbalah, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism. A chief event in the revitalization of alchemy and Hermeticism that characterised fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century Europe was the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Marsilio Ficino. The *Corpus* is a collection of seventeen treatises of Neoplatonic and Gnostic origin dating from the second and third centuries AD and long attributed to the revered Hermes Trismegistus, named ‘three times great’ because he was allegedly a priest, a prophet, and a magician<sup>36</sup>. The tracts, that are in the form of dialogues between a master and a disciple, were recovered in Macedonia by the monk Leonardo da Pistoia and presented to Cosimo de’ Medici<sup>37</sup>. The latter entrusted Marsilio Ficino with the translation of the *Corpus* (originally composed of fourteen dialogues) on which he worked between 1462 and 1463. Ficino’s translation was first published in 1471 with the title of *Poimandres*, that is, in fact, the title of the treatise that opens the collection. The Basel edition of Ficino’s *Corpus*, dating from 1576, also included the *Asclepius*, a text that was purportedly translated into Latin by Apuleius and whose original version is not extant<sup>38</sup>. The legendary Hermes “three times great” has been associated with alchemical knowledge since at least the seventh century, this is the reason why the terms “hermetic” and “alchemic” most frequently overlap<sup>39</sup>. Even though in the early seventeenth century Isaac

---

conference “Hermeticism and the Renaissance”, held at the Folger Library in Washington, in 1982: “Yates used the term *Hermeticism* for a wide range of occult and mystical writings and reserved *Hermetism* for texts and documents immediately related to the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This distinction has rarely been employed by others. A second object of the conference, consequently, had been to explore further and to clarify the meaning and use of these terms”. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Id. (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> “For this reason Hermes was so truly named Trismegistus because he was a king, a priest, a prophet, a magician, and a sophist of natural things”. Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, in *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus the Great. Now for the First Time Faithfully Translated into English*, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, based on the Geneva folio of 1658, James Elliott and Co., London, 1894, vol. 1, p. 49. Hereafter all quotations from this collection will be marked as HAWP followed by the volume and the page number.

<sup>37</sup> See Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, cit., p. 201.

<sup>38</sup> “Quel che oggi chiamiamo *Corpus Hermeticum* è un insieme di diciassette brevi trattati, pervenuti in lingua greca, cui si aggiunge l’*Asclepio*, di cui possediamo solo la versione latina [...], opera probabilmente di Apuleio. [...] La raccolta comprendeva i primi quattordici trattati, oggi conservati nella Biblioteca Laurenziana di Firenze, e tale edizione [...] fu dunque pubblicata nel 1471. Altri frammenti in lingua greca comparvero in epoche successive [...] e furono inseriti nell’attuale *Corpus*, rimaneggiato fino ad acquisire l’odierna costituzione in diciassette definitivi trattati”. Valeria Schiavone, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2001, pp. 6-7.

<sup>39</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia e Iconologia*, cit., p. 15. On the connections between Hermes Trismegistus and alchemy, Friedlander remarks: “I have found no satisfactory explanation of why the name, Hermes Trismegistus, first became attached to some alchemical writings. It has been suggested that the alchemical arts, at least in Egypt, were originally under the control of the priesthood. If this was so – although no really good evidence for this is offered – it would be understandable that they could have ascribed this to their god, Thot, the inventor of all things. In such a situation, the Greeks who apparently were the authors of the various works, or at least those who wrote their works in Greek, would have translated this as Hermes Trismegistus. [...] In any case, of importance to this essay is that, regardless of the reason, probably by at least the seventh century, Hermes Trismegistus was considered to be an authoritative

Casaubon demonstrated that the treatises ascribed to the Egyptian Hermes had been composed during the first centuries of Christianity, and not in pre-Christian times as it was formerly believed, the myth that Hermes was the father of alchemy continued to persist:

Casaubon proved that the Hermetic writings were not those of an ancient Egyptian divinity or priest who lived in primordial times but were composed anonymously during the period of the Roman Empire and the first few centuries AD<sup>40</sup>.

Along with the Hermetic *Corpus* and the *Asclepius*, the so-called *Tabula smaragdina*, first translated from Arabic into Latin by the aforementioned Hugo of Santalla<sup>41</sup>, is traditionally considered as the sacred text of alchemy. The *Tabula smaragdina* is the emerald tablet that, according to alchemical writers, revealed in Phoenician characters the secrets of the alchemical art. In the treatise *The Marrow of Alchemy*, the seventeenth-century alchemist George Starkey, long known by the pseudonym of Eirenaeus Philalethes, argues that the principles of alchemy were obscurely exposed in the tablet:

Of those who of this Art do bear a Name,  
First Noble Hermes comes upon the Stage,  
A Royal Prince and of deserved Fame,  
His Peer was not afforded in his Age;  
He Alchemy renown'd as he was able,  
Comprising't in his brief Smaragdine Table<sup>42</sup>.

Defined by Pereira as the “Urtext of Western alchemy”<sup>43</sup>, the *Emerald Table* was supposedly found in the grave of the mythical Hermes Trismegistus by Sarah, usually identified as the wife of Alexander the Great or of Abraham, a detail that inevitably contributed to heighten the status of the text.

---

figure in alchemy”. Walter J. Friedlander, *The Golden Wand of Medicine. A History of the Caduceus Symbol Medicine*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1992, p. 74.

<sup>40</sup> Stanton J. Linden (ed.), Introduction to Id., *The Alchemy Reader. From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 27. Casaubon explicitly asserted that the writings included in the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum* did not contain the Egyptian doctrine of Hermes: “I assert that in this book is contained not the Egyptian doctrine of Hermes, but a Greek doctrine drawn in part from the books of Plato and his followers, often in their very words, and in part a Christian doctrine obtained from sacred books”. Isaac Casaubon, *Isaaci Casauboni [...] exercitationes XVI*, London, 1613, quoted in Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences*, cit., p. 207.

<sup>41</sup> See Charles Burnett, “The Astrologer’s Assay of the Alchemist”, cit., p. 105: “Hugo was otherwise familiar with Arabic alchemy, for he was also responsible for making the earliest translation of the *Tabula smaragdina* of Hermes Trismegistus. This mysterious text was regarded as the key to alchemical esoterism and is the culmination of the Hermetic revelation in Pseudo-Apollonius’s *Secrets of Nature* which Hugo translated from Arabic”.

<sup>42</sup> George Starkey, *The Marrow of Alchemy*, Printed by A.M. for Edw. Brewster, London, 1654, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> “[La *Tabula Smaragdina*] acquisirà in brevissimo tempo lo status di Urtext dell’alchimia occidentale”. Michela Pereira (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano, 2006, p. 240.

Copenhaver remarks that the treatises belonging to the Hermetic *Corpus* are not “much concerned with astrology, very little with magic and not at all with alchemy”<sup>44</sup>; however, they provided a set of philosophical and theological principles that, depicting man as a god on earth, promoted alchemical research, intended as a way to perform an active role in the divine process of refinement of the world. In the seventeen tracts that compose the *Corpus Hermeticum*, man, thanks to his dual nature, human and divine, and his intermediary, somehow ‘amphibian’ position between the heavenly and the earthly dimensions, is explicitly defined as a “mortal god”:

the human rises up to heaven and takes its measure and knows what is in its heights and its depths, and he understands all else exactly and – greater than all of this – he comes to be on high without leaving earth behind, so enormous is his range. Therefore, we must dare to say that *the human on earth is a mortal god* but that god in heaven is an immortal human<sup>45</sup>. (italics mine)

The concept of man as a semi-god is especially developed in the *Asclepius*, a treatise defined by Ficino as especially divine<sup>46</sup>. God, Hermes remarks, created man of a dual nature so that he could revere things divine and take care of things on earth:

[God] noticed that he [man] could not take care of everything unless he was covered over with a material wrapping [...]. Thus god shapes mankind from the nature of soul and of body, from the eternal and the mortal, in other words, so that the living being so shaped can prove adequate to both its beginnings, wondering at heavenly beings and worshipping them, tending earthly beings and governing them<sup>47</sup>.

Man is “a great wonder”, Hermes concludes, since “he changes his nature into a god’s, as if he were a god” and “has been put in the happier place of middle status so that he might cherish those beneath him and be cherished by those above him”<sup>48</sup>. Hermes’s words in

---

<sup>44</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. xxxii.

<sup>45</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, “Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus: the Key”, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> See Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences*, cit., p. 203.

<sup>47</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 71. Latin text: “cum itaque eum [...] <fecisset> et animaduerteret eum non posse omnium rerum esse diligentem, nisi eum mundano integimento contegeret, texit eum corporea domo talesque omnes esse praecepit ex utraque natura in unum confundens miscensque, quantum satis esse debuisset. itaque hominem conformat ex animi atque corporis id est ex aeterna atque mortali natura, ut animal ita conformatum utraeque origini suae satisfacere possit, et mirari atque adorare caelestia et incolere atque gubernare terrena”. The Latin text of *Asclepius* is in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., pp. 305-306.

<sup>48</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., pp. 69-70. Latin text: “sic ergo feliciore loco medietatis est positus, ut, quae infra se sunt, diligit, ipse a se superioribus diligitur”. See *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 300. The same concept is reiterated

*Asclepius* are reminiscent of Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), a treatise in which Pico praises man's glory and free will and that is usually regarded as the 'Manifesto of the Renaissance'<sup>49</sup>. It is interesting to notice that Pico begins the *Oration* by asserting that "there is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man"<sup>50</sup>, a proposition that is supported by Hermes in *Asclepius*, as Pico himself remarks: "This opinion is seconded by Mercury's saying: 'A great miracle, Asclepius, is man'"<sup>51</sup>. As in *Asclepius* man is said to have been placed by God in a middle position between heaven and earth, so Pico argues that "man is the intermediary between creatures, a companion of the higher beings, a king of the things beneath him"<sup>52</sup>. In like manner, Marsilio Ficino praises the virtues of the human genre, that reflects the greatness of God, and maintains that "man wants neither a superior nor an equal, nor does he suffer anything to thrive outside his dominion. [...] Thus man seeks the divine condition"<sup>53</sup>.

Humanists such as Ficino and Pico believed that man expressed his divine nature through his knowledge and artistic power. In this respect, the scholar John Mebane notices that Renaissance Hermetic philosophy has its roots in the celebration of man's free will and inner divinity fostered precisely by Humanist thinkers:

One of the attitudes cultivated by the humanists which occult philosophers developed in a more radical fashion was the ideal of self-perfection. The hope for regeneration has been the heart of Christianity in all ages, but in the Renaissance the traditional idea that we are made in the image of God and can attain complete self-realization by restoring that image to its prelapsarian purity was transformed and revitalized by the increasing optimism about human nature and by the humanists' glorification of a wide range of creative activities<sup>54</sup>.

By way of example, Mebane remarks that the magician protagonist of Shakespeare's *The*

---

a few words below, when Hermes says to Asclepius that "[m]ankind is a living thing, then, but none the lesser for being partly mortal; indeed, for one purpose his composition seems perhaps fitter and abler, enriched by mortality. Had he not been made of both materials, he would not have been able to keep them both, so he was formed of both, to tend to earth and to cherish divinity as well". Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 72. Latin text: "animal ergo homo, non quod is eo minor, quod ex parte mortalis sit, sed eo forte aptius efficaciusque compositus ad certam rationem mortalitate auctus esse uideatur. scilicet, quoniam utrumque nisi ex utraque materia sustinere non potuisset, ex utraque formatus est, ut et terranum cultum et diuinitatis posset habere dilectum". See *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 308.

<sup>49</sup> See Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man. A New Translation and a Commentary*, edited by Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, Massimo Riva, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012. Pico wrote the *Oration* as a sort of introduction to a debate, in Rome, at which his nine hundred theses would be discussed.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.

<sup>53</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, edited by James Hankins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001-2006, vol. 4, p. 251.

<sup>54</sup> John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: the Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1989, pp. 10-11.

*Tempest*, Prospero, represents a perfect synthesis of Humanistic and Hermetic ideals: “Prospero describes his mastery of the ‘liberal arts’ as a stepping stone to ‘secret studies’”<sup>55</sup>. In a similar way, Elias Ashmole, antiquarian and, later, alchemist under King Charles II, claims that the knowledge of alchemy opens the way to the study of the liberal arts: “by the true and various use of the Philosophers Prima materia [...] the perfection of Liberall Sciences are made known, the whole Wisdome of Nature may be grasped”<sup>56</sup>. However, the longing for infinity typical of Hermetic literature is not compatible with “the sense of human limitations” that is to be found in the writings of the majority of Renaissance Humanists<sup>57</sup>. Mebane actually observes that the “crucial difference between the magician and other Renaissance ‘artists’ (to use the term in its broadest sense) is that the occultists accepted no limits whatsoever”<sup>58</sup>. The “liberating” and “motivating vision” of humanity prompted by Renaissance Hermeticism, which “seemed to offer a way back into Eden”<sup>59</sup>, underlies the alchemical attempt to employ human art to better nature and recover the prelapsarian condition that was lost with the Fall, as will be further discussed.

The same idea concerning the unlimited potentialities of humankind is expressed by Hamlet in a celebrated prose passage in which he defines man as “noble in reason”, “infinite in faculty”, and “in apprehension how like a god!”:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me. (II, ii, 306-11)

“Mankind”, Hermes says to his disciple in the treatise *Asclepius*, “certainly deserves admiration, as the greatest of all beings”<sup>60</sup>. It is especially in the last plays, as first suggested by Frances Yates<sup>61</sup>, that Shakespeare more plainly deals with the world of

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena to *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum. Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of our Famous English Philosophers, who have written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language. Faithfully Collected into one Volume*, Printed by J. Grismond for Nathaniel Brooke, London, 1652, sig. B2r. Hereafter all quotations from this collection will be marked as TCB followed by the page number.

<sup>57</sup> John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination. The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 80. Latin text: “Nec inmerito miraculo dignus est, qui est omnium maximus”. See *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit. p. 334.

<sup>61</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays: A New Approach*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

Renaissance Hermetic philosophy, a culture highly familiar to his audience<sup>62</sup>. The character of the magician Prospero would have reminded Shakespeare's public of personalities who were connected with alchemy, natural magic, and, on the whole, with the world of Hermeticism: John Dee, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, and Simon Forman. The great virtues of man that Hamlet both praises and abhors are concretely exemplified not only in the figure of Prospero but also in those of Cerimon, in *Pericles*, and Paulina, in *The Winter's Tale*. In this respect, it is worth quoting some lines from *Pericles* uttered by the physician Cerimon when reviving Thaisa, whom her husband Pericles believes to be dead:

I hold it ever  
Virtue and cunning were endowments greater  
Than nobleness and riches. Careless heirs  
May the two latter darken and expend,  
But immortality attends the former,  
Making a man a god.  
(III, ii, 26-31)

Defying the very laws of nature, Cerimon evidently epitomises the Hermetic vision of man as a god on earth, able to act on the processes of life and death and “rise up to heaven”<sup>63</sup>, as Hermes Trismegistus says in the *Asclepius*. In fact, Cerimon's lines recall Hermes's speech concerning the divine nature God granted to the human genre. The master explains to Asclepius that man should not accept his “middle status” but, rather, use his mind to express his inner divinity and join the gods:

one who has joined himself to the gods in divine reverence, using the mind that joins him to the gods, almost attains divinity. [...] Human are they who remain content with the middle status of their kind, and the remaining forms of people will be like those kinds to whose forms they adjoin themselves<sup>64</sup>.

---

<sup>62</sup> As will be considered in the following pages, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* was performed by Shakespeare's theatre company, the King's Men, in 1610, the same year in which *The Winter's Tale* was composed. As pointed out by Holland and Sherman, “[i]n a world like Jonson's, where old ills and new opportunities gave renewed power to dreams of transformation of all sorts, it is easy to see why businessmen, doctors, reformers, and princes alike might be equally vulnerable to the alchemical gold fever of Mammon [...]. Alchemists (whether serious or fraudulent) were surprisingly rare on the Renaissance stage, but alchemical texts were readily available in Renaissance libraries – and here again Jonson proved to be characteristically well read. Alchemy spawned a prodigious literature, multiplying its authorities and generating the increasingly elaborate terminology that Surly parodies”. Peter Holland and William Sherman, Preface to Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, edited by David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, vol. 3, p. 550.

<sup>63</sup> “Whence, though mankind is an integral construction, it happens that in the part that makes him divine, he seems able to rise up to heaven”. Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 73. Latin text: “unde efficitur ut, quoniam est ipsius una conpago, parte, qua ex anima et sensu, spiritu atque ratione diuinus est, uelut ex elementis superioribus, inscendere posse uideatur in caelum”. See *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 310.

<sup>64</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 69. Latin text: “propter

It is God's will, Hermes continues, that mankind should strive for immortality:

god made mankind good and capable of immortality through his two natures, divine and mortal, and so god willed the arrangement whereby mankind was ordained to be better than the gods<sup>65</sup>.

A few lines below, Cerimon discusses about the virtues that dwells in "vegetives, in metals, stones" (III, ii, 36), arguing that the "secret art" of physics has allowed him to become acquainted with the inner and most obscure workings of nature and, therefore, to expand his knowledge almost infinitely:

'Tis known I ever  
Have studied physic, through which secret art,  
By turning o'er authorities, I have,  
Together with my practice, made familiar  
To me and to my aid the blest infusions  
That dwells in vegetives, in metals, stones,  
And I can speak of the disturbances  
That nature works and of her cures, which doth give me  
A more content and cause of true delight  
Than to be thirsty after tottering honour.  
(III, ii, 31-40)

Alchemists believe that by "learning to read nature through close observation, a physician could come closer to a true understanding of God's creation"<sup>66</sup>. It should be recalled that at the time when *Pericles* was performed, in 1608<sup>67</sup>, alchemy was conceived of as the "secret art" that allowed man to obtain a god-like knowledge of the cosmos and to heal all sorts of diseases and even defeat death. The association between alchemy and medicine was reinforced by the writings of the Swiss alchemist and physician known as 'Paracelsus', as will be discussed in the following pages. The latter's treatises started to circulate widely

---

quod et prope deos accedit, qui se mente, qua diis iunctus est, diuina religione diis iunxerit, et daemonum, qui his iunctus est. humani uero, qui medietate generis sui contenti sunt, et reliquae hominum species his similes erunt, quorum se generis speciebus adiunxerint". See *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 298.

<sup>65</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 80. Latin text: "denique et bonum hominem et qui posset immortalis esse ex utraque natura composuit, diuina atque mortali, et sic compositum est per uoluntatem dei hominem constitutum esse meliorem et diis, qui sunt ex sola immortalis natura formati, et omnium mortalium". See *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 334.

<sup>66</sup> Francis McKee, "The Golden Medicine of Michael Maier", in Alison Adams and Anthony J. Harper (eds.), *The Emblem in Renaissance and Baroque Europe: Tradition and Variety*, Selected Papers of the Glasgow International Emblem Conference, 13-17 August 1990, Brill, Leiden, 1992, p. 169.

<sup>67</sup> On the first performances of *Pericles*, that is usually considered as the first of the group of Shakespeare's last plays, see Suzanne Gossett, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, edited by Suzanne Gossett, Bloomsbury, London, 2004, pp. 54-5.

precisely in the second half of the sixteenth century, both in England and Europe. Paracelsus's ideas, in contrast with the traditional medicine of Galen, were well known to Shakespearean theatre-goers, as attested by the comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*, a play in which the name of Paracelsus is explicitly mentioned: "So I say – both of Galen and Paracelsus" (II, iii, 11). The good physician, as Paracelsus writes, has to be skilled in alchemy because the alchemical art reveals to the careful practitioner the latent virtues that dwell in natural things. Thanks to the secret knowledge of alchemy, the physician becomes acquainted with the obscure workings of nature, unknown to common people:

If, then, it be of such vast importance that Alchemy shall be thoroughly understood in Medicine, the reason of this importance arises from the great latent virtue which resides in natural things, which also can lie open to none, save in so far as they are revealed by Alchemy. Otherwise, it is just as if one should see a tree in winter and not recognise it, or be ignorant what was in it until summer puts forth, one after another, now branches, now flowers, now fruits, and whatever else appertains to it. So in these matters there is a latent virtue which is occult to men in general. And unless a man learns and makes proof of these things, which can only be done by an Alchemist, just as by the summer, it is not possible that he can investigate the subject in any other way<sup>68</sup>.

Paracelsus's considerations regarding "the great latent virtue which resides in natural things", "which is occult to men in general" except to those who have been initiated to alchemical knowledge, are reminiscent of Cerimon's lines about "the blest infusions / That dwells in vegetives, in metals, stones" (*Pericles*, III, ii, 35-6). Interestingly enough, Margaret Healy defines Cerimon as "a charitable Paracelsian-type physician"<sup>69</sup>. Indeed, considering that Paracelsus was renowned for his seemingly miraculous cures, allegedly able to defeat death and prolong life, one can assume that his reputation influenced the audience's reception of such a character as Cerimon. As Debus notices, the legend according to which Paracelsus had discovered some extraordinary remedies fostered a wide diffusion of his writings:

the legend of the man's [Paracelsus] near-miraculous cures began in the years after 1550 and soon there was a widespread search for his manuscripts, which were often published with notes and commentaries<sup>70</sup>.

Like Cerimon, Paulina, in *The Winter's Tale*, seems to be able to overcome death by supposedly restoring life to Queen Hermione, whom everybody believes to have died sixteen years before, thus eventually reuniting her with her husband Leontes and her

---

<sup>68</sup> Paracelsus, *Alchemy. The Third Column of Medicine*, HAWP 2: 156.

<sup>69</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 197.

<sup>70</sup> Allen G. Debus, *Man and Nature in the Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, p. 20.

daughter Perdita. Paulina's healing and magical art, marvellously displayed in the so-called statue-scene and reminiscent of the Egyptian rituals of statue animation recorded in the *Asclepius*, hints at the contemporary debates concerning the limits of human art before nature, a topic that was central also in the alchemical literature of the time, most frequently dealing with the possibility to defeat death and extend human life. Cerimon himself alludes to Egyptian magical rituals when, immediately before reviving Thaisa with music, refers to an Egyptian who recovered from death:

Death may usurpe on Nature many hours  
And yet the fire of life kindle again  
The o'erpresse'd spirits. I heard of an Egyptian  
That had nine hours lain dead, who was  
By good appliance recovered.  
(*Pericles*, III, ii, 81-85)

Alchemy was considered as *the* human art par excellence, a discipline able to imitate and even surpass nature, thus perilously equalling God's powers. In *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson satirically argues that alchemists make "Nature ashamed". The shrewd alchemist Subtle suggests that alchemical art is even greater than nature itself when he predicts that Mammon will obtain immense riches once he has achieved the secret knowledge of the philosopher's stone:

He will make  
Nature ashamed of her long sleep, when art,  
Who's but a stepdame, shall do more than she,  
In her best love to mankind, ever could.  
(I, iv, 25-8)

Alchemical philosophers, however, constantly defend their art claiming that their true purpose is not to exceed nature, but, rather, to assist it, thus fulfilling the task assigned by God to humankind: revering the heavenly world and "preserving the lower world"<sup>71</sup>. This considered, it is not surprising that alchemy is defined as a *ministra naturae* and a nurse of

---

<sup>71</sup> See Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 73: "mankind was bound to be <human> only to this extent, that by contemplating divinity he should scorn and despise that mortal part joined to him by the need to preserve the lower world". Latin text: "ut enim meum animum rationis ducit intentio, homo hactenus esse debuit, ut contemplatione diuinitatis partem, quae sibi iuncta mortalis est mundi inferioris necessitate seruandi, despiciat atque contemnat". See *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 312. The same idea recurs a few words below, when Hermes observes that "[s]eeing that the world is god's work, one who attentively preserves and enriches its beauty conjoins his own work with god's will when, lending his body in daily work and care, he arranges the scene formed by god's divine intention". Latin text: "siquidem, cum dei opera sit mundus, eius pulchritudinem qui diligentia seruat atque auget, operam suam cum dei uoluntate coniungit, cum speciem, quam ille diuina intentione formauit, adminiculo sui corporis diurno opere curaue conponit".

nature<sup>72</sup>. Most regularly attacked on the basis of their attempts to pervert nature, alchemists always feel compelled to distinguish their endeavour to cooperate with God, what they define as the ‘true’ alchemy, a holy discipline and a divine gift, from the false alchemy practised by fraudulent artists.

## 1.2. The ‘True’ and the ‘False’ Art of Alchemy

Studies pertaining to the role of alchemy in the development of literature and science have often struggled to be accepted as a subject worthy of academic consideration. The conference “Hermeticism and the Renaissance”, held in 1982 at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, can legitimately be regarded as the first attempt to establish the role of Hermetic philosophy within Renaissance culture, in the light of the much-debated works of Frances Yates, Eugenio Garin, and Paul Kristeller<sup>73</sup>. In the last few years scholars have benefited from a number of reliable publications on the topic and new editions of alchemical texts, that have amply contributed to foster researches on alchemy. I believe it would be worthwhile dwelling upon the conception of alchemy promoted by alchemists themselves in order to appreciate the rich complexity of its imagery and language. As will be shown below, the view of alchemy that emerges from the majority of alchemical works rests on the more spiritual and mystical aspects of the art.

First of all, it is important to notice that alchemical practices were never limited to the transmutation of metals, but were always combined with philosophical and religious considerations on the potentialities of man before nature and on his role within the cosmos, as Eliade remarks:

dans toutes les cultures où l’alchimie est présente, elle y est toujours intimement liée à

---

<sup>72</sup> As Newman observes, “alchemy is a *ministra naturae*, a perfective art that leads natural forms to their final end”. William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> See Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Id. (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, cit., pp. 7-8: “The meeting was organized for the purpose of discussing the role of Hermeticism in Renaissance thought. [...] One of the goals of the conference, therefore, had been to evaluate charges advanced (particularly by traditional historians of science) that Dame Frances’s conclusions had been accepted uncritically by too many scholars and that the role of Hermeticism had been vastly overstated. To be sure, few of her critics question that Hermeticism was a strand of Renaissance Neoplatonism or that her research – continuing as it did in the tradition of the earlier investigations by Kristeller, Garin, Festugière, and other – had done much to promote recognition of this fact. But these critics argued that claims to a seminal importance or to an exclusive impact on Renaissance thought had yet to be substantiated”. One of the aims of the conference, therefore, was “to promote investigations of Hermetic phenomena in diverse areas of Renaissance culture with the purpose of detecting a coherence in the many *disiecta membra* of the tradition”.

une tradition ésotérique ou ‘mystique’: en Chine avec le Taoïsme; en Inde: le Yoga et le Tantrisme; dans l’Égypte hellénistique: la Gnose; dans les pays islamiques: les écoles mystiques de l’Hermétisme et de l’Esotérisme; en Occident pendant le Moyen Age et la Renaissance: l’Hermétisme, le mysticisme chrétien et sectaire, et la Cabale. En résumé, tous les alchimistes déclarent que leur art est une technique ésotérique, qui poursuit des buts semblables ou comparables à ceux des grandes traditions ésotériques et ‘mystiques’<sup>74</sup>.

Alchemists conceived of themselves as custodians of that “subtill science of holy *Alkimy*”<sup>75</sup> and, therefore, wished to detach from the common perception of the alchemist as a cozenor operating against “the excellence of the sun and Nature”<sup>76</sup> and representing the “heat of impudence in mankind”<sup>77</sup>, as ironically suggested by Ben Jonson in the masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (1616). Alchemy, however, has regularly been employed as a byword for fraud since Chaucer’s *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*<sup>78</sup>. Dante himself places the two alchemists Griffolino d’Arezzo and Capocchio in the bolgia of forgers. The latter defines himself as nature’s *buona scimia*, that is to say the good imitator of nature:

sì vedrai ch’io son l’ombra di Capocchio,  
che falsai li metalli con alchimia:  
e te ricordar, se ben t’adocchio,  
com’io fui di natura buona scimia<sup>79</sup>.

Perfectly aware of the stereotyped vision of alchemists as mere “Multipliers”<sup>80</sup> and as “a

---

<sup>74</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l’alchimie*, translated by Ilena Tacou, in *Cahiers de l’Herne*, 33, 1978, pp. 157-8. See also Crisciani and Pereira: “di alchimia in senso proprio si può invece parlare – in tutte le culture in cui si è sviluppata – solo quando gli elementi di una più o meno ampia ‘filosofia della natura’ si concentrano intorno a progetti di concreta trasformazione artificiale di sostanze materiali da effettuarsi in laboratorio, quando cioè programmi di trasformazioni tecniche si legano a riflessioni di tipo filosofico e/o religioso nel quadro del perseguimento di scopi di perfezionamento complessivo, a tutti i livelli; quando comunque alla ricetta sta sottesa una teoria e alla prescritta manipolazione operativa si affianca il libro, il trattato e una tradizione dottrinarie. Ed è appunto con una tradizione di questo tipo che l’Occidente entra in contatto nel sec. XII”. Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna. Alchimia e filosofia nel medioevo*, Centro italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo, Spoleto, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimie Written by Thomas Norton of Bristoll*, TCB 7.

<sup>76</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, l. 139, edited by Martin Butler, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, edited by David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, vol. 4, p. 440.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, l. 95, p. 438.

<sup>78</sup> See Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, The University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, 1996, pp. 1-103. As noticed by Multhauf, “Charlatanism was a prominent feature of European alchemy during the 16th century, and such monarchs as Rudolf II [...] were not entirely without reason in incarcerating some of their resident adepts. This picturesque era and its coincidence with the period when the modern science of chemistry appeared in embryonic form has led many historians of chemistry to view alchemy in general as a fraud”. Robert M. Multhauf, “Alchemy”, *Britannica.Macropaedia*, 1: 436.

<sup>79</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto XXIX, vv. 136-9, in Id., *Commedia*, con il commento di Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano, 1991, vol. 1, p. 880.

sooty tribe”<sup>81</sup>, alchemical writers always distinguish the ‘true’ art of alchemy from the ‘false’ art of impostors, merely interested in the acquisition of material riches. With the sentence *aurum nostrum non est aurum vulgi*, i.e. “our gold is not common gold”<sup>82</sup>, Hermetic philosophers constantly highlight the noble and virtuous purposes that inspired their practices.

The Belgian Gerard Dorn, celebrated for the compilation of the first Paracelsian dictionary in 1584, explicitly maintains that it is not the transmutation of metals that the true alchemist seeks: “si c’est la métamorphose des métaux vulgaires que tu cherches, tu pleureras ton erreur”<sup>83</sup>. Dorn argues that the “gold of philosophers” is not to be intended as common gold, but, rather, as a metaphor indicating a form of wisdom: “Ô très excellent or des philosophes, qui enrichit (lui, et non l’or qu’on convoite) les fils de la sagesse!”<sup>84</sup>. Thomas Norton, one of the most celebrated English alchemists, opens his *Ordinall of Alchimy* by warning his readers against false alchemical doctrines: “Wherefore my Pitty doth me constreyne / To shew the trewth in fewe words and plaine, / Soe that you may fro false doctrine flee”<sup>85</sup>. Because of the existence of deceiving people who, offering “fals illusions”<sup>86</sup>, regard alchemy as a profit-making activity, in the Proheme to his treatise Norton assures the aspiring adept that, by perusing his book, he would be able to eschew “greate deceipts” and distinguish “fals men from trew”<sup>87</sup>. Alchemists focus on the honourable nature of their art also when trying to obtain royal support, as Thomas Charnock does in a letter addressed to Queen Elizabeth:

for the excellency of this science and for the hiding of the same, the philosophers have written of two sciences, a false and a true [...]. And thus a number [...] do desire to put in practice this false science of Alchemy for lucre sake, whereby they be deceived, and yearly great riches consumed. But the true science is the making of the philosophers’ stone which they have hid under dark and misty terms, as by parables, similitudes and allegories, because it should not be understood but of verus (true) philosophers<sup>88</sup>.

Prompted by the intent to ease discussions concerning the validity of alchemy,

---

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 6.

<sup>81</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., l. 81, p. 438.

<sup>82</sup> Anon., *Rosarium philosophorum*, Frankfurt, 1550. Quoted by Charles Nicholl in *The Chemical Theatre*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. 247. As remarked by Nicholl, this is not the same *Rosarium philosophorum* that is usually attributed to Arnald of Villanova.

<sup>83</sup> Gérard Dorn, *La clef de toute la philosophie chimistique et commentaires sur trois traités de Paracelse*, edited by Caroline Thuysbaert and Stéphane Feye, Beya Éditions, Grez Doiceau, 2014, p. 14.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Charnock, *Alchemical Letter to Queen Elizabeth*, transcribed by Fiona Oliver, introduction by Adam McLean, Adam McLean, Glasgow, 2002, pp. 8-9.

Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, nephew of the renowned Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, declares his purpose to consider the issue related to the possibility of turning base metals into gold in *Opus Aureum*, a sixteenth-century treatise that was fathered on him<sup>89</sup>. Acknowledging that the question whether gold can be obtained by artificial methods has always been a controversial one since the time of Aristotle's *Meteorologia* and that it has drawn the interest of both educated and uneducated people, the author commits himself to defend the true *chrysopoeia*. Notwithstanding the antiquity of the alchemical tradition and the high number of praiseworthy personalities that have been associated with it since the thirteenth century (namely Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, and Albert the Great), Francesco Pico remarks that the art of alchemy came to be practised by inexperienced people<sup>90</sup>. It is because idle and empty concepts had been promulgated that alchemy gradually fell into disgrace: “Unde et inanes irritique conceptus passim ostentabantur: proptereaque coeptum dubitari, verane ars an impostura censenda esset, auri per artem conficiendi pollicitatio”<sup>91</sup>. Possibly for fear of potential accusations, throughout his dissertation Francesco Pico constantly reminds the reader that his interest is exclusively in supporting the real art of alchemy and not the false art of gold-seekers: “nos *de vera loquimur arte*, quae falsitatis nomine taxari non potest, nedum ad tribunalia trahi”<sup>92</sup>. The defence of alchemy expressed in *Opus Aureum*, that reflects a common praxis among alchemical writers of all epochs, testifies to the great distance existing between the conception of the art promoted by its adepts and the one supported by its detractors. As a case in point, it is worth quoting a passage from Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Dwelling on the widespread idea that alchemists are deceivers, Scot explicitly defines alchemy as a fraud, “an art consisting wholie of subiltie and deceit, whereby the ignorant and plaine minded man through his too much credulitie is circumvented, and the humor of the other slie cousener satisfied”<sup>93</sup>.

Given the holiness of the alchemical art, it is not surprising that the so-called ‘true’ alchemists are usually required to approach the ‘Great Work’, or *opus alchymicum*, with a

---

<sup>89</sup> *Opus aurum* is collected in Jacobi Mangeti, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, Chouet, G. De Tournes, Cramer, Perachon, Ritter & S. De Tournes, Genevae, 1702, vol. 2, pp. 558-584. Hereafter, all quotations from this collection will be marked as BCC followed by the volume and the page number. See also Maurizio Barracano, Introduction to Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, *Opus Aureum*, a cura di Maurizio Barracano, Arktos, Carmagnola, 1979.

<sup>90</sup> “Tantum enim concursus ut ad imperitissimos quosque res devenerit. Unde et inanes irritique conceptus passim ostentabantur”. Joannes Franciscus Picus Mirandulae Dom, *Opus Aureum*, Liber Secundus, Cap. II, “De Artis ipsius Origine atque progressu”, BCC 2: 564.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 566.

<sup>93</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, a reprint of the first edition published in 1584, edited by Brinsley Nicholson, Elliott Stock, London, 1886, p. 300.

pure heart, as one can read in *Aurora consurgens*, a text that was attributed to Thomas Aquinas: “Know, that thou canst not have this science, unless thou shalt purify thy mind before God, that is, wipe away all corruption from thy heart”<sup>94</sup>. The author describes as “fools” those who despise it because, ignorant and unskilled, they do not realise that alchemy is a gift of God:

This glorious science of God and doctrine of the saints and secret of the philosophers and medicine of the physicians fools despise, for what it is they know not. These will not have the blessing and it shall be far from them, nor doth such science befit the unskilled, for everyone who is ignorant of it is its enemy, and that not without cause<sup>95</sup>.

Despite the efforts made by alchemists to protect their art from accusations, “fraud had for centuries been the inseparable companion of alchemy”<sup>96</sup>. As a consequence, secrecy acquires a specific significance in alchemical literature: being “a worke and Cure divine”<sup>97</sup>, alchemy has to be preserved by employing a language that is comprehensible only to the initiates. In this respect, Ashmole opens his collection, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, by alerting his readers of the arduous vocabulary used by alchemists in their writings, a terminology that the author defines as seemingly “Irksome and Uncouth”:

The Style and Language thereof, may, I confesse (to some) seeme Irksome and Uncouth, and so it is indeed to those that are strangers thereunto; but withall very Significant; [...] for what some light Braines may esteem as Foolish Toys; deeper Judgements can and will value as sound and serious Matter<sup>98</sup>.

Reiterating a sentence that constantly recurs in alchemical treatises, the fourteenth-century English alchemist John Dastin explicitly remarks that God “does not wish to grant such a great pearl to those pseudo-wise who neglect the truth”<sup>99</sup>. Indeed, Hermetic authors most regularly quote the Biblical saying from the Gospel of Matthew: “Give not that which is holy unto the Dogs, neither cast ye your pearles before swine”<sup>100</sup>. In the text *Dialogue*

---

<sup>94</sup> Von Franz, Marie-Louise (ed.), *Aurora Consurgens. A Document attributed to Thomas Aquinas on the Problems of Opposites in Alchemy*, translated by R.F.C. Hull and A.S.B. Glover, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966, p. 107.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47. On the idea of alchemy as a gift of God, see Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 2013, pp. 192ff.

<sup>96</sup> Vladimir Karpenko, “The Chemistry and Metallurgy of Transmutation”, *Ambix*, vol. 39, Part. 2, July 1992, pp. 49-50.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 15.

<sup>98</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena, TCB sig. B4r.

<sup>99</sup> John Dastin, *Epistola boni viri*, in Wilfred R. Theissen, “John Dastin’s Letter on the Philosopher’s Stone”, *Ambix*, vol. 33, part 2/3, November 1986, p. 82. Theissen provides a transcription of the Latin text by Dastin and an English translation of the same. As documented by Theissen, several versions of Dastin’s text are found in the following manuscripts: London, B.L. Sloane 513, fols. 189r-191v; London B.L. Harley 3542, fols. 44v-48r; Oxford, Bodleian L. Ashmole 1384, fols. 95v-97v.

<sup>100</sup> *Matthew*, 7:6. All quotations from the Bible are from King James’s Authorized Version: *The Holy Bible*,

*entre la nature et le fils de la philosophie* (1595), the alchemist known as Egidius de Vadis alludes to the same biblical maxim when saying: “Ne jetez pas de perles aux porceaux”<sup>101</sup>. In the preface to his alchemical collection of emblems *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617), the German alchemist Michael Maier, who journeyed to England in 1611, underlines the necessity to safeguard alchemical secrets in the same way as God concealed “infinite arcana in nature”:

Now for the cultivation of the intellect, God has concealed infinite arcana in nature, which like the fire that is struck from flint can be extracted and put to use by innumerable arts and sciences. The secrets of Chemistry are not last among these, but the first and most precious after the searching out of divine things: not in the hands of those wandering deceivers and pseudo-chemical frauds<sup>102</sup>.

Mino Gabriele effectively defines the language of alchemists as a sort of secret dance of words that gives birth to a style that is as confused as incredibly multifaceted<sup>103</sup>. As might be expected, the obscure features of much alchemical literature have largely contributed to heighten the common perception of alchemy as a form of imposture. Ben Jonson laughs at the alchemical confusing terminology in *The Alchemist* when the gamester Surly mocks the alchemist Subtle enquiring “What else are all your terms, Whereon no one o’ your writers’ grees with other? (II, iii, 182-3). In like manner, the occult philosopher Henry Cornelius Agrippa, in his work *Of the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences* (1569), condemns the “mutable” opinions of natural philosophers and alchemists: “they do so much strive and disagree among themselves in all things and do maintain this perpetual strife from age to age” and “doth always waver in mutable opinions”<sup>104</sup>. As recorded in Abraham’s *Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, the term ‘labyrinth’ is usually employed as a metaphor to indicate both “the dangerous journey of the alchemist through

---

*Conteyning the old Testament, and the New: Newly Translated out of the Originall tongues: & with the former Translations diligently compared and reuised, by his Maiesties Speciall Comandament. Appointed to be read in Churches*, Imprinted at London by Robert Barker, Printer to the Kings most Excellent Maiestie, 1611.

<sup>101</sup> Egidius de Vadis, *Dialogue entre la Nature et le Fils de la Philosophie*, préface de Bernardus G. Penotus a Portus, éditions Dervy, Paris, 1993, p. 13.

<sup>102</sup> Michael Maier, “Preface to the Reader”, *Atalanta fugiens*, quoted by Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit. p. 41. Latin text: “Ad excolendum autem intellectum Deus infinita arcana abdidit in natura, quae scientiis et artibus innumeris, ut ignis ex silice extunduntur, et in usum transferuntur: Inter haec sunt Chymica secreta non postrema, sed post divinorum indagacionem, omnium prima et preciosissima, non circumforaneis deceptoribus et fucis pseudo-chymicis”. Michael Maiero, “Praefatio ad Lectorem”, *Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, Emblemata nova de secretis naturae chymica*, Oppenheimii, Ex typographia Hieronymi Galleri, Sumptibus Joh. Theodori de Bry, 1618, pp. 6-7.

<sup>103</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente secondo le fonti manoscritte e a stampa*, Electa, Milano, 1986, p. 18: “una sorta di segreta danza delle parole caratteristica del lessico alchemico”.

<sup>104</sup> Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Of The Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences*, 1569, in Kate Aughterson (ed.), *The English Renaissance. An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, Routledge, London-New York, [1998] 2002, p. 352.

the *opus alchymicum*” and the difficulties of finding a logical thread in the alchemists’ treatises<sup>105</sup>. In the Prolegomena to Arthur Dee’s *Fasciculus Chemicus*, Ashmole explicitly argues that he will offer to his reader “a Clew” to find the way in the “Labyrinths”<sup>106</sup> of alchemical writings. It follows that only a constant and thorough study of the alchemical tradition would allow a proper understanding of the truths that alchemical authors hid behind the veil of parables and convoluted metaphors, as Thomas Norton, among others, suggests: “Trust not therefore to reading of one Boke, / But in many Auctors works you may look”<sup>107</sup>.

Eliade points out that in archaic societies knowledge of the arts and crafts was secretly transmitted by a master to a disciple by means of several initiation rites: “quand on révélait à quelqu’un les secrets d’un métier, d’une technique ou d’une science, on lui faisait subir une initiation”<sup>108</sup>. In a similar way, Eliade continues, the different phases of the *opus alchymicum* are a form of initiation since they are supposed to lead to a transformation of the human condition: “Les phases de l’*opus* (oeuvre) alchimique constitue une initiation, c’est-à-dire une série d’expériences spécifiques qui ont pour but la transformation radicale de la condition humaine”<sup>109</sup>. As a sort of initiation ritual, the *opus alchymicum* was regarded as a mystical and religious experience and, therefore, alchemical secrets could be transmitted only “from mouth to mouth”, as Norton observes:

Also no man coulde yet this Science reach,  
But if God send a Master him to teach:  
For it is so wonderful and so selcouth  
That it must needs be thought from mouth to mouth<sup>110</sup>.

The importance of the oral culture in the transmission of alchemical knowledge is visually celebrated in an illustration that belongs to Thomas Norton’s *The Ordinall of Alchimy* (see plate 87). The picture portrays a master who offers a book containing instructions on how to perform the *opus alchymicum* to a disciple kneeling and praying before him. With the words “Accipe donum Dei sub Sigillo Sacrato”, the master bequeaths the secrets of the alchemical art to his adept, who replies “Secreta [...] Alkymiae secreta servabo”<sup>111</sup>.

<sup>105</sup> See ‘labyrinth’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 113.

<sup>106</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena to Arthur Dee, *Fasciculus Chemicus: or Chymical Collections*, London, 1650, quoted by Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 1996, p. 32.

<sup>107</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 40.

<sup>108</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l’alchimie*, cit., p. 158.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 159.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 14.

<sup>111</sup> The typically alchemical theme of the secrecy of the art is visually represented also in one of the still

The plate in Norton's *The Ordinall of Alchimy* also suggests that certain moral qualities are essential in order to be initiated to alchemy: the reverential and pious attitude of the adept while accepting the book indicates that only those who are true, patient, and not ambitious can hope to be introduced to the mysteries of the holy science, as remarked, among others, by Charnock:

That is to remember only the trewe,  
And he that is constant in minde to pursue,  
And is not Ambitious, to borrow hath no neede,  
And can be Patient, not hasty for to speede,  
And that in God he set fully his trust,  
And that in Cunny be fixed all his lust;  
[...] Such men be apt this Science to attaine<sup>112</sup>.

Jonson satirises the pious and religious attitude alchemists are required to possess when Surly remarks that the alchemist “must be *homo frugis*, / A pious, holy, and religious man, / One free from mortal sin, a very virgin” (*The Alchemist*, II, i, 97-9). Since alchemy is an art that has been allegedly handed down directly by God to chosen and worthy prophets, it must be constantly preserved. Hermes, Moses, Solomon, Democritus, Pythagoras, and Noah are regarded by alchemists as the first patriarchs appointed by God to bequeath alchemical knowledge to posterity. As might be expected, then, only “eminent Men” are granted the privilege of the ‘holy gift’. Ashmole explicitly dwells upon the elitist features of alchemy in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*:

in the Progreße this Science has made into severall parts of the World, we may finde, that God hath evermore been pleas'd to call upon the stage thereof in sundry Ages, some choyce and eminent Men, whom (by the Illumination of his blessed Spirit) he hath furnished with ability to reade the Characters of his blessed will, writ in that ample and sacred Volume of the Creation, and the severall Pages of individuall Natures<sup>113</sup>.

Notwithstanding the efforts made by Hermetic philosophers to distinguish the true alchemy from awkward attempts to forge metals, a number of statutes had been issued in order to either encourage or repress alchemical practices. In England, alchemy was officially forbidden in 1403-4 by King Henry IV, who promulgated a decree against “multipliers”<sup>114</sup>. However, even though Henry IV's statute was not formally repealed until

---

extant manuscripts of *Aurora consurgens*, a thirteenth-century text usually attributed to Thomas Aquinas. In the plate, that is reproduced in the Treccani encyclopaedia of science, the Master is shown while carrying a tablet on his knees and instructing the pious adepts on the secret and divine art of alchemy. See Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira, “L'alchimia fra Medioevo e Rinascimento”, *Storia della Scienza*, 4: 910.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas Charnock, *Alchemical Letter*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>113</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses Upon Some Part of the Preceding Worke*, TCB 460.

<sup>114</sup> See D. Geoghegan, “A License of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy”, *Ambix* (6), 1957, p. 16: “for fear of

1689<sup>115</sup>, monarchs were used to grant licenses for the practice of transmuting metals and alchemists constantly confided in royal support<sup>116</sup>. A case in point is represented by a petition addressed to King Henry VI and dating from 31 May 1456, a letter in which twelve alchemists ask to be granted a concession for the production of the philosopher's stone. In the *Letters Patent*, the king describes them as "talented", "sufficiently learned in natural sciences", "men who fear God, seek truth, and hate deceitful work and the false tincturing of metals" and provides that they should be granted "liberty, warrant and licence, to inquire, investigate, begin, pursue [...] the said medicines, [...] and also doing and practising the transmutation of metals into true gold and silver"<sup>117</sup>. King Henry VI praises the respectability of alchemy, describing it as the art of the "true preparation of [...] glorious medicines" that would be "so efficacious and admirable that all curable infirmities would be easily cured"<sup>118</sup>.

Among the alchemists who sought royal patronage was the sixteenth-century alchemist Thomas Charnock. In the letter he addressed to Queen Elizabeth, Charnock argues that several monarchs and emperors praised the art of producing the elixir of life "more for a royalty of the thing, than wholly for the desire of gold":

And so in old times, Emperors, kings, and princes desired this science, more for a royalty of the thing, than wholly for the desire of gold, and they did maintain noble and learned philosophers for that purpose, and looked for nothing at their hands but only their medicine to use it as a preserver of life and health<sup>119</sup>.

Charnock associates alchemy with illustrious personalities, namely the two English monarchs Henry VII, defined as "the second Solomon", "a great" and "a wise philosopher"

---

incurring the penalty of a certain statute of the time of Henry, our grandfather, given and provided against multipliers". Geoghegan provides a transcription of a manuscript (MS. Museum 84, Museum of the History of Science, Oxford) that comprises a petition to Henry VI to practise alchemy (in English), a draft of the *Letters Patent* under application (in Latin), and a short memorandum to the effect that on 31 May the King gave the petition to be executed by the Lord Chancellor. The words I quote are from the *Letters Patent* granted by King Henry VI to the twelve petitioners.

<sup>115</sup> As far as the practice of alchemy in England is concerned, Archer notices that "[u]ntil 1689, alchemy, defined as the multiplication of gold and silver, was illegal in England, a felony punishable by death and forfeiture of goods". See Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "*Rudeness itself she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia", in Annaliese Connolly and Lisa Hopkins (eds.), *Goddesses and Queens: the Iconography of Elizabeth I*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007, p. 53.

<sup>116</sup> As documented by Crisciani and Pereira, in a paradoxical way the official opposition to alchemy went hand in hand with its diffusion at a social level: "La circolazione dei manoscritti alchemici sembra essere un riflesso della diffusione più ampia dell'alchimia nella società, a livelli diversi, cui fa riscontro d'altra parte l'opposizione istituzionale, testimoniata per esempio dai divieti emanati da varie autorità, come la corona inglese (1403-1404) oppure i governi di città quali Norimberga (1492) e Venezia (1488). Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira, "L'Alchimia fra Medioevo e Rinascimento", *Storia della scienza* 4: 908.

<sup>117</sup> See D. Geoghegan, "A License of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy", cit., p. 16.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Charnock, *Alchemical Letter*, cit., p. 40.

who “had this stone”, and “that most prudent prince” Henry VIII<sup>120</sup>. When alchemical practices were partially re-established under the reign of Henry VI, alchemy was even declared advantageous for the country and a board of specialists was hired to verify the quality of the gold produced by alchemists<sup>121</sup>. Charnock’s letter, along with the petition addressed to King Henry VI, testifies to the position held by alchemy at the highest levels of society, showing that it was often supported by English monarchs and members of the court alike. In particular, as recently stressed by Califano, Charnock’s writings have been extremely important to assess Queen Elizabeth’s interest in the field of alchemical studies<sup>122</sup>. Before focusing in more detail on the role held by alchemy in the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, it would be useful to dwell on the issues that have concerned alchemical historiography since ancient times: as will be discussed below, the complex and often ambiguous features of alchemical texts, deliberately obscure and defying straightforward interpretations, have led scholars to concentrate on either the religious or the proto-chemical aspects of the discipline, thus making the study of the alchemical tradition still problematic for contemporary scholars.

---

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>121</sup> Jacques van Lennep, *Art et alchimie. Étude de l’iconographie hermétique et de ses influences*, Éditions Meddens, Bruxelles, 1966, p. 136.

<sup>122</sup> Salvatore Califano, *Storia dell’alchimia*, cit., p. 125.

## Chapter 2

### The Alchemical Context

#### 2.1. Alchemy: Between Science and Esoteric Philosophy

Since it entered Western Europe in the twelfth century, alchemy has been the subject of several, often contrasting, definitions and currents of thought. It has been conceived of either as a fraudulent attempt to counterfeit gold and a form of dominion over nature, or, conversely, as a sacred art bestowed by God on mankind in order to perfect the world and recover the prelapsarian condition lost with the human Fall. Lennep effectively defines alchemy as “the human struggle against chaos and imperfection” and also as the most stunning dialogue that ever existed between man and nature<sup>123</sup>. Historians of literature, philosophy, and science have alternatively described alchemy as a proto-chemistry, as a discipline close to medicine, as an esoteric philosophy, or as a conflation of both theory and practice, a “craft” and a “creed” at the same time<sup>124</sup>. The main tendency that has long characterised the study of the Western alchemical tradition has been to distinguish between ‘exoteric’ and ‘esoteric’ readings<sup>125</sup>. Scholars belonging to the first group are inclined to emphasise the practical, ‘chemical’ aspects of the operations performed by alchemical practitioners in their laboratories and their contribution to the development of chemistry. One of the representatives of this kind of approach, according to which the origins of chemistry are to be found in alchemical doctrine, is Frank Sherwood Taylor:

---

<sup>123</sup> “La démarche de l’alchimiste résume en somme la lutte séculaire de l’homme contre le chaos et l’imperfection. [...] Elle [la pierre philosophale] visait plus à opérer une transformation de la personne humaine qu’une transmutation métallique. Il n’empêche que les recherches en laboratoire forment un des aspects de l’alchimie, faisant d’elle le plus étonnant dialogue qui ait existé entre l’homme et la matière”. Jacques Van Lennep, *Art & Alchimie*, Éditions Meddens, Bruxelles, 1966, p. 16.

<sup>124</sup> Frank Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists. Founders of Modern Chemistry*, Henry Schuman, New York, 1949, p. 144.

<sup>125</sup> Chinese alchemy, for instance, is mainly concerned with the mystical and esoteric aspects of the alchemical art: “Chinese alchemy had a strongly mystical character – under the influence of Taoism – which was in strong accord with the alchemical mysticism from the West. Besides, the Chinese emphasized the point of preparing the medicine of immortality, the elixir of a long life, the theory about the contrast, and not so much the preparation of gold itself. It is possible that Chinese alchemy influenced later Arabic chemistry, which also paid much attention to the aurum potable and the elixir of life”. See H.M.E. De Jong, Introduction to Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens. Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems*, edited by H.M.E. De Jong, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1969, p. 23. On the Indian and the Chinese alchemical traditions, see also Mircea Eliade, *Il mito dell’alchimia seguito da L’alchimia asiatica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2001, and Robert P. Multhauf, “Alchemy”, *Britannica. Macropaedia*, 1: 432-4.

Those who would understand the growth of chemistry must needs trace to their roots not only the fundamental chemical ideas, but the characters and society of chemists; and it is in the alchemical laboratories that these took their origin<sup>126</sup>.

In a similar way, Allen Debus, who has long focused on the contribution of alchemical research to modern chemistry, has repeatedly demonstrated that a close link did exist between alchemy and the dawning science of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries: in Debus's opinion, the exponents of the two fields of knowledge, far from being completely separated, propounded "the same emphasis on new observations as a basis for a new science"<sup>127</sup>. Paolo Rossi points out that all the founding fathers of what today we term 'science'<sup>128</sup>, namely Bacon, Descartes, Kepler, Mersenne, Leibniz, and Newton, inevitably had to confront themselves with the ideals, conceptions, and values of that complex and rich philosophy that is labelled 'Renaissance Hermeticism', to which alchemy belongs. In his enlightening book *Il tempo dei maghi*, Rossi remarks that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, alchemy, natural magic, kabbalah, and astrology were at the centre, not on the fringes, of European culture, as one might be prompted to believe<sup>129</sup>. In this respect, it should be noted that alchemy and chemistry were two almost indistinguishable terms and disciplines until at least the late seventeenth century<sup>130</sup>. As remarked by Principe

---

<sup>126</sup> Frank Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, cit., p. x.

<sup>127</sup> Allen G. Debus, *The Chemical Dream of the Renaissance*, Churchill College Overseas Fellowship Lecture n. 3, W. Heffer & Sons, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 10-11. On the relationship between alchemy and science, see also Id., *The English Paracelsians*, Franklin Watts, New York, 1965; Id., *The Chemical Dream of the Renaissance*, Churchill College Overseas Fellowship Lecture 3, W. Heffer & Sons, Cambridge, 1968; Id., *Man and Nature in the Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978; Allen G. Debus and Michael T. Walton (eds.), *Reading the Book of Nature: the Other Side of the Scientific Revolution*, Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Kirksville, 1998.

<sup>128</sup> The term 'science' was employed until the seventeenth century as a synonym of 'knowledge', on the model of the Latin word *scientia*, i.e. 'knowledge' (see 'knowledge', entry 2, in OED). 'Science' as we intend it today was, instead, known as 'natural philosophy', i.e. "the study of natural bodies and the phenomena connected with them" (see 'natural philosophy' in OED). Throughout the present study the term 'science' will be employed with its current meaning.

<sup>129</sup> "Il 'tempo dei maghi' indica, in *questo libro*, quel periodo della storia culturale europea che va, all'incirca, dalla metà del Cinquecento alla metà del Seicento. In quei cento anni furono pubblicati gli scritti di Tommaso Campanella e di Giordano Bruno, di Paracelso e di Cornelio Agrippa, di Giambattista della Porta e di Robert Fludd. Il mondo magico era, in quegli anni, al centro e non ai margini della grande cultura europea. La magia era certo (anche allora) connessa al mondo delle superstizioni e delle credenze diffuse, ma non coincideva affatto con una forma di sapere 'popolare', non era, come è oggi – nonostante la sua massiccia e capillare e ingombrante presenza – una forma di cultura subalterna. Con quel mondo, i suoi ideali, i suoi valori, le sue caratteristiche 'strutturali', le sue spiegazioni del mondo, la sua immagine del posto dell'uomo nel mondo, variamente si confrontarono molti dei cosiddetti padri fondatori della filosofia e della scienza moderne: Bacon, Descartes, Kepler, Mersenne, Leibniz, Newton". Paolo Rossi, *Il tempo dei maghi. Rinascimento e modernità*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>130</sup> As reported in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, in early modern English the word 'chymistry' also meant alchemy, the two terms being indistinguishable until at least the end of the seventeenth century (see 'chemistry', entry 1, in OED). For instance, the adjective "chymical" is employed in Thomas Tymme's translation of Joseph Du Chesne's treatise on alchemy: Joseph Du Chesne, *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke, for the Preseruation of Healht. Written in Latin by Iosephus Quersitanus, Doctor of Phisicke. And Translated into English, by Thomas Tymme*, Printed by Thomas Creede, London, 1605.

and Newman, it was only with the beginning of the following century, the eighteenth, that the former started to be considered in derogatory terms and, therefore, it was gradually detached from ‘proper’ chemistry:

Increasingly from the beginning of the century there was a tendency to sequester the ‘older’ alchemy from the ‘newer’ science of chemistry, and this divorce appears clearly in the etymological distinctions between ‘alchemy’ and ‘chemistry’<sup>131</sup>.

Employing an expression used by Marcello Pagnini, alchemy can legitimately be included in the so-called “style” of the Renaissance, that is to say in that system of values, motifs, and ideologies that underlies a given epoch<sup>132</sup>. Since every man lives within history and is, therefore, consciously or unconsciously confronted with the tendencies and themes typical of his age, this “collective style”, as Pagnini argues, inevitably influences artists and authors, whose works always bear the signs of the broader pattern of cultural, literary, social, and scientific currents of their time. Equally significant is Mario Praz’s definition of the *ductus* that marks the artistic and literary production of every epoch: according to Praz, a work of art always presents itself as a product of the general style typical of the historical period in which it is created and shows several of the “traits” of its age: “The lesser artists show the elements common to the period in a more conspicuous manner, but no artist, no matter how original, can avoid reflecting a number of traits”<sup>133</sup>. There always exists a close relationship or *air de famille*, Praz argues, between “the expressions of the various arts in any given epoch of the past”<sup>134</sup>. As far as the role of alchemical philosophy and imagery in the development of early modern English culture and literature is concerned, Margaret Healy states that “thinking alchemically, and thus transformatively, played an important

---

<sup>131</sup> Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, in William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (eds.), *Secrets of Nature. Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006, p. 386. On the use of the terms ‘chemic’ or ‘chymick’ in early modern English, see also Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>132</sup> “È compito degli storici, dei filosofi, degli scienziati, e anche degli artisti [...] di far luce sui sistemi inconsci che sottendono una cultura”. Marcello Pagnini, *Pragmatica della letteratura*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1980, p. 38. A few words below, Pagnini writes: “Quando uno scrittore decide di produrre un testo letterario, egli, dal punto di vista tecnico-letterario; a) si trova *dentro* uno o più sistemi stilistici praticati dal suo tempo; b) si trova *dinanzi* al grande sistema della letteratura, nel suo complesso, che è costituito dalle sue funzioni formali e dalle varie esperienze concrete di tutti i tempi [...]. Accanto alle grandi regole stanno, dunque, le regole dei gusti e delle sensibilità – gli ‘stili epocali’ – nei quali si distinguono costanti caratteristiche sia di ordine formale – in pratica ‘scelte’ di particolari ‘comportamenti’ in seno alle regole generali – sia di ordine contenutistico – in pratica ‘scelte’ di sistemi come ‘temi’, ‘motivi’, ‘intrecci’, ‘lessici’, ‘ideologie’, ecc. L’opera risulta, in tal modo, un complesso *montaggio* di sistemi, formali e non formali”. *Ibidem*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>133</sup> Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne. The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and London, 1974, pp. 26-7.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

part in the English Renaissance's wider ferment of creativity"<sup>135</sup>. However, it is often the current inability to decode alchemical treatises, whose notions are rarely translatable in comprehensible chemical terms, that has often led to the erroneous perception of Hermetic philosophy as an 'occult' and popular tendency, alien to the educated élites and far removed from the 'enlightened' climate of the scientific revolution.

It is equally essential to point out that the impulse to over-emphasise the impact of Hermetic and alchemical ideals on the mindset of the time or to consider them as the only and dominant philosophy of sixteenth-century Europe should be avoided as well. Shumaker rightfully argues that "[s]cholarship has passed the stage at which it was necessary to find Hermeticism everywhere in the Renaissance in order to justify the study of it"<sup>136</sup>. Indeed, in the last decades, eminent scholars and historians have assessed the centrality of alchemy in Renaissance Europe and in the unfolding of the so-called 'new science'<sup>137</sup>. Particularly telling is the case of Elias Ashmole, antiquarian and, later, alchemist under king Charles II. In addition to being the editor of the first anthology of alchemical writings in English, published in 1652 with the title *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, Ashmole was also one of the founders of the Royal Society, thus testifying to the close relationship that existed between 'old' and 'new', alchemy and chemistry or, more in general, medieval philosophy and sixteenth-century science. In this respect, Curry remarks that Ashmole was a representative of "those (a not inconsiderable number) who saw no necessary conflict between magical knowledge and natural philosophy"<sup>138</sup>. However, one should abstain from simplistic readings of the connections between alchemical experimentations and the development of the modern scientific method, as if

---

<sup>135</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination. The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 4-5.

<sup>136</sup> Wayne Shumaker, "Literary Hermeticism: Some Test Cases", in Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, cit., p. 295.

<sup>137</sup> For the influences of alchemical philosophy on English Renaissance culture and literature, see, among others, the studies of Stanton J. Linden: Id., *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, cit., and Id. (ed.), *Mystical Metal of Gold. Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture*, AMS Press, New York, 2007. For a more general inquiry on the influence of alchemy on the mindset of the time, see Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006, and Id. (ed.), *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2010. Two other valuable studies on the development of alchemy from ancient times to early modern Europe are: William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions. Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, and William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (eds.), *Secrets of Nature. Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006. The former of the two is a thorough study concerning the position held by alchemy within the art-nature debate from its origins, in ancient times, up to the late eighteenth century, when alchemical practices gradually ceased to exist.

<sup>138</sup> Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 35. The same consideration is made by Schuler: "Ashmole is an excellent example of one who, despite his deep involvement in alchemy and astrology, could maintain enough scientific respectability to be named a foundation member of the Royal Society". See Robert M. Schuler, "Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 41, n. 1, 1980, p. 294.

alchemy were simply a form of proto-chemistry. Rossi actually remarks that a detachment from what was perceived as the out-of-date alchemical *Weltanschauung* did take place, and, therefore, the aim of the historian should not be to erase all differences between alchemy and science, as if no real revolution had ever occurred, but, rather, to avoid “rough demarcations” and, at the same time, recognise the pervasive presence of alchemical conceptions even within the more strictly scientific writings<sup>139</sup>.

As already argued, alchemy has been described either as a precursor of science or as an esoteric, religious art. Taylor, for instance, even though associating it with the rise of chemistry, equally acknowledges that the two differ in several ways, because alchemy “attempts something that modern science does not”<sup>140</sup>. In particular, Taylor affirms that if chemistry is a “co-operative undertaking”, alchemy is a “personal” one since alchemists seek to perfect both physical matter and themselves “in an understanding or wisdom concerning nature which could not be transmitted through written texts”<sup>141</sup>. The individual and personal character of alchemical research is precisely what Francis Bacon denounced, asserting that only an adequate cooperation among scientists would lead to new discoveries, truly helpful to the entire community of men<sup>142</sup>. Moreover, Bacon regarded with suspicion the tendency, typical of alchemical practitioners, to praise themselves as enlightened individuals, chosen by God to be initiated to nature’s secret operations, that they were successively required to preserve from common people. This conflation between religion and science, along with the alchemists’s custom to express themselves in obscure terms, represented, in Bacon’s opinion, a hindrance to the advancement of true scientific knowledge<sup>143</sup>. It is exactly this peculiarity of alchemy, its religious understanding of

---

<sup>139</sup> “I tentativi di tracciare linee di demarcazione devono essere sempre condotti con grande cautela. Ma una cosa è affermare questo e combattere le rozze contrapposizioni, e tutt’altra cosa è accettare l’idea continuista secondo la quale non ci sono mai state rivoluzioni e [...] non si dovrebbe più parlare [...] di rivoluzione scientifica. Io credo che si possa e si debba continuare a parlarne non solo perchè il termine *novus* ricorre in quegli anni in modo quasi ossessivo, ma perchè nacque allora una forma di cultura che aveva caratteristiche diverse dalle altre forme della cultura e che giunse faticosamente [...] a crearsi sue proprie istituzioni e un suo specifico linguaggio”. Paolo Rossi, *Il tempo dei maghi*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Frank Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, cit., p. 231.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 234-5.

<sup>142</sup> As Paolo Rossi notices, Bacon always pursued the objective of creating a community of scientists that, with the help of public authorities, could obtain significant results: “La lotta in favore di una collettività organizzata di scienziati finanziata dallo Stato o da altri enti di pubblica utilità e il tentativo di creare una specie di internazionale della scienza furono perseguiti da Bacone, con estrema coerenza, durante tutto il corso della sua vita”. Paolo Rossi, *Francesco Bacone. Dalla magia alla scienza*, Einaudi, Torino, 1974, p. 35.

<sup>143</sup> Alchemy is mentioned by Bacon in a speech delivered at court in occasion of the Queen’s birthday in 1592. Here Bacon discusses about “the things which have forbidden the happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things, and in place thereof have married it to vain notions and blind experiments”. Francis Bacon, “Mr. Bacon in Praise of Knowledge”, in *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon. Including All His Occasional Works*, edited by James Spedding, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, London, 1861, vol. 1, p. 125. A few words above, Bacon argues that “All the philosophy of

Creation and nature, and the overall mystical vein identifiable in the majority of alchemical writings, that has led to the ‘spiritual’ interpretations of it.

The necessity to pray God in order to succeed in the alchemical work of transmutation is one of the features that most evidently distinguish alchemical treatises from the texts dealing with natural philosophy: even though natural philosophers conceive of their advancements as a way of celebrating God, the relationship between alchemy and religion is much more profound. Alchemists, working “On God’s behalfe”<sup>144</sup>, believe that their operations can be successfully accomplished only thanks to divine instruction and specifically consider themselves as ‘co-creators’ and, therefore, active participants in the divine and natural creative action<sup>145</sup>. The fourteenth-century English alchemist John Dastin explicitly compares the process that leads the adept to the achievement of the philosopher’s stone to the formation of the soul by God. In Dastin’s view, the alchemist is a helper of God on earth and reproduces the divine process of Creation in the microcosm of his laboratory:

Indeed, when the fetus has  
been conceived in a woman’s womb,  
within a period of forty days all its  
members are formed and it receives  
[...] a single fine, pure, noble vapor  
similar to nature in a celestial [i.e.  
spiritual] way which is called spirit. As  
soon as that spirit is formed the soul  
descends quickly at God’s command to  
the infant’s body by means of the great  
fineness of the spirit.  
[...] In a similar way [this happens in the  
production of] the white or yellow stone<sup>146</sup>.

Simon Forman, the Elizabethan alchemist and physician renowned for his comments on some of Shakespeare’s plays, whose performances he attended at the Globe theatre, wrote a short poem entitled *Of the Division of the Chaos* in which the description of the *opus alchymicum* is clearly based on the analogy with God’s Creation of the world from

---

nature which is now received, is either the philosophy of the Grecians, or that other of the Alchemists. [...] That of the alchemists hath the foundation in imposture, in auricular traditions and obscurity; it was catching hold of religion, but the principle of it is, *Populus vult decipi*”. Paolo Rossi mentions Bacon’s speech in Id., *Francesco Bacone. Dalla magia alla scienza*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>144</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher’s Stone*, l. 278, in Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry 1575-1700. From Previously Unpublished Manuscripts*, Routledge, Garland Publishing, New York- London, [1995] 2013, p. 20. Hereafter, all quotations from this volume will be marked as AP followed by the page number.

<sup>145</sup> See Wilfred Theisen, “John Dastin: the Alchemist as Co-Creator”, *Ambix*, vol. 38, Part 2, July 1991, pp. 73-8.

<sup>146</sup> John Dastin, *The Alchemical Art* (14<sup>th</sup> century), in Wilfred Theisen, “John Dastin: the Alchemist as Co-Creator”, cit., p. 75. Theisen provides an English translation of *Johannis Dastin super arte alchymistica* from a manuscript preserved in the British Library (MS Sloane 2476. ff. 3-3v).

undifferentiated chaos or *prima materia*. Allying himself with the common practice of considering God as a “divine Alchemist”<sup>147</sup>, Forman reiterates the idea according to which alchemists, in their attempt to purify matter from corruption and disease, are expected to retrace the steps by which the Almighty “Into darkness [...] did descend [...] / Upon the watrie Chaos, where on he made his abode. / [...] Out of which [He] Created all things as yt stode”<sup>148</sup>. Equally worth mentioning is one of John Donne’s sermons in which the poet, employing a terminology that is undoubtedly alchemical, discusses about the way “God can work in all metals and transmute all metals”, making “a Superstitious Christian a sincere Christian; a Papist a Protestant”, thus further highlighting the spiritual core of alchemical doctrines<sup>149</sup>.

A perusal of the first writings on alchemy that entered twelfth-century Europe attests that a close connection between practical, chemical operations, and religious beliefs has always been a distinguishing trait of alchemical literature. In the aforementioned *Testamentum Morieni* or *Liber de compositione alchemiae*, alchemy is defined as “the gift of God”, for He alone “chooses among his humble and obedient servants those to whom he reveals it”<sup>150</sup>. The treatise, translated by the English monk Robert of Chester in 1144, is

---

<sup>147</sup> Alchemists most frequently argue that God created the cosmos by means of the same processes of distillation and sublimation that occur in the course of the *opus alchymicum*. As one can read in Philalethes’s *Secrets Reveal’d*, “this Work [the *opus alchymicum*] is to be likened to the Creation of the Universe”. See Eirenaeus Philalethes, *Secrets Reveal’d: or, An Open Entrance to the Shut-Palace of the King: Containing, the Greatest Treasure in Chymistry, never yet so Plainly Discovered*, Printed by W. Godbid for William Cooper, London, 1669, p. 9. In like manner, Thomas Tymme, who translated Joseph Du Chesne’s *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermetical Physicke*, describes the creation of the cosmos in alchemical terms, evidently comparing God to an alchemist: “It may seeme (Right Honorable) an admirable and new *Paradox*, that *Halchymie* should haue concurrence and antiquitie with *Theologie*, the one seeming meere *Humane*, and the other *Diuine*. And yet Moses, that auncient Theologue, describing & expressing the most wonderfull Architecture of this great world, tels vs that the *Spirit of God moued vpon the water*: which was an indigested Chaos or masse created before by God, with confused Earth in mixture: yet, by his Halchymicall Extraction, Separation, Sublimation, and Coniunction, so ordered and conioyned againe [...]. Therefore this Diuine *Halchymie*, through the operation of the spirit [...] was the beginning of *Time*, & of *Terrestrial existence*”. Thomas Tymme, “To the Righ Honorable, Sir Charles Blunt, Earle of Deuonshire”, in Joseph Du Chesne, *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermetical Physicke*, cit., sig. A3r/v. Queen Elizabeth herself, as will be discussed in the following chapter, was defined as “an Alchymist diuine” by John Davies: “Rudenesse it selfe she doth refine, / Euen like an Alchymist diuine, / Grosse times of Iron turning / Into the purest forme of gold: / Not to corrupt till heauen waxe old, / And be refin’d with burning”. See John Davies, Hymne 1, “Of Astraea”, ll. 11-16, in Id., *Hymnes of Astraea, in acrosticke verse*, Printed by R. Field for I. Standish, London, 1599, p. 1.

<sup>148</sup> Simon Forman, *Of the Division of the Chaos*, ll. 1-6, AP 56. As Schuler notices, Forman’s alchemical writings, that were originally meant for publication, belong to the Ashmolean collection of the Bodleian Library.

<sup>149</sup> John Donne, Sermon delivered on Easter Monday, 1622, in Id., *The Sermons of John Donne*, edited by George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1953-1962, 10 vols., vol. IV, p. 110.

<sup>150</sup> Morienus, *A Testament of Alchemy being the Revelations of Morienus, Ancient Adept and Hermit of Jerusalem to Khalid Ibn Yazid Ibn Mu’awiyya, King of the Arabs of the Divine Secrets of the Magisterium and Accomplishment of the Alchemical Art*, edited by Lee Stavenhagen, Published for The Brandeis University Press by The University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1974, p. 11. See the Latin text of Morienus’s *Liber de compositione alchemiae* in AA 2: 3-54.

presented as the account of how king Calid “came into possession of the spiritual riches” handed down to him by the wise “Morienus the Greek”<sup>151</sup>. The latter resolves to bequeath the secrets of the art to Calid only after he perceives that the king is truly worthy of it: “For this is something which God gives into the sure keeping of his elected servants until such time as he may prepare one to whom it may be handed on from among his secrets”<sup>152</sup>. Most importantly, Morienus describes the *opus alchymicum* and its product, the philosopher’s stone, as a treasure that is to be found within one’s inner self: “What more can I tell you? For this matter comes from you, who are yourself its source, where it is found and whence it is taken, and when you see this, your zeal for it will increase”<sup>153</sup>. Interestingly enough, the same excerpt from Morienus’s *Testament* is quoted by the Elizabethan alchemist Edward Kelly in his writings: “Morienus, that illustrious Sage, answered King Calid’s question as to the matter of the Stone in the following way: ‘It is of thee, O King, and thou art its ore’”<sup>154</sup>. The association between the object of the alchemical work, the philosopher’s stone or elixir of life<sup>155</sup>, and man, between material transmutation and interior transformation, constantly recurs in alchemical treatises, as will be considered in the following chapters. Ashmole’s Prolegomena to his alchemical anthology *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* attest that the mystical background of alchemical research still held sway in the mid-seventeenth century, when the collection was published for the first time. What is of particular interest is Ashmole’s focus on the virtuous purposes of the alchemical quest, described as a process leading to spiritual growth and edification, rather than as a mere practice of transmutation of metals into gold:

For they being lovers of Wisdome more than Worldly Wealth, drove at higher and more Excellent Operations: And certainly He to whom the whole Course of nature lyes open, rejoyceth not so much that he can make Gold and Silver, or the Divells to become Subject to him, as that he sees the Heavens open, the Angells of God Ascending and Descending, and that his own Name is fairely written in the Book of life<sup>156</sup>.

As might be expected, the spiritual and philosophical concerns that always underlie

---

<sup>151</sup> Morienus, *A Testament*, cit., p. 3: “He [Calid] was assiduous in his quest for the Major Work, continually inquiring after any and all whom he supposed to be privy to his operation”.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27. Latin text: “Quid tibi multa referam? Haec enim res a te extrahitur: cuius etiam minera tu existis, apud te namque illam inueniunt, et vt verius confitear, a te accipiunt: quod cum probaueris, amor eius et dilectio in te augebitur”. Morienus, *Liber de compositione alchemiae*, AA 2: 37.

<sup>154</sup> Edward Kelly, *The Alchemical Writings*, translated from the Hamburg Edition of 1676, James Elliott and Co., London, 1896, p. 71.

<sup>155</sup> The Philosopher’s Stone was “the much sought-after goal of the *opus alchymicum* and the most famous of all alchemical ideas. The Stone is the arcanum of all arcana, possessing the power to perfect imperfection in all things, able to transmute base metals into pure gold and transform the earthly man into an illumined philosopher”. See ‘philosopher’s stone’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>156</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Prolegomena*, TCB sig. A4v.

even the more technical descriptions of the different phases of the *opus alchymicum* have fostered the so-called ‘esoteric’ interpretations of alchemy, particularly widespread in the nineteenth century. Newman and Principe, in their relatively recent discussion upon the limits and problems of previous and current interpretative schools, remark that the eighteenth-century distaste for the occult features of alchemical literature led to a gradual dismissal of it as a form of imposture, that had to be carefully distinguished from proper ‘chemistry’<sup>157</sup>. However, following Curtius’s view, according to which all literary currents and beliefs are subject to constant abatements and renewals throughout history<sup>158</sup>, the following century, i.e. the nineteenth, witnessed a renovated interest in the alchemical and Hermetic literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In Newman’s and Principe’s opinion, this attention for what they term “spiritual alchemy” was due to the “Victorian fascination with the occult” that induced some thinkers to focus only on the more mystical traits of the alchemical literary production of the previous centuries<sup>159</sup>. Among the main proponents of the nineteenth-century spiritual readings of alchemy are the American Ethan Allen Hitchcock and the English Mary Anne Atwood, both convinced that the alchemical art is to be conceived of solely as a process of soul refinement. In his *Remarks Upon Alchemy and the Alchemists* (1857), Hitchcock, believing that “the character of the Alchemists, and the object of their study, have been almost universally misconstrued”<sup>160</sup>, resolves to undertake what he considers as a new direction and clears the way from what he describes as the “deeply rooted prejudice”<sup>161</sup> according to which alchemists were merely greedy seekers of gold. Before announcing his explanation of the real objective of the alchemical quest, Hitchcock assures to have devoted himself to a careful perusal of a number of texts of the tradition. Finally, in the preface that precedes the essay, the author explicitly claims that “*Man* was the *subject* of Alchemy; and that the *object* of the Art was the perfection, or at least the improvement, of Man”<sup>162</sup>. From the author’s point of view, alchemy, always misinterpreted as a practical transformation of physical substances, is, conversely, the art of promoting inner enlightenment and knowledge of one’s self.

These exclusively esoteric explanations, ignoring the practical, even though

---

<sup>157</sup> See Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, cit., pp. 385-8.

<sup>158</sup> See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated from the German by Willard R. Task, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, [1953] 1979. (or. ed. *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, A. Francke AG Verlag, Bern, 1948).

<sup>159</sup> Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, cit., pp. 388-9.

<sup>160</sup> Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Remarks Upon Alchemy and the Alchemists*, Crosby, Nichols, and Company, Boston, 1857, p. iii.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibidem*, p. iv.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibidem*.

essential, aspects of alchemical experimentation and focusing only on the moral and religious implications of it, are certainly far from providing an exhaustive and exact account of the alchemical tradition. According to both Principe and Newman, who define some of these nineteenth-century supporters of spiritual alchemy as people “relegated to places beyond the fringes of respectability”<sup>163</sup>, Hitchcock-like readings totally fail “to recognize the cultural context of alchemical texts”<sup>164</sup>. Even though acknowledging the presence of irrational conceits in the alchemists’s writings, the two scholars justify these mystical features on the basis of the “greater religious sensibility” of the ages in which alchemical practices developed<sup>165</sup>. The “psychologizing view of alchemy”<sup>166</sup> fostered by Carl Gustav Jung is equally condemned by Newman and Principe as a weak theory and a consequence of the author’s “immersion in Victorian’s occultism”<sup>167</sup>. The two critics also argue that the Jungian approach to alchemy negatively influenced even such praised thinkers as the literary scholar Northrop Frye and the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, thus strongly affecting current views<sup>168</sup>. Eliade’s theories, in particular, are described as analogous in their main contents to Jung’s since both authors emphasise the soteriological purpose of alchemical operations:

Eliade was not a psychoanalyst, and he therefore eschewed the language of analytical psychology, yet this part of this message is identical with Jung’s. [...] And like Jung, Eliade stressed that the chemical side of alchemy became pronounced only when the discipline ‘decayed’ or ‘degenerated’ from its primeval simplicity<sup>169</sup>.

With the aim to promote new and more accurate studies and surpass what they consider as ahistorical interpretations, Principe and Newman conclude their essay by disapproving what they see as another defective approach that has marred alchemical historiography, i.e. the “presentist” or “positivist” approach<sup>170</sup>. They clarify that they define as “presentist” the tendency to evaluate historical beliefs and currents of thought on

---

<sup>163</sup> Lawrence Principe and William R. Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, cit., p. 389.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 397.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 401.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 402.

<sup>168</sup> “Carl Jung has probably exercised a greater influence on the common perception of alchemy than any other modern author. His psychologizing view of alchemy has been propelled into the cultural mainstream by such writers as the historian of mythology Joseph Campbell, the literary critic Northrop Frye, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, and the historian of religion Mircea Eliade. [...] Even such serious students of the subject as F. Sherwood Taylor and E. J. Holmyard felt obliged to consider the Jungian perspective in their own surveys”. *Ibidem*, p. 401.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 409.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 415.

the basis of the degree of connection these latter have with current scientific notions<sup>171</sup>. These readings, as applied to alchemy, have produced contrasting results: while, on the one hand, they have exclusively focused on the contribution of alchemical experiments to the development of modern science, regarding all esoteric and mystical elements as mistakes, on the other hand, they have led to a dismissal of alchemy on the whole as a totally unscientific discipline and, therefore, unworthy of academic consideration. As deficient as the “spiritual” ones, “presentist” perspectives overlook the cultural background that gave birth to alchemical imagery, thus providing a very limiting view of it.

Although the mutual exchange between alchemy and science has widely been acknowledged, to the extent that we are now aware that the former “was at the heart of the thought and method”<sup>172</sup> of several pioneers of the scientific revolution, the connections between the two disciplines is much more complex. This complicated, and most of the times paradoxical, relationship between ‘old’ and ‘new’ conceptions of man and nature is well exemplified in the works of ‘transitional’ figures such as the already mentioned Francis Bacon. Recent criticism has established that alchemical, magical, and scientific views coexist in his writings, as they coexist in the treatises, among others, of Newton, Kepler, and Copernicus:

the empirical investigation of nature; the vision of magus or scientist as unveiler of nature’s secrets; the accurate technical use of instruments, of weighing and gauging and producing effects; are all shared by alchemy, natural magic and natural philosophy<sup>173</sup>.

In this respect, it would be useful to quote *Gesta Grayorum*, the account of the Christmas revels organised at the Gray’s Inn in 1594-95 at the presence of Queen Elizabeth. Besides testifying to an early performance of Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*, the text contains some speeches that have been attributed precisely to Bacon: of particular interest is one of them, in which there is an explicit allusion to alchemy<sup>174</sup>. Soliciting the

---

<sup>171</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 415-17.

<sup>172</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader. From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>173</sup> Kate Aughterson (ed.), *The English Renaissance*, cit., pp. 345-6.

<sup>174</sup> The first attribution of the “Councillors’ Speeches” in *Gesta Grayorum* to Francis Bacon appears in James Spedding (ed.), *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, cit., p. 325. Paolo Rossi himself accepts the attribution of the speeches to Bacon. In particular, Rossi points out that two years after the already mentioned discourse *Mr. Bacon in the Praise of Knowledge*, where alchemy is harshly criticised, Bacon, rather surprisingly, praised alchemical research in *Gesta Grayorum*: “Due anni dopo, in un discorso intitolato *Gesta Grayorum* Bacone esprimeva il suo progetto di una riforma che non consisteva in ritrovati e scoperte individuali, ma che necessitava di una organizzazione e di una serie di istituzioni. Ricordando gli stretti rapporti fra i regni dell’antichità e la cultura che in essi si era sviluppata, Bacone sollecitava il sovrano perché desse vita a quattro grandi istituzioni che sarebbero rimaste come un perenne monumento: una completa biblioteca che raccogliesse libri e manoscritti antichi e moderni europei e delle altre parti del mondo; un grande orto botanico e un grande giardino zoologico pieni di tutte le varietà di piante

establishment of a new program of cultural advancements, Bacon proposes the building of a library, fully furnished with ancient and modern books and manuscripts; a garden, where all sorts of plants and animals would live; a cabinet, where all inventions generated by human art would be preserved, and, rather surprisingly, a still-room for alchemical research. This “Still-house”, “furnished with Mills, Instruments, Furnaces and Vessels”, would be employed as “a Palace fit for a Philosopher’s Stone”<sup>175</sup>. Prompted by the same purposes that lead alchemists in their ‘quest’, namely the discovery of nature’s secrets, Bacon overtly foreshadows to the monarch the possibility of becoming as Hermes Trismegistus, the alleged founder of alchemy and the father of all arts and sciences:

Thus, when your Excellency shall have added depth of Knowledge to the fineness of Spirits, and greatness of your Power, then indeed shall you lay a Trismegistus; and then, when all other Miracles and Wonders shall cease, by reason that you shall have discovered their natural Causes, your self shall be left the only Miracle and Wonder of the World<sup>176</sup>.

Eliade observes that a renovation of learning was at the core of both the Hermetic culture and of the new programs fostered by the supporters of the new scientific method<sup>177</sup>. In this respect, it is worth noticing that in 1619 Jonathan Valentin Andreae, the father of the Rosicrucian movement, imagined the existence of a utopian city, Christianopolis, whose centre of scientific research is a laboratory of chemical experimentation. As alchemy is usually considered by its practitioners as a *ministra naturae*<sup>178</sup>, so in *Christianopolis* chemistry is defined as “a very accurate midwife of Nature”<sup>179</sup>. In the author’s opinion, this laboratory is the place where “[h]eaven is married to the earth” and the “divine mysteries imprinted on the earth are discovered once more”<sup>180</sup>. In the forges and workshops “set up for smelting, stamping, casting, and moulding metals”, the workers devote themselves to “an accurate knowledge of natural philosophy”<sup>181</sup>: “Here indeed is to be seen the exploration of nature, since whatever the earth contains in its depths is subjected to the

---

animali ucelli e pesci; un laboratorio dotato di macine, fornaci e alambicchi che fossero il luogo opportuno per la fabbricazione della pietra filosofale”. Paolo Rossi, *Francesco Bacone*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>175</sup> *Gesta Grayorum or, The History of the High and Mighty Prince, Henry Prince of Purpoole, [...] Together with a Masque, as it was presented (by his Highness’s Command) for the Entertainment of Q. ELIZABETH; who, with the Nobles of both Courts, was present thereat*, Printed for W. Canning, London, 1688, Reprint by Frederick Hall at the Oxford University Press, The Malone Society Reprints, 1914, p. 35.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Mircea Eliade, Foreword to Bettina Knapp, *Theatre and Alchemy*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1980, pp. ix-x.

<sup>178</sup> William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>179</sup> Johann Valentin Andreae, *Christianopolis*, introduced and translated by Edward H. Thompson, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1999, p. 209. (or. ed. Johannes Valentinus Andreae, *Reipublicae Christianopolitanae descriptio*, Argentorati, 1619).

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 168.

laws and instruments of science”<sup>182</sup>. As further evidence of the constant exchange between new science and occult philosophy, it is worth mentioning Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, where the author describes an ideal city in which the House of Solomon, whose practices are reminiscent of alchemical doctrines, is the main institution for the advancement of knowledge in the field of natural philosophy. References to the elixir, the balm for the prolongation of human life, and to furnaces, where admirable effects occur, can be detected throughout Bacon’s text, thus suggesting that “many preoccupations in the *New Atlantis* derive from earlier traditions of natural knowledge – dietetics, medicine, mechanics, alchemy, natural magic”<sup>183</sup>. The Fathers of Solomon’s House, priests and scientists at the same time, use some natural caves for what appear to be alchemical practices:

we use them [these caves] for all coagulations, indurations, refrigerations, and conservation of bodies. We use them likewise for the imitation of natural mines; and the producing also of new artificial metals<sup>184</sup>.

Even more evocative of alchemy is the Fathers’ concern with the prolongation of human life. The Bensalemites employ the so-called “Water of Paradise” in the same way as alchemists use their elixir, i.e. to procure everlasting health:

we have little wells for infusions of many things, where the waters take the virtue quicker and better than in vessels or basons. And amongst them we have a water which we call Water of Paradise, being, by that we do to it, made very sovereign for health, and prolongation of life<sup>185</sup>.

As remarked by Paolo Rossi, however, these considerations should not prevent researchers from recognising the profound differences that distinguish Bacon’s doctrines and methodology from the alchemists’s ones, even though some of his works, especially the early ones, are no doubt imbued with the Hermetic beliefs typical of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages. In fact, the quoted excerpts from the two speeches *Mr. Bacon in Praise of Knowledge* and *Gesta Grayorum* are telling of the controversial and ambiguous attitude towards alchemical culture that marks the writings of Bacon and, more in general, of the

---

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Richard Serjeantson, “Natural Knowledge in the *New Atlantis*”, in Bronwen Price (ed.), *Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002, p. 98. On the influences of natural magic and alchemy on Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, see also Margaret Healy, “Protean Bodies: Literature, Alchemy, Science and English Revolutions”, in Margaret Healy and Thomas Healy (eds.), *Renaissance Transformations: The Making of English Writing, 1500-1650*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009, pp. 161-77.

<sup>184</sup> Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis and The Great Instauration*, edited by Jerry Weinberger, Harlan Davidson, Wheeling, Illinois, 1989<sup>2</sup>, p. 72.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

philosophers and thinkers usually associated with the scientific revolution. In accordance with Pagnini's theories, an author's indebtedness to the "style" of his epoch is even more evident when he decides to cast himself against the general ethos of the age<sup>186</sup>. It is unquestionable that in a world in which new science called "all in doubt"<sup>187</sup> and threatened traditional conceptions of man and nature, as claimed by the Metaphysical poet John Donne, alchemy still played a central and influential role.

If it is of paramount importance to consider the links between alchemy and science, it is equally crucial not to reject the mystical features of alchemical theory as mistakes that have somehow interfered with the discipline's development into modern chemistry. As a matter of fact, Michela Pereira and Chiara Crisciani point out that alchemy has always been a synthesis of practical and spiritual concerns. Programs of transformation of physical substances go hand in hand with philosophical reflections, with the aim to obtain a condition of perfection on various fronts<sup>188</sup>: gold, health, and spiritual renewal are equally part of the alchemists's dream to mend the world<sup>189</sup>. The difficulty of deciphering alchemical texts and the subsequent problems in interpreting them correctly are due to the symbolical and metaphorical veil that covers the descriptions of the numerous phases leading to the achievement of the philosopher's stone, always "called by a perplexing variety of names"<sup>190</sup>, as remarked by Petrus Bonus of Ferrara. In this respect, Roger Bacon's definition of the stone is particularly worth quoting because it is emblematic of the

---

<sup>186</sup> "ogni opera letteraria è, in qualche modo, *novatoria*. Quella della non ripetizione assoluta ne è la condizione minima. Ma abbiamo detto che anche nelle scritture originali non novatorie in senso massiccio, sibbene 'variazionistiche', c'è sempre un comportamento che si riferisce a un 'tema' da ricostruire. Questo 'tema' non dato, ma ricostruibile *a posteriori*, che non esiste allo stato puro e completo in nessuna esecuzione, ma informa tutti i componimenti di un certo tipo, è lo 'stile 'epocale'. [...] Nessuna opera, per quanto originale e rivoluzionaria, è nuova in ogni sua parte. Vi si riconoscono tratti originali e tratti convenzionali. Perciò anche là dove si abbia una violenta reazione, essa è pur sempre *legata a uno stile*, da cui violentemente si differenzia". Marcello Pagnini, *Pragmatica*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>187</sup> John Donne, *An Anatomy of the World*, 1611, ll. 205-8: "And new philosophy calls all in doubt; / The element of fire is quite put out; / The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit / Can well direct him where to look for it".

<sup>188</sup> "di alchimia in senso proprio si può invece parlare – in tutte le culture in cui si è sviluppata – [...] quando [...] programmi di trasformazioni tecniche si legano a riflessioni di tipo filosofico e/o religioso nel quadro del perseguimento di scopi di perfezionamento complessivo, a tutti i livelli; quando comunque alla ricetta sta sottesa una teoria e alla prescritta manipolazione operativa si affianca il libro, il trattato e una tradizione dottrinarica. Ed è appunto con una tradizione di questo tipo che l'Occidente entra in contatto nel sec. XIII". Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L'arte del sole e della luna*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>189</sup> "è anche in una simile integrazione prospettica, unitaria e dinamica, che si può meglio comprendere la altrettanto frequente compresenza e l'interscambiabilità degli scopi operativi dell'alchimista che puntano alla perfezione, cioè a ciò che sta al vertice in diverse – ma tra loro corrispondenti e reciprocamente condizionantesi – serie gerarchiche: oro, salute, lunga vita, rinnovamento spirituale". Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L'arte del sole e della luna*, cit., pp. 12-3.

<sup>190</sup> Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, The Original Aldine Edition, James Elliott & Co., London, 1894, p. 117. See the Latin text in Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita novella*, Apud Aldi filios, Venetii, 1546, p. 34v: "Quia ergo materia huius lapidis est unica tantum, sed in arte, magisterioque alchimiae, est infinitis nominibus variata, et modus operandi est solum unus, sed a philosophis multipliciter variatus".

equivocal nature of alchemical notions and of the plurality of objectives of the alchemical art. Bacon explicitly asserts that the term philosopher's stone has to be intended in metaphorical terms since it stands for all those things from which the *opus alchymicum* begins: "Lapis igitur sumitur primo methaphorice pro omni eo super quo incipit operacio alkimie"<sup>191</sup>. The word 'stone', therefore, does not imply that the field of the alchemical enterprise is restricted to the manufacturing of metals, but, rather, that it should be broadened to include every sort of 'object' on which the alchemist accomplishes his operations. In this regard, Stanton Linden, who has recently edited several scholarly editions of alchemical texts, claims that "the [alchemical] evolving 'stone' becomes the symbol for, or direct reflection of, stages in the subject's inner purification"<sup>192</sup>.

Further complicating the task of unravelling alchemical tropes and enigmas, is the practice, especially common among medieval and Renaissance alchemists, to describe the transmutation of metals by means of metaphors drawn from the life of man. If the creation of the stone is imagined as the birth of an infant, the reunion of all the contrasting polarities characterising the earthly dimension is, needless to say, regarded as a 'conjunction' or 'chemical wedding' between a man and a woman, often represented as a king and a queen. In a high number of alchemical parables illustrating the phases of the *opus* in allegorical terms, the royal protagonists are shown while submitting themselves to a phase of 'dissolution', also referred to as a 'divorce', and of 'solution', a reconciliation – a process that is thought to reflect the transmutation of metals within the alembic in the course of the cycle known as *solve et coagula* (see especially plates from 1 to 17 and from 18 to 34). As will be discussed, in the same way as metals have to be dissolved and then reassembled in a new form in order to be purged of their imperfections, man has to symbolically die in order to be regenerated. The custom to describe the steps of the *opus alchymicum* in human terms arises from the notion that the microcosm and the macrocosm are one and the same thing: the world of man, the microcosm, and the world of God, the

---

<sup>191</sup> Roger Bacon, *Secretum secretorum cum glossis et notulis*, in Id., *Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi*, edited by Robert Steele, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1920, vol. 5, p. 117. *Secretum secretorum* is an alchemical text that was attributed to Aristotle. Roger Bacon, considering this treatise to be of primary importance in the history of alchemy, added an introduction and some glosses to it. The sentence I have quoted is among Bacon's comments to the original text. See also Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L'arte del sole e della luna*, cit., pp. 157-61. As pointed out by a number of scholars, *Secretum secretorum* was the "secrets book par excellence". Moreover, as Ray remarks, "well known to early modern readers, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* circulated widely through the seventeenth century". See Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy. Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015, p. 192. Ray also quotes Eamon's comment on the widespread circulation of the text in the early modern period: "this text was 'among the most widely read of the medieval and Renaissance periods'". William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1994, p. 45, quoted in Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, cit., p. 192.

<sup>192</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, cit., p. 10.

macrocosm, are closely related, the former being a reflection of the latter. The Renaissance model of the two cosmos, according to which *Homo est utriusque naturae vinculum*, “the nodal point”<sup>193</sup> between heaven and earth, perfectly applies to alchemical imagery since alchemists most frequently describe the philosopher’s stone as a microcosmic reproduction of man. The fifteenth-century alchemist Thomas Norton, among others, explicitly argues that “our Stone in generation / Is most like thing to Mans Creation”<sup>194</sup>. It is not surprising that the alchemical attempt to bring the physical, external world to the highest level of perfection is an endeavour that alchemists extended also to man’s body and soul, according to a vast program of reformation of the earthly dimension.

All this considered, it would be limiting to isolate the practical from the mystical, or religious, aspects of alchemical theory, as if the alchemists’s objective were either the purification of physical matter or the regeneration of man<sup>195</sup>. In this respect, the already mentioned *Testamentum Morieni* is particularly significant since a comparison between the practical operations of the *opus alchymicum* and the different stages of human life is explicitly drawn, the creation of the stone being compared to the “generation of man”:

For the conduct of this operation, you must have pairing, production of offspring, pregnancy, birth, and rearing. For union is followed by conception, which initiates pregnancy, whereupon birth follows. Now the performance of this composition is likened to the generation of man, whom the great Creator most high made not after the manner in which a house is constructed nor as anything else which is built by the hand of man<sup>196</sup>.

The idea that an interconnection between man and nature, earthly and heavenly

---

<sup>193</sup> “In the chain of being the position of man was of paramount interest. *Homo est utriusque naturae vinculum*. He was the nodal point, and his double nature, though the source of internal conflict, had the unique function of binding together *all* creation, of bridging the greatest cosmic chasm, that between matter and spirit”. Eustace Mandeville Wetenhall Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Penguin Books in Association with Chatto and Windus, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 73.

<sup>194</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 61.

<sup>195</sup> “Il contesto in cui questo perfezionamento dovrebbe verificarsi è spesso caratterizzato [...] secondo i moduli concettuali e linguistici propri della tradizione ermetica che rinviano ad una dinamica, vitale unità del reale, i cui diversi piani si connettono in corrispondenze armoniche più che articolarsi in distinzioni nette; che accentuano il rapporto di partecipazione e corrispondenza tra macrocosmo e microcosmo; che dunque prevedono non drastiche separazioni tra ‘interno’ ed ‘esterno’, tra alto e basso, tra spirito e materia, tra l’operatore e ciò su cui egli opera, ma piuttosto dinamici scambi e reciproche influenze. In tale contesto s’inquadrano allora, da un lato, le non infrequenti indicazioni sulla connessione necessaria che deve legare l’*opus* di perfezionamento della materia alla trasformazione interiore (consistente in un potenziamento di valori spirituali nell’anima dell’artefice) dell’operatore”. Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>196</sup> Morienus, *A Testament*, cit., p. 29. Latin text: “Prima earum est coitus: secunda est conceptio: tertia, praegnatio: quarta, ortus: quinta, nutrimentum. Si non fuerit igitur coitus, non erit conceptio: et si non fuerit conceptio, non erit praegnatio: et si non fuerit praegnatio, ortus villo modo non sequetur. Haec est enim huius dispositionis directio, quae scil homini creationi assimilatur. Omnipotes enim creator altissimus, magnus, cuius nomen semper sit benedictum, creavit hominem, non ex partibus constitutius, vt est domus, quae ex suis partibus constat constitutius: Non est enim res que homini esse constituat”. *Liber de compositione alchemiae*, AA 2: 38.

dimensions, ‘high’ and ‘low’ exists, a conception that is at the basis of the alchemical mindset, recurs in one of the principles of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, or *Emerald Table*, the sacred text of alchemy:

True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing<sup>197</sup>.

The *Emerald Table*, that was said to be the tablet on which Hermes Trismegistus revealed the secrets of alchemy to his adepts, focuses on the close relationship between the divine and the human realms, that were thought to mirror each other. It follows that the tendency, still persistent in modern criticism, to decree whether a given alchemical work is a book on chemistry or on esoteric alchemy might be restrictive, because that same work is very likely intended to be both, given that the majority of alchemists deny all distinctions between the material and the spiritual dimensions<sup>198</sup>. Linden, while acknowledging the pragmatic necessity to label alchemical writings as either ‘esoteric’ or ‘exoteric’, warns his readers from the danger of building ahistorical and baffling categories<sup>199</sup>. The following lines by George Ripley, one of the most illustrious fifteenth-century alchemists, attest that the practical and the spiritual approaches overlap in a number of alchemical treatises. Providing his reader with directions regarding the passage from the first stage of the *opus alchymicum*, the so-called *nigredo*, to the second one, known as *albedo*, the author describes the whole process as the attainment of Paradise: “And thus by the Gate of Blacknes thou must cum in / To lyght of Paradyce in Whytenes yf thou wylt wyn”<sup>200</sup>.

Taking into account the manifold purposes of alchemy and the ambiguous nature of most alchemical texts, the seemingly contradictory “tendency to reassess and reinterpret”<sup>201</sup> typical of alchemical criticism becomes somehow easier to understand. The perplexities concerning the true purpose of the alchemical art have their roots in the very first philosophical reflections on the subject that developed in medieval Europe, after the Arabs contributed to spread alchemical writings and notions in the Latin world. If considering the treatises of the first thinkers who debated on the significance of alchemy

---

<sup>197</sup> The English translation of the *Emerald Tablet* is quoted from Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28. An English translation of the *Tabula Smaragdina* is also in Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, cit., pp. 179-80.

<sup>198</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., pp. 46-7: “While the modern mentality seeks to know if this strange hybrid volume is a recipe book for spiritual or for practical chemistry, it is most likely that (in true Hermetic spirit) it sought to guide both esoteric and exoteric practices simultaneously, denying distinctions”.

<sup>199</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>200</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, TCB 150.

<sup>201</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 1.

and on its position within the scholastic philosophy of the time, then one will notice that it was seen as an art having various, seemingly disparate, objectives<sup>202</sup>. Robert of Chester, in the prologue to his Latin translation of *Testamentum Morieni*, underlines the original features of alchemy, that he defines as a *novitas*: “because your Latin has not as yet truly understood what alchemy is, and what is its composition, I will therefore make it manifest and known unto you”<sup>203</sup>. Chester’s prologue is of particular interest also because it presents the book as divine and prophetic and alchemy as a discipline that allows the attentive and virtuous reader to be initiated to the secrets of the Scriptures, a concept that is constantly reiterated by alchemical writers:

For this is a divine book, and full of divinity, for in it the true and perfect probation of the two Testaments (that is to say of the Old and of the New) is contained. For if any man should study much in this book, and shall understand it fully, the truth and virtue of the Testament [...] shall be sufficiently known unto him<sup>204</sup>.

As Chester’s words suggest, the conception of alchemy that entered Europe was not that of an art limited to the transformation of metals, but, rather, that of a discipline that had a more ambitious scope. The originality of this new craft lay precisely in its being both *ars* and *scientia*<sup>205</sup>: far from being a series of recipes, alchemical texts introduced into Western Europe a set of philosophical beliefs and doctrines directed to transform and perfect both nature and man. It was this fusion of theory and practice that distinguished alchemy from all other already existing arts, as argued very clearly by Petrus Bonus of Ferrara. The

---

<sup>202</sup> “è dalla civiltà araba e andalusa che i latini hanno ricevuto sia le conoscenze pratiche, sia quelle teoriche che, messe insieme, componevano la misteriosa ed esaltante *novitas*, sulla quale ben presto i filosofi scolastici avrebbero appuntato la loro curiosità”. Michela Pereira (ed.), *I testi della tradizione*, cit., p. 387. See also Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna*, cit., pp. 3-75. Halleux remarks that it was because of the sacred character of alchemical art that the disciple resisted easy categorisations: “[...] il carattere divino, sacro e rivelato dell’alchimia, e le strategie linguistiche che ne derivavano, rappresentavano decisamente un ostacolo per l’integrazione del nuovo sapere. Così, l’alchimia finì con l’occupare una posizione instabile nelle diverse classificazioni delle scienze”. Robert Halleux, “L’alchimia nel medioevo latino e greco”, *Storia della Scienza* 6 : 544. On the place of alchemy in the classifications of arts and sciences in the Renaissance, see Jean-Marc Mandosio, “La place de l’alchimie dans les classifications des sciences et des arts à la Renaissance”, *Chrysopoeia*, tome IV, 1990-1991, pp. 199-282.

<sup>203</sup> Robert of Chester, *The Book of the Composition of Alchemy*, transcribed and modernised by Adam McLean, Adam McLean, Glasgow, 2002, pp. 5-6. Latin text: “Et quoniam quid sit Alchymia, et qua sit sua compositio, nondum vere vestra cognovit latinitas, in praesenti sermone elucidabo”. Robert of Chester, *Praefatio Castrensis*, AA 2: 5.

<sup>204</sup> Robert of Chester, *The Book of the Composition of Alchemy*, cit., p. 5. Latin text: “Hic est namque liber divinus, et divinitate plenissimus. In eo enim duorum testamentorum (veteris scilicet et novi) continetur vera et perfecta probatio. Si quis namque in hoc libro multum studuerit, et eum plenarie intellexerit, veritas virtusque testamenti, nec non et utriusque vitae modus, et sufficienter illum latere non poterunt”. Robert of Chester, *Praefatio Castrensis*, AA 2: 4-5.

<sup>205</sup> “l’alchimia non è una serie di ricette, è una *scientia*, cioè un insieme di dottrine che orientano ed hanno per scopo un fare/trasformare. [...] Questa compresenza di *ars* e *scientia*, che accomuna nella struttura questa disciplina alla medicina e che implica particolari rapporti con la natura, sarà oggetto in seguito di vivaci discussioni”. Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna*, cit., p. 9.

fourteenth-century Italian physician explicitly highlights the dual nature of alchemy, both ‘natural’ and ‘divine’ and, therefore, both ‘practical’ and ‘spiritual’: “Our Art is partly natural and partly supernatural, or Divine”<sup>206</sup>. Because of its peculiarity, alchemy was difficult to integrate within the Aristotelian framework. The exceptional nature of the art is unequivocally expressed by Petrus Bonus in a longer passage, where he argues that alchemy exceeds all other ‘sciences’: “Et quia est de nobili subiecto, et cui omnia obediunt, et quod omnia suppeditat, ipsa est nobilis ualde. [...] Ideo quo ad hoc, haec scientia omnis alias superat”<sup>207</sup>. Earlier than Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, the thirteenth-century Dominican Vincenzo de Beauvais had attempted to find the proper place of alchemy within his encyclopaedia *Speculum mundi*. He resolved to list it among the mechanical arts and specifically associated it with both the craft of the smiths and with medicine. Moreover, introducing one of the analogies that constantly recur throughout alchemical writings, de Beauvais also compared alchemy to agriculture, arguing that the two operate in a similar way<sup>208</sup>. Likewise, attempting to classify alchemy but specifically drawing on its philosophical traits, the Italian Constantinus Pisanus, in his *Liber secretorum alchimie*, dating from the mid-thirteenth century, clearly affirms that it represents the apex of philosophy. Since alchemy is “most profound and obscure”, its knowledge, as claimed by Pisanus, can be attained only if one reaches the utmost degree of a philosophical education:

Et [quia] ars alchymica est ualde profunda et ualde obscura, quemadmodum tenebrosa aqua in nubibus aeris, sicut scientia in prophetis, ita etiam alchymia in philosophicis. Et nullus potest uenire ad cubile alchymie nisi per motum superiorum infallibiliter noscendo eundem. Ut sciant operari, possunt uenire ad totius philosophie culmen et ibidem quieuit philosophus<sup>209</sup>.

The above-quoted excerpts suggest that the alchemical art immediately emerged as a multi-faceted discipline, having a broad range of action. The esoteric and soteriological aspects of alchemical experimentations are usually combined with practical instructions and considerations on the metamorphoses of matter and metals, thus making it problematic for scholars to decide on the exact nature of a given alchemical text. On the whole, it can be argued that the leitmotiv of alchemical doctrines is, as already anticipated, the

---

<sup>206</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 123. Latin text: “Distinctio prima ostendens haec ars sit naturalis et diuina [...]. Dicimus, quod ipsa partim est naturalis, et partim diuina sive supra naturam”. Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., [38r].

<sup>207</sup> Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., [47v].

<sup>208</sup> See Vincenzo de Beauvais, *Speculum Naturale e Doctrinale*, in Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L'arte del sole e della luna*, cit., p. 138.

<sup>209</sup> Constantinus Pisanus, *Liber secretorum alchimie*, in Id., *The Book of the Secrets of Alchemy*, edited by Barbara Obrist, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1990, p. 73. (Constantinus Pisanus, *Liber secretorum alchimie*, 13<sup>th</sup> century, MS. Ferguson 104, Glasgow University Library, Glasgow).

correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm and, therefore, the analogy between the transmutation of physical substances and the refinement of the human body and soul.

## 2.2. Some Methodological Remarks

The main criticism Principe and Newman direct at several of the existing interpretations of alchemy concerns the tendency to “separate alchemy from ‘science’ or natural philosophy” since they “all insist upon psychological, ecstatic, or irrational elements as fundamental to alchemy”<sup>210</sup>. As already said, the two scholars contest nineteenth-century spiritual readings, along with the Jungian psychoanalytical approach, but also the views of much celebrated scholars as Mircea Eliade and Northrop Frye, in the hope that new directions will be taken in the field of alchemical historiography. With regards to Newman’s and Principe’s debate, Long remarks that, in their attempt to oppose “the validity of reading alchemical symbolism as anything other than a straightforward code for the materials and the processes of alchemical practice”, they “may have overcorrected”<sup>211</sup>. In fact, Long continues, the “larger cultural context in which these works were created” has always to be taken into account<sup>212</sup>. As remarked by Shumaker, in the Renaissance people thought by means of analogies, the “modern fondness for distinctions” being almost unknown to them:

it deserves note that the readiness to say ‘x is the same as y’, or if an equation cannot be made, ‘x exists alongside y and is the same truth in another realm or dimension’, characterizes much Renaissance thought and was only gradually to be replaced by its opposite, the modern fondness for distinctions<sup>213</sup>.

Moreover, Renaissance emblem literature inevitably heightened the allegorical and symbolical character of much alchemical writings, something that Newman and Principe themselves acknowledge<sup>214</sup>. Since everything was a symbol of something else, the

---

<sup>210</sup> Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, cit., p. 417.

<sup>211</sup> Kathleen P. Long, “Odd Bodies: Reviewing Corporeal Difference in Early Modern Alchemy”, in Id. (ed.), *Gender and Scientific Discourse*, cit., p. 64.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, p. 194.

<sup>214</sup> Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, cit., p. 407: “the alchemists’s images are not unconscious productions, but rather expressive metaphors developed under the guidance of actual observation of chemical reactions coupled with the need to maintain secrecy and the outlook fostered by the ‘emblematic world-view’ characteristic of the premodern

transmutation of metals was usually not distinguished from the inner metamorphoses of man and from the attempts to prolong human life. Linden remarks that already at the time of the Greek philosopher Zosimos (third century AD), alchemy was not regarded only as “a metallurgical craft” but also, and above all, as “a secret and mysterious hermetic art”:

During the more than four hundred years separating Bolos and Zosimos, important changes occurred in the way alchemy was conceived, practiced, and written about. During this time it appears to have been transformed from what essentially a metallurgical craft to a secret and mysterious hermetic art<sup>215</sup>.

Zosimos, focusing on the more spiritual aspects of the alchemical art, was the initiator of a tradition that would develop particularly in late medieval and Renaissance alchemical literature, i.e. the description of the phases of the *opus alchymicum* in the form of ‘visions’ or ‘dreams’<sup>216</sup>.

Moving from the fact that isolating the practical from the esoteric concerns of alchemy might be anachronistic, in the present study the alchemical literary tradition will be considered in all its facets, with no intention to superimpose preconceived readings or to deny its proto-chemical features. In an old but still invaluable essay, Schuler remarks that in early modern England alchemy was subject to a variety of religious interpretations and, therefore, it would be more appropriate to talk about “spiritual alchemies”, in the plural<sup>217</sup>. One of the documents transcribed and discussed by Schuler is an anonymous text, dating from the late sixteenth century, in which a parallelism is clearly drawn between inner and outer transmutation: “the Regeneration of Man and the Purification of Metall have like degrees of Preparation and Operation to their highest perfection”<sup>218</sup>. In like manner, the writings of George Ripley dwell upon the spiritual significance of the alchemical art: Ripley was especially renowned in Renaissance England, the first publication of his *Compound of Alchymie* dating from 1591 and including a dedication to Queen Elizabeth. The Elizabethan alchemist William Blomfield further attests to the religious concerns of alchemists. As a matter of fact, he regards himself as one who has been blessed with the task of “mayntayning of true religion” thanks to the art of alchemy, whose knowledge he received “not at mannes hand,

---

period”.

<sup>215</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>216</sup> “La formulazione allegorica del processo di trasmutazione, con o senza immagini, trova i suoi antecedenti in Zosimo (le visioni di Zosimo, l’‘oroboro’) e negli autori arabi (la *Visio Arislei*, *l’Epistola solis ad lunam crescentem* di Muhammad ibn Umayl al-Tamīmī, il Senior Zadith dei Latini)”. Robert Halleux, “L’Alchimia nel Medioevo Latino e Greco”, *Storia della Scienza* 4: 548.

<sup>217</sup> Robert M. Schuler, “Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England”, cit., p. 294.

<sup>218</sup> See British Library MS Sloane 2203, fols. 119-120v, quoted by Robert M. Schuler, “Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England”, cit., p. 304.

but only of god”<sup>219</sup>.

Schuler’s study is also emblematic of the importance to understand that alchemy has always been a protean discipline, constantly changing and intermingling with various philosophies. Another objection raised by Principe and Newman regards the custom to conceive of alchemy as a monolithic tradition:

A common failing of the interpretations critiqued in this chapter is the depiction of alchemy as a uniform and constant monolith; consequently, future studies should pay attention to mapping out the development and fine structure of the discipline<sup>220</sup>.

As already noticed, alchemy originated from the syncretism of Neoplatonic, Gnostic, and Hermetic doctrines in Hellenistic Alexandria and has always adjusted to different philosophical and religious traditions. Crisciani and Pereira remark that when it entered the Latin Middle Ages, alchemy already presented itself as a complex set of beliefs:

la tradizione che giunge in Occidente dall’Islam non è essa stessa monolitica ed omogenea: presenta anzi varie correnti e tendenze ed è già affiancata, nella cultura araba, da un vivace dibattito filosofico-scientifico sui limiti, sui pregi, sul valore complessivo che vanno attribuiti alle ricerche alchemiche<sup>221</sup>.

Because of its long history and its metamorphoses through the ages, then, alchemy is resistant to strict categorizations and scholars still dispute about its true significance. Tilton observes that “the very term ‘alchemy’ had accumulated a variety of meanings by the turn of the sixteenth century, and the nature of the endeavours to be placed under it rubric remains a contentious issue to this day”<sup>222</sup>. Moving from Tilton’s comments, Long concludes that there is no correct and obvious interpretation of alchemical symbolism since it “can be read in a number of ways and as having a number of meanings, some inherently a part of various aspects of the alchemical process, and some [...] clearly not referring to the alchemical process itself”<sup>223</sup>. In a similar way, Roberts reflects on the obstacles scholars encounter when dealing with alchemical treatises, since “it is not always clear whether the allegories occupying some or all of some alchemical treatises are figurative

---

<sup>219</sup> William Blomfield, Dedicatory letter to Queen Elizabeth, in Id., *Blomefylde’s Quintaessens, or the Regiment of Lyfe*, ca. 1573, quoted by Robert M. Schuler, “William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist”, *Ambix*, vol. 20, Part 2, July 1973, pp. 81-2. See also Robert M. Schuler, “Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England”, cit., p. 303.

<sup>220</sup> Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, cit., p. 419.

<sup>221</sup> Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>222</sup> Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix: Spiritual Alchemy and Rosicrucianism in the Work of Count Michael Maier (1569-1622)*, W. De Gruyter, Berlin, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>223</sup> Kathleen P. Long, “Odd Bodies: Reviewing Corporeal Difference in Early Modern Alchemy”, cit., p. 64.

expressions concealing practical processes from the vulgar” or “whether the medium is the message and the allegory is meant to reveal some other meaning”<sup>224</sup>. It is worth quoting also the words of Michela Pereira, who defines as very limiting the attempt to expunge every kind of symbolical element from the interpretation of alchemical texts with the intent to ‘redeem’ alchemy from spiritual and psychoanalytical readings<sup>225</sup>.

The recent exhibition “The Art of Alchemy”, held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles throughout January and February 2017, testifies to the profound interest alchemy still raises among scholars. The exhibition, primarily aimed at displaying how alchemy affected visual culture from antiquity to the twentieth century, also focused on the religious and spiritual concerns that emerge from the same works on display. The curator, David Brafman, actually points out that “alchemy was a science tinged with spirituality and infused with a spritz of artistic spirit”<sup>226</sup>. It is important to come to terms with the fact that material and spiritual transformation are complexly intertwined in the majority of the texts of the alchemical tradition since alchemists conceived of themselves mainly as philosophers, devoted to concrete experimentations on matter but also to the attainment of higher forms of perfection<sup>227</sup>. It is not a matter of chance that alchemical practitioners of all epochs contend that the true alchemy does not only consist in the transmutation of metals, but also, and above all, in the pursuit of nobler scopes, as suggested, for instance, in the following lines from *Blomfields Blossoms*, an alchemical allegory written by the Elizabethan alchemist William Blomfield and collected in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*: “Who lifts to be diligent, / Shall finde that we seeke an heavenly treasure / And a precious jewell that ever shall endure”<sup>228</sup>.

Frances Yates herself, the pioneer, along with Eugenio Garin, of the study of Renaissance Hermeticism, stressed that these kind of researches should be scientific and rigorous. When accepting the invitation to the conference “Hermeticism and the Renaissance”, that marked the official entrance of Hermetic studies in the field of academic research and that was held at the Folger Library in Washington in 1982, Yates emphasised “the great need for scholarly rigor in this field that was so riddled with

---

<sup>224</sup> Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy. Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, The British Library, London, 1994, p. 66.

<sup>225</sup> “molto più limitativo è il tentativo di espungere dall’interpretazione dei testi alchemici ogni elemento simbolico, allo scopo di ‘redimere’ l’alchimia dalle interpretazioni ‘spirituali’ e psicoanalitiche”. Michela Pereira, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, cit., p. xvi.

<sup>226</sup> See the website: <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/how-alchemy-has-been-depicted-in-art-through-the-ages>. Anika Burgess’s article “How Alchemy Has Been Depicted in Art Through the Ages”. *Atlas Obscura* reproduces some of the works on display during the exhibition.

<sup>227</sup> Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna*, cit., pp. 13-4.

<sup>228</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, TCB 313.

speculation”<sup>229</sup>. Even though her works have been the subject of several criticisms, she undoubtedly contributed to pave the way to previously neglected areas of research. In this respect, Paolo Rossi remarks that Yates and Garin are the two scholars to whom the “discovery of Hermeticism” is to be attributed<sup>230</sup>. Acknowledging the merits of Yates’s and Garin’s works but also highlighting their limits, Rossi warns from the too widespread tendency to regard the study of the Hermetic culture as a transient literary current<sup>231</sup>. Therefore, Rossi continues, it is necessary to include it within wider perspectives in order to truly acknowledge its role within the Renaissance world-view.

Throughout the present work I will take into account the most enlightening and valuable insights of the different theories of alchemy that have been proposed, in the belief that they have all contributed to varying degrees to our better understanding of this complex and rich tradition. Past errors have led scholars to revise certain interpretations and to work on new editions of alchemical writings in order to provide younger researchers with erudite publications. Indeed, a close reading of primary sources is fundamental to undertake a thorough and reliable research on the alchemical tradition and on the relationship between alchemy and literature. In addition to the publication of a high number of new studies on English and European alchemy, in the last few years several websites and online databases have been created with the purpose of supplying a number of sources that otherwise would not be easily available<sup>232</sup>.

I believe it is worth pointing out that my work is not intended to be a study of the history of alchemy and Hermeticism. This task has been already undertaken by eminent scholars, such as Chiara Crisciani, Michela Pereira, Allen Debus, Mircea Eliade, Lawrence Principe, and Lynn Thorndike, among others<sup>233</sup>. Moving from the theoretical apparatus of

---

<sup>229</sup> Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Id. (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, cit., p. 8. As pointed out by Merkel and Debus, Yates’s actual participation to the conference was not possible due to ill health.

<sup>230</sup> Paolo Rossi, *Il tempo dei maghi*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> At present, the most thorough and reliable website collecting more than 250 alchemical texts of different epochs is “The Alchemy Website – Levity” (<http://www.levity.com/alchemy/>). Moreover, a large variety of alchemical collections has been digitised by libraries throughout the world. See also the iconographic database of the Warburg Institute, that collects a number of alchemical illustrations and emblems: ([https://iconographic.warburg.sas.ac.uk/vpc/VPC\\_search/subcats.php?cat\\_1=9&cat\\_2=459](https://iconographic.warburg.sas.ac.uk/vpc/VPC_search/subcats.php?cat_1=9&cat_2=459)).

<sup>233</sup> See, among others, Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna*, cit.; Allen G., “The Significance of Chemical History”, cit., and Allen G. Debus and Ingrid Merkel (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance. Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, cit.; Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit.; Lawrence Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012 and Id. (ed.), *Chymists and Chymistry: Studies in the History of Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry*, International Conference on the History of Alchemy and Chymistry, Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, 19-23 July 2006, Science History Publications, Sagamore Beach, Mass., 2007; Lynn Thorndike (ed.), *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1964-66, 8 vols.

the history of ideas, my intent is to offer a reading of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in the light of the alchemical and Hermetic culture that was familiar to his public. In the first chapter of his pioneering work, *The Great Chain of Being*, Lovejoy highlights the importance of the study of "the general background in the intellectual life and common moral and aesthetic valuations" of the age in which great writers produced their works and of "the ideas then generally prevalent":

And it is, of course, in any case true that a historical understanding even of the few great writers of an age is impossible without an acquaintance with their general background in the intellectual life and common moral and aesthetic valuations of that age; and that the character of this background has to be ascertained by actual historical inquiry into the nature and interrelations of the ideas then generally prevalent<sup>234</sup>.

As Holland and Sherman remark with regards to Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, a comedy contemporary with Shakespeare's romance and that was played by the same theatre company, Jacobean theatre-goers were well learned in alchemical philosophy, a mental framework that, conversely, is almost meaningless to modern readers of the play: "the play [*The Alchemist*] is deeply informed by an alchemical world view that few modern readers will completely share or fully understand"<sup>235</sup>. Throughout my study, I will draw not only on contemporary alchemical treatises but also on the vast iconographic apparatus of the Renaissance alchemical tradition, in the belief that alchemical emblems and illustrations were an essential part of the Elizabethan and Jacobean mindset.

In particular, my analysis of *The Winter's Tale* is preceded by an introduction that might provide the reader with a useful background to the alchemical tradition. After an initial focus on the diffusion of alchemy in Medieval and Renaissance Europe and on its significance as both 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' practice, I have discussed some of the issues concerning the numerous theories of alchemy and its historiography. A conspicuous section consecrated to the role of alchemy and Hermeticism in the ages of Elizabeth and James, who are usually regarded as having two opposite approaches towards Renaissance 'occult' philosophy, concludes the introductory context.

The second part of the present study is arranged according to certain key themes that testify to the existence of some significant connections between Shakespeare's play and alchemical symbolism. The topics to be addressed are the following: Leontes as the *rex chymicus*, a symbolical figure that alchemists intend as the personification of alchemical

---

<sup>234</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., [1936] 1964, p. 20.

<sup>235</sup> Peter Holland and William Sherman, Preface to Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, cit., pp. 549-550.

gold and that is usually conceived of as the protagonist of the *opus alchymicum*, often seen as a soteriological journey of death and rebirth; the role of time and water, two elements that are essential both in alchemical imagery and in Shakespeare's romance; the statue scene, that evidently alludes to the rituals of statue animation recounted in the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius*, and the role of Paulina as a personification of the alchemical art. Finally, I would like to conclude with a focus on King James's possible reception of the play, in view of the fact that he was the patron of Shakespeare's theatre company, the King's Men, when the romance was performed<sup>236</sup>.

---

<sup>236</sup> On the influence of contemporary politics on Shakespeare's last plays, see Stuart M. Kurland, "Shakespeare and James I: personal rule and public responsibility", in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare, 1608-1613*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 209-24.

## Chapter 3

### Alchemical Culture in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages

#### 3.1. Alchemy in Elizabethan England. The Historical Context

In the 1903-edition of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, the scholar Charles Montgomery Hathaway claims that "we hear of few alchemists in the early part of the sixteenth century, but in Queen Elizabeth's time England swarmed with them"<sup>237</sup>. The same concept is reiterated in the chapter dedicated to alchemy by Robert Steele in the volumes *Shakespeare's England* published in the early twentieth century: "In Elizabeth's reign a good deal of encouragement was given in England to alchemy, or at least to alchemists, by personages in high places, even by the Queen herself"<sup>238</sup>. Nowadays, when the research about the state of alchemy in early modern England has much improved, critics and historians still consider the reign of Elizabeth as the golden age of the so-called "divine Science"<sup>239</sup>, supported by both the queen and her courtiers. Charles Nicholl, in his distinguished study of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the light of alchemical and Hermetic imagery, argues that "whether as patron or experimenter, Queen Elizabeth shows us that the fascination for alchemy percolated up to the highest level of English society"<sup>240</sup>. In like manner, Califano, in his recent history of alchemy, remarks that the reign of Elizabeth I represented no doubt the climax of alchemical practices in sixteenth-century England: "Il sedicesimo secolo vide fiorire le ricerche alchemiche in Inghilterra soprattutto alla corte della regina Elisabetta I che era personalmente interessata all'occulto e al magico"<sup>241</sup>.

As already said, when Queen Elizabeth was in power the practice of alchemy was officially forbidden in England following a statute issued by King Henry IV in 1403-4, and it remained so until 1689<sup>242</sup>. However, monarchs were used to hire alchemists at court and,

---

<sup>237</sup> Charles Montgomery Hathaway, "Introduction" to Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, edited by Charles Montgomery Hathaway, Holt, New York, 1903, p. 17.

<sup>238</sup> *Shakespeare's England. An Account of the Life & Manners of the Age*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1917, p. 471.

<sup>239</sup> Giovanni Battista Agnello, "To the Reader", *The Revelation of the Secret Spirit. Declaring the most concealed secret of ALCHYMIE. Written first in Latine by an vnknowne Author; but explained in Italian, by Iohn Baptista Lambye*, Printed by Iohn Haviland for Henrie Skelton, London, 1623.

<sup>240</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. 19.

<sup>241</sup> Salvatore Califano, *Storia dell'alchimia*, cit., p. 125.

<sup>242</sup> See Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "Rudenesse itselpe she doth refine. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia", in Annaliese Connolly and Lisa Hopkins (eds.), *Goddesses and Queens: the Iconography of Elizabeth I*, cit., p. 53. As Nicholl remarks, "For nearly three centuries – from 1404 to 1689 – alchemy was technically

among the Tudor sovereigns, Elizabeth I is notoriously the one who had a more evident, even though at times ambiguous, relationship with alchemy and alchemical practitioners<sup>243</sup>. The surviving accounts of the queen's Christmas's and New Year's gifts indeed point out that "physicians, apothecaries, distillers, and perfumers, whose work may well have involved alchemical procedures, operations and products" were present at court during variable intervals of time<sup>244</sup>. John Dee, Cornelius de Alneto, Thomas Charnock, Edward Cradock, Edward Kelly, Simon Forman, and Edward Dyer were only a few of the renowned alchemists active during Queen Elizabeth's reign. As Harkness has recently discussed, during the Elizabethan era alchemy played a key role in the intellectual exchange that animated the London communities of natural science practitioners<sup>245</sup>. English and non-English alchemists alike were scattered throughout the city and contemporary written records show that more than seventy-four of them were officially working in several neighbourhoods in the second half of the sixteenth century<sup>246</sup>.

The most evident link between Queen Elizabeth and the world of alchemy and Hermeticism was beyond doubt John Dee (1527-1609): being the Renaissance magus *par excellence*<sup>247</sup>, Dee was a polymath whose interests ranged from disciplines such as alchemy and natural philosophy to mathematics, astrology, astronomy, navigation, music, and optics<sup>248</sup>. The study of alchemy was crucial in Dee's career as the catalogues of his now lost library, once placed at Mortlake, show. As a matter of fact, his massive library was rich in alchemical books and even contained "the largest collection of Paracelsian writings in the country"<sup>249</sup>. Considering that the treatises of the Swiss physician and

---

illegal, a felony punishable by death and forfeiture of goods". Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>243</sup> "The official attitude toward alchemy in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was ambivalent. On the one hand, the Art posed a threat to the control of precious metals and was often outlawed; on the other hand, there were obvious advantages to any sovereign who could control gold making by controlling the gold maker". Robert P. Multhauf, "Alchemy", *Britannica. Macropaedia*, 1: 453.

<sup>244</sup> Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "*Rudeness itself she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia", cit., p. 52.

<sup>245</sup> Deborah H. Harkness, "'Strange' Ideas and 'English' Knowledge. Natural Science Exchange in Elizabethan London", in Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen (eds.), *Merchants and Marvels. Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, pp. 151-5.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 151.

<sup>247</sup> "John Dee personified the Renaissance magus in his fullest dignity". Peter French, *John Dee. The World of an Elizabethan Magus*, Routledge, London and New York, 1972, p. 87.

<sup>248</sup> "To John Dee everything was a form of science and everything was worth exploring. He was deeply interested in utilitarian mathematics, geography, navigation, mechanics and the fine arts [...]. Even greater, though, was his interest in mathesis, or mathematical magic, and theurgy, the influence of supernatural powers. Dee considered these various studies inseparable, and it is this attitude that makes a study of his thought so useful in understanding the English Renaissance". Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., p. 21.

<sup>249</sup> Lyndy Abraham, Introduction to Arthur Dee, *Fasciculus Chemicus*, edited by Lyndy Abraham, Garland, New York and London, 1997, p. xiii. One of John Dee's references to the writings of Paracelsus is in *The Private Diary and the Catalogue of His Library of Manuscripts in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and*

alchemist Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493-1541), better known as ‘Paracelsus’, started to be officially published long after his death, i.e. in the late sixteenth century<sup>250</sup>, John Dee’s library was a real source of wealth, presenting the newest writings of the time in the field of natural philosophy and alchemy. Even a quick glance at the list of the manuscripts once owned by Dr. Dee reveals the vast presence of treatises attributed to key names of the alchemical tradition: Aristotle, Hermes Trismegistus, Roger Bacon, Arnald of Villanova, Raymond Lull and authors of texts of Arabic origin figure among John Dee’s masterpieces<sup>251</sup>. Such a furnished library could not have failed to draw the attention of a number of eminent visitors, among whom was the queen herself<sup>252</sup>, whose education in diverse fields of knowledge was notoriously outstanding. A proof of the affectionate bonding between Queen Elizabeth and John Dee emerges in some passages from the latter’s private diary, where the monarch’s visits to Mortlake are recounted:

the Quene’s Majestie cam from Rychemond in her coach, the higher way of Mortlak felde, and when she cam right against the church she turned down toward my howse: and when she was against my garden in the felde she stode there a good while, and than cam ynto the street at the great gate of the felde, where she espyed me at my doore making obeysains to her Majestie; she beckend her hand for me; I cam to her couch side, she very speedily pulled off her glove and gave me her hand to kiss; and to be short, asked me to resort to her court<sup>253</sup>.

Another account of one of the queen’s visits to Mortlake testifies to Elizabeth’s deep attraction for Dee’s ‘occult’ studies, besides showing her tenderness towards Dee’s private life:

the Queen’s Majestie, with her most honourable Privy Council, and other her Lords and Nobility, came purposely to have visited my library: but finding that my wife was within four houres before buried out of the house, her Majestie refused to come in; but willed to fetch my glass so famous, and to show unto her some of the properties of it, which I did; her Majestie [...] did see some of the properties of that glass, to her Majestie’s great contentment and delight<sup>254</sup>.

---

*Trinity College Library, Cambridge*, edited by James Orchard Halliwell, Printed for the Camden Society by John Bowyer Nichols and Son, London, 1842, p. 35: “July 31<sup>st</sup>, I gave Mr. Richard Candish the copy of Paracelsus twelve lettres, written in French with my own hand; and he promised me, before my wife, never to disclose to any that he hath it; and that yf he dye before me he will restore it agayn to me”.

<sup>250</sup> For further details on the publication of Paracelsus’s writings, see Allen G. Debus, *Man and Nature*, cit., pp. 20ff. The epithet ‘Paracelsus’ means ‘beyond Celsus’ or ‘greater than Celsus’, the Roman physician living in the I century AD. In both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Celsus’s *De medicina* was regarded as an invaluable medical encyclopaedia. As it is well known, Paracelsus wanted to surpass the traditional medical approaches of Aristotle, Galen and, of course, Celsus.

<sup>251</sup> See John Dee, *Lists of Manuscripts Formerly Owned by John Dee*, with Preface and Identifications by M.R. James, Printed at the Oxford University Press for The Bibliographical Society, Oxford, 1921.

<sup>252</sup> See Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., pp. 86ff.

<sup>253</sup> John Dee, *The Private Diary*, cit., pp. 8-9.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

The “glass so famous” is very likely the scrying glass which Dee used for divination purposes, a practice which he started to undertake despite the existence of a legal order that prohibited it, because considered akin to witchcraft<sup>255</sup>. As several occurrences in his diary attest, Dee was often welcomed in the royal Privy Chamber, a detail which is indicative of the high consideration in which he was held: a monarch’s Privy Chamber was notoriously a place where only few and strictly selected guests were received. As Dee’s biographer Peter French notices, “Queen Elizabeth was fond of her philosopher”<sup>256</sup> and constantly invited him to her court. There is a comment in Dee’s journal that is paramount in order to understand the queen’s absolute support of the former’s alchemical practices:

Dec. 16<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Candish receyved from the Queen’s Majestie warrant by word of mowth to assure me to do what I wold in philosophie and alchimie, and none shold chek, controll, or molest me; and she sayd that she wold ere long send me £50 more to make up the hundred pound<sup>257</sup>.

Dee’s eclecticism represents the quintessence of Renaissance Hermetic philosophy, both in its relationship with magic and with emerging science. His varied activity was a product of the Hermetic tendency to adopt a syncretic approach towards all arts, conceived of as the expression of the human ability to penetrate into the secret works of nature and, therefore, of God<sup>258</sup>. Dee, in particular, considered the alchemist as a “hero”, someone able to correctly interpret the laws of the supernatural world<sup>259</sup>. It is precisely to ennoble his philosophical approach to alchemy and distinguish it from that of those tricksters that

---

<sup>255</sup> See György E. Szönyi, “Paracelsus, Scrying, and the *Lingua Adamica*. Contexts for John Dee’s Angel Magic”, in Stephen Clucas (ed.), *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought*, Springer, Dordrecht 2006, p. 214.

<sup>256</sup> Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>257</sup> John Dee, *The Private Diary*, cit., p. 37. The queen’s total support of Dee’s alchemical practices is also recalled by Ashmole, TCB 483: “Being settled againe at *Mortelack*, the *Queene* used to call at his *House* to visit him, and shewed her self very Curteous to him [...]. she likewise sent him word by Mr. Thomas Candish, to doe what he would in *Alchymie* and *Philosophy*, and none should controule or molest him: and not unlike by the *Queenes example*, divers *Personages of Honour at Court*, frequented his *Company*, and sent him many *Guifts*, from time to time. Amongst others *Sir Thomas Jones* most nobly offered him his *Castle of Emlin in Wales*, to dwell in, free with all *Accomodations*”.

<sup>258</sup> “Everything is permitted to him [to man]: heaven itself seems not too high, for he measures it in his clever thinking as if it were nearby. No misty air dims the concentration of his thought; no thick earth obstructs his work; no abysmal deep of water blocks his lofty view. He is everything, and he is everywhere”. Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 70. Latin text: “omnia illi licent: non caelum uidetur altissimus; quasi e proximo enim animi sagacitate metitur. Intentionem animi eius nulla aeris caligo confundit; non densitas terrae operam eius inedit; non aquae altitudo profunda despectum eius obtundit. omnia idem est et ubique idem est”. *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 300.

<sup>259</sup> “Dee saw the alchemical enterprise as a task for an alchemist / ‘hero’ who understands the supercelestial virtues”. Federico Cavallaro, “The Alchemical Significance of John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*”, in Stephen Clucas (ed.), *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies*, cit., p. 159.

would be portrayed by Ben Jonson in *The Alchemist* (1610) that Dee decided to coin new definitions for his own kind of alchemy: “voarchadumia”, “mechanical magic”, or “Real Cabala”<sup>260</sup>. Dee’s engagement with alchemy and natural magic was accompanied by a close study of mathematics, which he saw as a key subject that could connect man with divine knowledge. French defines Dee’s compounded discipline “mathesis”<sup>261</sup>, since its objective was the exploration of the mystical aspects of number with the aim to seize the secret correspondences between the microcosm and the macrocosm. *Monas Hieroglyphica*, a complex and often obscure work where mathematics, alchemy, and natural magic are deeply intertwined, epitomises a higher level in the study of alchemical practices<sup>262</sup>: the *opus alchymicum* is not only perceived as a series of practical experimentations on matter, but, rather, as a theoretical procedure that, if understood correctly, could lead to a full re-integration with the divine<sup>263</sup>.

In addition to the constant requests from the queen to employ his outstanding astrological knowledge to advise her on personal and political issues, Dee’s skills were equally praised by other members of the court. As a matter of fact, the names of two other courtiers appear in Dee’s memories among those who constantly consulted him on various matters: Sir Francis Walsingham and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Philip Sidney’s uncle<sup>264</sup>. French insists a good deal on the connections between Dee and the so-called ‘Sidney circle’, arguing that Dee often corresponded with Henry and Mary Sidney, parents of the celebrated Elizabethan poet and courtier<sup>265</sup>. It is generally acknowledged that John Dee taught alchemy, or ‘chymistry’, to the poet Philip Sidney who, as the physician Thomas Moffet reports, “with his eye passing to and fro through all nature”, was fascinated by “that starry science, rival to nature”<sup>266</sup>. Sidney shared his alchemical lectures with the

---

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., p. 215.

<sup>262</sup> Brian Vickers defines John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica* as “possibly the most obscure work ever written by an Englishman”. Brian Vickers, “Frances Yates and the Writing of History”, *Journal of Modern History*, 51 (1979), p. 308. On the early reception of John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*, see Peter J. Forshaw, “The Early Alchemical Reception of John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*”, *Ambix*, vol. 52, n. 3, November 2005, pp. 247-69.

<sup>263</sup> “It is worth noting that Dee deals with general principles, and does not give concrete details of the process, which would seem to indicate that his knowledge was more speculative and theoretical than derived from laboratory practice”. Federico Cavallaro, “The Alchemical Significance of John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*”, in Stephen Clucas (ed.), *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies*, cit., p. 165.

<sup>264</sup> John Dee refers to Walsingham and Leicester in, Id., *The Private Diary*, cit., p. 5. According to French, who further discusses about the relationship between John Dee, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the so-called ‘Sidney circle’, it was especially on navigational matters that Sir Francis Walsingham consulted Dr. Dee. Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., pp. 86-7 and pp. 176-213.

<sup>265</sup> Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., p. 177.

<sup>266</sup> Thomas Moffett, *Nobilis or a View of the Life and Death of a Sidney and Lessus Lugubris*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1940, p. 75. As Nicholl observes: “Dee had long been associated with Sidney’s family, and probably began tutoring Sidney in alchemy and related magical pursuits in the early 1570s”. Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 15.

fellow poet Sir Edward Dyer (1543-1607), who was also renowned for his peculiar devotion to natural sciences<sup>267</sup>. Another pupil of Dee's belonging to the Sidney family might have been the highly cultivated Mary, the celebrated sister of Philip Sidney. It is not certain whether Mary, like her brother, was instructed directly by Dee; what is certain is that she was indeed well trained in 'chymistry'<sup>268</sup>, which she possibly studied with Adrian Gilbert, a close collaborator of Dee and brother of the more famous scientist William Gilbert<sup>269</sup>, whose *De Magnete*, as noticed by Roy Strong, is usually praised as "the first wholly English scientific treatise"<sup>270</sup>. As might be expected, a basic knowledge of chemistry, alchemy, and practical medicine was required from all educated women<sup>271</sup>, but Mary Sidney's interest in the field seemed to have gone beyond mere necessity. Scholars have noted that, besides her medical and 'chymical' skills and a peculiar passion for embryology, Mary Sidney was concerned with the way to achieve the much yearned-for philosopher's stone<sup>272</sup>. Furthermore, the fact that William Herbert, the son of Mary Sidney, eventually joined Dee regularly at Mortlake<sup>273</sup>, is particularly telling about the close relationship that linked Dee's Hermetic interests and the Sidney family. The bonding between William Herbert and John Dee was so tight that the latter reported in his diary how his son, Arthur, spent most of his time playing with Mary, Herbert's daughter<sup>274</sup>. Among the courtiers whose names appear in the list of the guests Dee received at Mortlake

<sup>267</sup> See Steven W. May, "Dyer, Sir Edward", in H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, in association with the British Academy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, vol. 17, pp. 475-6. Hereafter referred to as ODNB followed by the volume and the page number.

<sup>268</sup> As remarked by Principe, the term 'chymistry' denotes "*the sum total of alchemical/chemical topics as understood in the seventeenth century*". Lawrence M. Principe, *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and his Alchemical Quest*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>269</sup> "what can we know for certain about Mary Sidney's interest in chemistry and medicine? She is said to have enjoyed the company of physicians and scientists, to have worked in her own laboratory with professional chemists, to have developed medicines, to have raised silkworms, to have been interested in the philosopher's stone". Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (eds.), *Women, Science, and Medicine 1500-1700. Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, Sutton Publishing, Phoenix Mill, Stroud, 1997, p. 114. On Mary Sidney's relationship with chemistry and alchemy, see also Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., p. 179ff.

<sup>270</sup> Roy Strong, *Henry Prince of Wales and England's Lost Renaissance*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1986, p. 218.

<sup>271</sup> On the relationship between women and 'occult knowledge' in early modern England, see Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013. See also a recent study that retraces the connections between women and the world of early modern scientific culture, with a particular focus on Italy: Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy. Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015.

<sup>272</sup> Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (eds.), *Women, Science, and Medicine*, cit., pp. 113-4. According to Abraham, "after the marriage, she [Mary Sidney] went to live at Wilton, where she had an alchemical laboratory to do experiments". Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, Scholar Press, Aldershot, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>273</sup> "Sir William Herbert cam to Mortlak", 1581. John Dee, *The Private Diary*, cit., pp. 10 and 13.

<sup>274</sup> "Arthur Dee and Mary Herbert, they being but 3 yere old the eldest, did make as it wer a shew of childish marriage, of calling ech other husband and wife". John Dee, *The Private Diary*, cit., p. 14.

are also “Mr. Bacon and Mr. Phillips of the court”<sup>275</sup>. Even though there are no clear details on the precise identity of “Mr. Bacon”, he was possibly Nicholas Bacon, father of Francis Bacon<sup>276</sup>. All these accounts demonstrate that Dee was a joining link between the Elizabethan court and the world of Renaissance Hermetic philosophy and alchemy. In particular, the close alliance that existed between the queen and her astrologer is a clear sign of the former’s support for Hermeticism in all its facets, even though, as will be considered below, the monarch was not always ready to publicly declare her opinions regarding the world of ‘occult philosophy’.

Besides the queen herself, other members of the court were concerned with alchemy in several ways: among others, William Cecil often acted as an intermediary between Elizabeth and the numerous alchemical practitioners who appealed to her. One of Cecil’s duties as secretary of state was to evaluate natural science projects and decide which of them could have been profitable for the Crown<sup>277</sup>. Serving as a sort of negotiator, Cecil also supervised the relationship between the potentially ‘dangerous’ art of alchemy and the monarchy<sup>278</sup>. As a consequence of his close connection with alchemists addressing the queen, Cecil owned a rich collection of alchemical writings, among which were the treatises by the praised medieval alchemist George Ripley<sup>279</sup>. Thomas Charnock himself delivered a copy of his *Breviary of Naturall Philosophy*<sup>280</sup>, dedicated to the queen, to Cecil. As Archer observes, some of the alchemical manuscripts and books that were intended to be for Elizabeth might never really have come to her attention<sup>281</sup>. A case in point is represented by Charnock’s *Booke dedicated vnto the queenes maiestie*, that, as the author himself suggests, was first given to Cecil but possibly never reached its true addressee, i.e. the queen:

In the yere off our Lorde god 1566. I dyd dedicate a booke off philosophie to Queen Elizabeth and delivered him to hir cheiffe Secrettaire name secretarye Sicyll: / but because the Quene and his counsel had set goone a work in Somerset place in London before I came and had wrought there by the space off one yere therefore my booke was layde a syde ffor a tyme: // and was put in the Queenes librarie<sup>282</sup>.

---

<sup>275</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>276</sup> See Peter French, *John Dee*, cit., p. 87.

<sup>277</sup> Deborah E. Harkness, “‘Strange’ Ideas and ‘English’ Knowledge”, cit., p. 142.

<sup>278</sup> On the role of William Cecil as intermediary between alchemists and Queen Elizabeth, see Jayne Elizabeth Archer, “*Rudenesse itselpe she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia”, cit., p. 55.

<sup>279</sup> Jonathan Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England. Plantagenet Kings and the Search for the Philosopher’s Stone*, Continuum, New York, 2012, p. 5.

<sup>280</sup> Thomas Charnock, *Breviary of Naturall Philosophy*, TCB 291-304.

<sup>281</sup> Jayne Elizabeth Archer, “*Rudenesse itselpe she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia”, cit., p. 55.

<sup>282</sup> Charnock’s text is quoted by Allan Pritchard, “Thomas Charnock’s Book Dedicated to Queen Elizabeth”, *Ambix*, vol. 26, Part 1, March 1979, p. 56.

Pritchard actually testifies that “his [Charnock’s] manuscript must have remained among the papers of ‘secretarye Sicyll’”<sup>283</sup>. A proof of the central role performed by Cecil in overseeing the negotiations with alchemists is provided by the case of Humfrey Lock. Lock presented an alchemical treatise to Cecil hoping to obtain royal support for his return to England from Russia<sup>284</sup>, where he was working as an alchemist at the service of the Tsar Ivan Vassilivitch. The treatise seemed to have had an immediate resonance among figures such as Simon Forman, John Dee, his son Arthur, and Elias Ashmole, who owned several copies of it<sup>285</sup>. In the dedicatory poem that precedes the text, Lock explicitly asks Cecil’s help to return to England, with the promise to disclose the secrets of nature to his native country:

Then shall I with a joyfull heart  
assay to bring to passe  
the pleasant things by nature hidd,  
within the globeous masse,  
[...]  
My good Lord, therefore, your Lordshippes helpe  
most humblie I {doe} craue  
and thuse allwayes I praye the Lorde  
your Honnor euer saue.  
(ll. 190-3 – 207-10)<sup>286</sup>.

In another letter, this time addressed to Robert Dudley, Lock overtly pleads his addressee and William Cecil (Lord Burghley) to act as mediators with the queen and facilitate his return to England:

I shall moste humblye  
beseche your good Lordshipp and my good Lorde of Burgley  
to be medyatores vnto the Quenes Maiestie ffor her gracious  
lettre vnto the Emperrores Maiestie ffor my delyverye<sup>287</sup>.

The English State Papers of the British Library testify to the intense alchemical activity sustained more or less directly by the Crown. Among the names appearing in the numerous letters to the queen, that of the Dutch Cornelius de Alneto is the most recurrent. Being the official alchemist employed by Queen Elizabeth, Alneto, also known as Lannoy,

---

<sup>283</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>284</sup> See Peter J. Grund, Introduction to Humfrey Lock, “*Mysticall Wordes and Names Infinite*”: an Edition and Study of Humfrey Lock’s *Treatise on Alchemy*, edited by Peter J. Grund, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, 2011, p. xi.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xii.

<sup>286</sup> Humfrey Lock, “Dedication”, in Id., “*Mysticall Wordes and Names Infinite*”, cit., p. 129.

<sup>287</sup> Humfrey Lock, “Letter from Humfrey Lock to Robert Dudley”, 19 May 1572, ll. 147-59, *Ibidem*, p. 240.

promised Her Majesty that he would create the philosopher's stone and produce a certain amount of gold for the state<sup>288</sup>. Alneto, however, was never able to obtain the alchemical elixir nor the gold promised, as demonstrated by his large correspondence with Cecil, and Armigil Wade, the agent supervising the alchemist's activity at Somerset House<sup>289</sup>. Alneto gradually lost the queen's favour when he continuously delayed the fulfilling of his commitment to provide her with "a certain medicine for converting base metals into gold"<sup>290</sup>. However, the main reason for his confinement in the Tower of London was of political nature: Alneto's regular contacts with the Princess of Sweden Cecilia, sister of King Eric XIV, were disapproved by Her Majesty. In one of the letters in the 'Cecil Papers' it is reported that the princess "Understands from her chaplain, Dr. Olaf, that the Queen is displeased at her holding such frequent counsel with him (de Alneto), but cares little for that"<sup>291</sup>. Alneto allegedly made a bond with Cecilia of Sweden promising her a sum of money of ten thousand pounds sterling that she was compelled to return in twelve years by yearly instalments<sup>292</sup>. Besides being a "threat to national security"<sup>293</sup>, the queen conceived of this alliance between the two as a further impediment to Alneto's alchemical work and, therefore, forbade him to have any relationship with the princess or any of her suitors. Notwithstanding the royal interdiction, Alneto continued to secretly correspond with Cecilia of Sweden, with whom he was thought to be planning to leave England to go to the Netherlands and, therefore, he was destined to remain confined in the Tower<sup>294</sup>.

Like Alneto, Giovanni Baptista Agnello was a foreign alchemist working in London and protected by the queen. The Venetian Agnello, also known as 'Lambi', is usually mentioned for his translation and commentary of a work on spiritual alchemy entitled *A*

---

<sup>288</sup> See "Memorial of Cornelius de Alneto, alias Lannoy, to the Queen. Offering to produce for Her Highness's use 50,000 marks of pure gold yearly, on certain conditions" (Elizabeth Vol. XXXVI. 12. [Feb 7<sup>th</sup> 1565]). See the State Papers 1509-1714 Complete Collection at the following website: <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/state-papers-online-15091714.aspx>.

<sup>289</sup> The 'Cecil Papers' are available on the website British History online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-cecil-papers/vol1/pp324-342>.

<sup>290</sup> "Directions [by Cornelius de Lannoy] for employing a certain medicine for converting base metals into gold". (Elizabeth Vol. XIII. 23 [July? 1566] 23. 1).

<sup>291</sup> 1565/6, Jan. 20., 1073.

<sup>292</sup> "Bond between Cornelius de Alneto alias 'deLannoy' and the Princess Cecilia of Sweden, by which the former pledges himself to lend to the latter on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of May 1566 the sum of ten thousand pounds sterling, which the Princess on her part covenants to repay in twelve years by yearly instalments of one thousand pounds, and also to pay the said Cornelius for the trouble he has taken a further sum of 300 /. sterling" (1565/6, Jan. 20). It is not clear whether Alneto expected to produce these sums of money from transmutation.

<sup>293</sup> Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "*Rudenesse itselpe she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia", cit., p. 55.

<sup>294</sup> "States at length his reasons for suspecting that Cornelius de Alneto is about to leave the country, and suggests various grounds on which he might be justly detained, such as his failing to perform his promises to Her Majesty within the given time, &c." 1565/6, March 23. 1104 Armigil Wade to Sir W. Cecil.

*Revelation of the Secret Spirit* (1623). Agnello was also associated with the case of the explorer Martin Frobisher, who, advised by John Dee himself on navigation matters, was said to have brought from the New World a “small black stone” that, once placed in the fire, immediately turned into gold<sup>295</sup>. Despite the scepticism of a few alchemists about the real value of the mineral and the possibility that it could be transmuted, the queen was convinced of the quality of Frobisher’s ore after consulting her trustworthy Giovanni Agnello, who purportedly produced a certain amount of gold from it.

Another figure that embodied the Elizabethan fascination for Hermeticism is the courtier, explorer, and poet Sir Walter Raleigh (1554-1618), half-brother of the already mentioned Adrian Gilbert. During the years he spent as a prisoner in the Tower of London under accusation of treason, Raleigh dedicated himself to the practice of alchemy in the hen-house that he turned into a well-equipped still-room<sup>296</sup>. Considering his career as a sailor and his life-long obsession to find the city of ‘gold’ famously known as El Dorado, possibly located in Guyana, one can assume that the alchemical, illusory, quest for the philosopher’s stone interweaves with Raleigh’s life in several ways. Alchemists constantly repeat that their art is both a laboratory practice and a philosophical system. In Raleigh’s *History of the World* alchemy is actually conceived of as a complex system of knowledge that could be assimilated to religion and politics. In the following excerpt, Raleigh employs alchemical imagery to argue that the true word of God can be found in all existing elements, exactly as an alchemist is able to detect both a helpful medicine and poison out of all plants:

As a skilful and learned Chymist can as well by separation of visible elements draw helpful medicines out of poison, as poison out of the most helpful herbs and plants (all things having in themselves both life and death) so contrary to the purposes of and hopes of the heathen, may those which seek after God and Truth find out everywhere<sup>297</sup>.

Alchemical and Hermetic conceptions actually permeate Raleigh’s *History of the World*, of which some passages are highly evocative of the treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and of *Asclepius*. In praising Hermes Trismegistus as the initiator of that group of wise men belonging to the *prisca sapientia*, who had predated the coming of Christ, Raleigh clearly emerges as a representative of the devotion to Hermeticism that had characterised the reign

---

<sup>295</sup> Deborah H. Harkness, “‘Strange’ Ideas and ‘English’ Knowledge”, cit., pp. 152 ff.

<sup>296</sup> See P. M. Rattansi, “Alchemy and Natural Magic in Raleigh’s *History of the World*”, *Ambix*, n. 3, October 1966, vol. XIII, p. 122. See also Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 17: “As the new Lieutenant reported in 1605, ‘in the Garden he hath converted a little Hen-house to a still hous, where he doth spend his time all the day in his distillations’”.

<sup>297</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*, Book I, part i, Chapter 7, quoted in P. M. Rattansi, “Alchemy and Natural Magic in Raleigh’s *History of the World*”, cit., pp. 122-3.

of Elizabeth:

And this certain, that if we look into the wisdom of all ages, wee shall finde that there never was a man of said understanding or excellent judgement: never any man whose minde that art of education hath not bended; whose eyes a foolish superstition hath not afterward blinded; whose apprehensions are sober, and by pensive inspection advised; but that he hath found by an unresistable necessitie, one true God [...]; which no man among the Heathen hath with more reverence acknowledged or more learnedly exprest, than that Aegyptian Hermes<sup>298</sup>.

Raleigh's *History of the world*, first published in 1614, was initially dedicated to James I, seemingly adverse to Hermetic philosophy. Perhaps, while imprisoned in the Tower, Raleigh's alchemical experimentations mirrored his dream to recover the 'golden age' of Elizabeth's reign, the phoenix-like queen who, like the alchemical stone, 'gilded' all her subjects. It is usually assumed that the ends of Raleigh's and Dee's careers during the reign of the new Stuart monarch testify to the king's opposition to alchemy and Hermeticism. However, as will be discussed, if it is beyond doubt that James deprecated black, demonic magic, and witchcraft, his opinion of natural philosophy and alchemy was much more complex and less definite.

An account of the most renowned Elizabethan alchemists cannot avoid quoting Simon Forman (1552-1611), a physician and astrologer mostly celebrated for the *The Booke of Plaies and Notes thereof per formans for Common Policie* where he reported several, invaluable, details on some of Shakespeare's performances, such as *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*. Another reason why Forman should have a prominent role in the field of Elizabethan studies is provided by the numerous alchemical treatises which he wrote and translated, thus offering scholars the possibility to dive even more deeply into the Renaissance alchemical world-view. Even though he did not seem to have had any direct contacts with the queen, Forman's reputation as a physician, astrologer, and alchemist was well known. The only indirect reference to Queen Elizabeth in Forman's diary dates from 26 September 1595, when he received a visit from the court physician: "that morning I drempt [...] of my philosophical pouder which I was distilling of; and that dai cam Mr. Rocks, the Quen's phision, to me to be acquainted with me"<sup>299</sup>. As it is reported in his personal journal, Forman began to commit himself to the practice of alchemy in 1587: "The 11. of May I began to distill many waters. [...] The 22. of Decemb. [...] I practised magik, and had moch strife with divers that I had in suetes of lawe, but I

---

<sup>298</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*, Walter Burne, London, 1614, Book II, ch. 6, s. 7, p. 96.

<sup>299</sup> Simon Forman, *The Autobiography and Personal Diary of Dr. Simon Forman, the Celebrated Astrologer, From A.D. 1552, to A.D. 1602*, edited by James Orchard Halliwell, From the Unpublished Manuscripts in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, edited by James Orchard Halliwell, London, 1849, p. 26.

thrived reasonable well, yet I lost moch”<sup>300</sup>. At a later time, in the 1590s, his alchemical experiments gradually became much more significant<sup>301</sup>, and his concrete attempt to create the stone finally occurred: “This yere [1595] in Lente I began the philosopher’s stone, and before mad my furnys and all for yt, as in my other bock yt aperes”<sup>302</sup>. Even though Forman is not usually mentioned in recent scholarship except for his accounts of a number of Shakespearean plays he saw at the Globe theatre, in his time he had a reputation as a skilful physician and, surprisingly, among his clients were both “the powerful and the poor, countesses and commoners”<sup>303</sup>. Forman was also praised for his astrological abilities, as he himself states in his diary: “This yere I did profecie the truth of many thinges which afterwarde cam to passe, and the very sprites wer subecte unto me; what I spake was done. And I had great name”<sup>304</sup>. In addition to alchemy, astrology, and magic, Forman also engaged himself with necromancy<sup>305</sup>, which is possibly why his reputation has long remained negative and dubious. He was very likely one of the targets of Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, along with John Dee and Henry Cornelius Agrippa<sup>306</sup>. Unfortunately for the history of Elizabethan alchemy, almost all of Forman’s alchemical manuscripts are still unpublished; however, his work is outstanding if considering that he translated a substantial number of alchemical treatises written by others<sup>307</sup>, such as the already mentioned text by the alchemist Humfrey Lock<sup>308</sup>, thus amply contributing to preserve a large quantity of texts.

The name of Edward Kelly (1555-1597/8), like Simon Forman’s, is highly significant as far as the role of Hermeticism in Renaissance England is concerned. Kelly is usually mentioned in relation to John Dee, since the two started to hold séances together. However, angel magic was not the only interest that linked the two: as a matter of fact,

---

<sup>300</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23: “I first begane to practise the philosopher’s stone”.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>303</sup> Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry*, p. 51. See also Lauren Kassell, “Forman, Simon”, ODNB 20: 374: “By 1595, despite periodic imprisonment, Forman’s astrological medical practice was thriving. He was consulted more than 8000 times between March 1596 and 1603”.

<sup>304</sup> Simon Forman, *The Autobiography and Personal Diary*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>305</sup> “This yere I began to practise necromancy and to calle aungells and spirits”. *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>306</sup> According to the scholar John Read, the audience of Jonson’s *The Alchemist* had a first-hand knowledge of such notorious practitioners in magic and pseudo-alchemy as Dr. John Dee and Simon Forman”. John Read, *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1947, p. 40.

<sup>307</sup> See Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry*, cit., pp. 49-70. Schuler has edited some of Forman’s previously unpublished manuscripts, such as *Of the Division of the Chaos* and *Compositor huius Libri ad Lectorem, 1597*. Forman’s numerous alchemical papers are mainly collected among the Ashmolean manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, in Oxford, and some of his works are also at the British Library, in London. As Schuler remarks, “a systematic study of his numerous alchemical papers [...] is a major project awaiting an undertaker”. Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry*, cit., p. 53.

<sup>308</sup> For further details on Forman’s copy of Lock’s manuscript, see Humfrey Lock, “*Mysticall Wordes and Names Infinite*”, cit., pp. 20-3.

Kelly was said to be Dee's "Intimate *Friend*", and "long *Companion* in *Philosophicall Studies*, and *Chemicall Experiments*"<sup>309</sup>. Furthermore, as a "continuall *Searcher*, in the abstruse and difficult *Secrets of Philosophy and Chemistry*"<sup>310</sup>, Kelly unveiled the secrets of the art to Dee, as reported in the latter's diary: "May 10<sup>th</sup> [1588], E. K. did open the great secret to me, God be thanked!"<sup>311</sup>. Travelling first to Poland, thanks to the nobleman Albrecht Laski, in 1584 Kelly and Dee reached Prague<sup>312</sup>, where they were welcomed by the emperor Rudolf II, a well-known supporter of Hermetic and alchemical research. Several alchemical treatises and manuscripts by Edward Kelly, mainly dedicated to Rudolf II, are still extant, demonstrating that he highly contributed to the history of sixteenth-century alchemy. While Dee and Kelly were in Bohemia, there seems to have been a rich correspondence between them and Queen Elizabeth, who urged the two to come back to England and whom they constantly informed of their activities<sup>313</sup>. The queen's concern with the alchemical practices carried on by Kelly and Dee in Bohemia is further attested by the fact that the former of the two sent to Elizabeth a piece of metal he managed to transmute from some copper<sup>314</sup>. The queen herself seems to have acted in favour of Kelly, in the attempt to convince him to return to England, when he was accused by the emperor of crime against a nobleman. However, if Dee finally resolved to return to his native land, Kelly, whose reputation as alchemist steadily increased, did not manage to flee to England and died in an attempt to escape from his imprisonment in Bohemia<sup>315</sup>.

The cases of Kelly and Alneto are evidence of the fact that, despite the great enchantment alchemy exercised on the Elizabethan court and, on a wider perspective, on European sovereigns, the relationship between alchemists and official power was not

---

<sup>309</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses, Upon Some part of the preceding Worke*, TCB 478.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 479.

<sup>311</sup> John Dee, *The Private Diary*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>312</sup> R. Julian Roberts, "Dee, John", ODNB 15: 672. Dee recounts the first encounter with Laski in his diary: "June 15<sup>th</sup> [1583], about 5 of the clock cam the Polonian Prince Lord Albert Lasky down from Bissham [...]. He had in his company Lord Russell, Sir Philip Sidney, and other gentlemen: he was rowed by the Queene's men, he had the barge covered with the Queene's cloth, the Queene's trumpeters [...]. He cam of purpose to do me honor, for which God be praised!". John Dee, *The Private Diary*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>313</sup> "Things were not carried here so privately, but *Queene Elizabeth* had notice given her of their *Actions*, whereupon she used severall meanes by *Letters* and *Messages* to invite them back into England". Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 482.

<sup>314</sup> "Sir *Edward Kelly* make *Projection*, and in particular upon a piece of *Metall* cut out of a *Warming pan*, and without *Sir Edwards* touching or handling it, or melting the *Metall* (onely warming it in the *Fire*) the *Elixir* being put thereon, it was *Transmuted* into pure *Silver*: the *Warming pan* and this piece of it, was sent to *Queen Elizabeth* by her *Embassador* who then lay at *Prague*". Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 481. For further details on the piece of transmuted copper sent by Kelley to the queen, see also C. A. Burland, *The Arts of the Alchemists*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1967, p. 92.

<sup>315</sup> Louise Schleiner, "Kelley, Edward", ODNB 31: 102. On the exchange of letters between Queen Elizabeth, John Dee, and Edward Kelly, see also Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 482: "severall *Letters* past between *Queene Elizabeth* and *Doctor Dee*, whereby perhaps he might promise to returne; At length it so fell out, that he left *Trebona* and took his *Journey for England*".

always straightforward. Even though Alneto's and Kelly's imprisonments were mostly due to political reasons, they testify to the twofold conception of alchemy, as both a honourable and dangerous art. Alchemists actually promised what they could not give since the transmutation of base metals into large amounts of gold always turned out to be a delusion. It is interesting to point out that one of the possible, unofficial, reasons lying behind Edward Kelly's incarceration was the emperor's fear that his alchemist would reveal the secrets of alchemical art: "Sir Edward was clapt up close Prisoner by the Emperour (for he had so unwarily and openly managed the Secret, that it had given the Emperour occasion to carry a strict Eye over all his Actions, out of a desire to be sharer)"<sup>316</sup>. Nicholl has defined Elizabeth's connection with alchemy and Hermeticism "definite" and "covert" at the same time<sup>317</sup>. Even the custom to use intermediaries such as William Cecil and Francis Walsingham belonged to the queen's strategy of elusiveness. Her Majesty was notoriously unpredictable, constantly prone to employing "delaying tactics", thus making it impossible for her councillors to delve into the queen's thoughts<sup>318</sup>. In alchemical matters, avoiding any direct, 'official' contact with alchemists allowed Elizabeth to protect herself from any sort of accusations. It could be argued that the queen's reticence to directly deal with alchemists who wrote to her makes her a symbolical representative of alchemical art itself: "Our Water is a most pure virgin, and is loved of many, but meets all her wooers in foul garments, in order that she may be able to distinguish the worthy from the unworthy"<sup>319</sup>. As alchemy was perceived by its adepts as ambiguous, because deluding them with the dream of gold, so Queen Elizabeth chose to remain elusive and most of the times unattainable<sup>320</sup>.

---

<sup>316</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 483.

<sup>317</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>318</sup> Tracy Borman, *Elizabeth's Women. The Hidden Story of the Virgin Queen*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2009 cit., pp. 334-5.

<sup>319</sup> Eirenaeus Philalethes, *The Three Treatises of Philalethes*, in *The Hermetic Museum. Restored and Enlarged: Most Faithfully Instructing all disciples of the Sopho-Spagyric Art How that Greatest and Truest Medicine of the Philosopher's Stone May Be Found and Held, Now First Done into English from the Latin Original Published at Frankfort in the year 1678*, Translated by Arthur Edward Waite, Containing Twenty-Two Most Celebrated Chemical Tracts, J. Elliot and Co., London, 1893, p. 315. Hereafter, all quotations from this volume will be marked as HM followed by the page number. Latin text: "virgo mundissima, et a multis amator, omnibus vero suis procis vestibis sordidissimis induta fit obviam, ut hoc modo Philosophos a stultis possit distinguere". *Philalethae Tractatus Tres*, in *Musaeum Hermeticum, Reformatum et Amplificatum*, Hermannum à Sande, Francofurti, 1678, p. 801. All quotations from this collection will be marked as MH followed by the page number. The treatise *The New Chemical Light (Novum Lumen Chemicum)* was published in Prague in 1604. As pointed out by Nicholl, "Sendivogius [...] is typical of the alchemist flourishing in these first years of the seventeenth century, and he was highly esteemed by such powerful enthusiasts as Rudolf II". Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>320</sup> See Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "Rudeness itself she doth refine. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia", cit., pp. 46-50.

### 3.2. Queen Elizabeth as a Symbol of Alchemical Art

The queen's deep, personal, involvement in alchemical practices has been recently documented by Tracy Borman, the curator of the Historic Royal Palaces in London. In her recent book *The Private Lives of the Tudors*, Borman also focuses on Elizabeth's attitude towards the much desired and, at the same time, feared art of alchemy. The scholar argues that the monarch was "obsessed" by it, which would explain her attempts to conceal or, at least, disguise her keen interest in the field: "Elizabeth became so obsessed with this art that she had a suite of private rooms at Hampton Court Palace filled with alchemical equipment"<sup>321</sup>. Elizabeth used to practise alchemy with Dee in her private laboratories at Hampton Court, where King Henry VIII's still-rooms used to be<sup>322</sup>. It was in these still-houses that Richard Eden, the alchemist officially hired by Henry VIII, used to conduct his alchemical experiments for which he earned a yearly salary<sup>323</sup>.

Queen Elizabeth's fascination for the world of alchemy sprang from several causes: the necessity to fill the state's coffers with gold was not the main cause of her support of alchemical research. Borman highlights that the queen was deeply troubled by the passing of time and by every sign of age, to the extent that she undertook a real "quest for eternal youth"<sup>324</sup>. In this respect, it should be recalled that the alchemical 'elixir' was allegedly a medicine that could not only transmute metals into gold but also dispel all diseases and confer longevity and even eternal life<sup>325</sup>. According to alchemists, the elixir grants eternal youth by taking away "Wrinkles of the face, every litura or spot, [and] gray haire"<sup>326</sup>.

---

<sup>321</sup> Tracy Borman, *The Private Lives of the Tudors. Uncovering the Secrets of Britain's Greatest Dynasty*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2016, p. 314. Tracy Borman discussed the relationship between Queen Elizabeth, John Dee, and alchemy during a lecture she delivered at the conference 'In the Light of Gloriana' held on November 18-21 2016 at the Tower of London and organised by the Gloriana Society. As a proof of the role played by alchemy and Hermeticism in the field of Elizabethan studies, a whole panel of the conference was devoted to the role of alchemy in early modern England.

<sup>322</sup> See Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "*Rudenesse itselfe she doth refine. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia*", cit., p. 52.

<sup>323</sup> As Archer points out, Henry VIII "was known to have made experiments in distillation in an attempt to find some relief for his various ailments, and thus received dedications in works by the English alchemist William Blomfield [Blomefield]". Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "*Rudenesse itselfe she doth refine. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia*", cit., p. 53. Richard Eden had a reputation as a chemist and alchemist: "[he] was offered the position of distiller of waters in the royal household [...] Manuscript evidence suggests that he was also becoming interested in alchemy [...] In the late 1540s and early 1550s Eden was employed by Richard Whallay, a prominent Nottinghamshire gentleman who held public office [...] to work in a laboratory searching for the secret of turning base metal into gold". Andrew Hadfield, "Eden, Richard", ODNB 17: 686.

<sup>324</sup> Tracy Borman, *The Private Lives of the Tudors*, cit., p. 314.

<sup>325</sup> See 'red elixir', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 165: "the universal panacea or miraculous medicine, synonymous with the philosopher's stone, which can transmute all base metal into pure gold, cure all disease, confer longevity, and resurrect the dead to eternal life".

<sup>326</sup> Anon., *Zoroaster's Cave, Or The Philosopher's Intellectuall Echo to One Another from their Cells*, Printed for Matthew Smelt, London, 1667, quoted by Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 145.

Alchemical writers constantly list the possibility to prolong youth among the manifold virtues of the philosopher's stone: "The old it [the elixir] maketh young [...] And if old folke vse this fire in a moderate quantity, and joyne thereto the water of gold, it remoueth the infirmity of age"<sup>327</sup>. It is, therefore, not surprising that one of the Classical myths recurring in alchemical literature as an allegory of transmutation is precisely the story of Aeson<sup>328</sup>. The myth recounts that old Aeson, Jason's father, pleads Medea to rejuvenate him. In the alchemical vision by the fourteenth-century alchemist John Dastin, this myth is clearly mentioned as a metaphor for the *opus alchymicum*:

Old Aeson was made young by Medea,  
With her drinks and with her potions,  
Soe must your Brother of pure *Volunta*  
Dye and be young through his operation<sup>329</sup>.

The mythical story of Aeson recurs also in the Seventh Parable of Trismosin's *Splendor solis*: "OVID the old Roman, wrote to the same end, when he mentioned an ancient Sage who desired to rejuvenate himself"<sup>330</sup>. The plate accompanying the text actually shows an old man immersed in a cleansing bath as an allegory of the alchemical process of renewal (see plate 37). Drawing on one of the most renowned commonplaces of alchemical literature, Ben Jonson satirises the "perpetuity of beauty" promised by the philosopher's stone in the masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (1616). The powers of the stone are so immense, the playwright ironically suggests, that it would even turn "a grave matron" into "a young virgin":

marry, above here, perpetuity of beauty (do you hear, ladies?), health, riches, honours, a matter of immortality is nothing. They [alchemists] will calcine you a grave matron – as it might be a mother o' the maids – and spring up a young virgin out of her ashes as fresh as a phoenix<sup>331</sup>.

Jonson is especially ironic about the fascination alchemy exercises on women: when Mercury, intended as both the god and the substance, denounces the abuses perpetrated on

<sup>327</sup> Giovanni Baptista Agnello, *The Revelation of the Secret Spirit*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>328</sup> See 'Aeson' in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 4. The myth is recounted in Book VII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. See Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, edited by Richard J. Tarrant, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004. pp. 180-214.

<sup>329</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin's Dreame*, TCB 264.

<sup>330</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, Including 22 Allegorical Pictures Reproduced from the Original Paintings in the Unique Manuscript on Vellum, dated 1582, in the British Museum, With Introduction, Elucidation of the Paintings, aiding the Interpretation of their Occult Meaning, Trismosin's Autobiographical Account of his Travels in Search of the Philosopher's Stone, A Summary of his Alchemical Process Called 'The Red Lion', and Explanatory Notes by J. K., Kegan Paul, Trench, Rubner & Co., London, 1920, p. 33.

<sup>331</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 69-73, p. 437.

him by alchemists, he asks the ladies present at court for help: “One tender-hearted creature or other, save Mercury and free him! Ne’er an old gentlewoman i’the house that has a wrinkle about her to hide me in?”<sup>332</sup>.

Elias Ashmole himself employs the same concept of old age renewed as a metaphor to describe his endeavour to create the first anthology of alchemical writings in English, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652). Arranging these texts in a new collection, he made these ‘old’ philosophers ‘young’ again, somehow ‘transmuting’ them:

(as if having the Elixir it selfe) I have made Old Age become Young and Lively, by restoring each of the Ancient Writers not only to the Spring of their severall Beauties, but to the Summer of their Strength and Perfection<sup>333</sup>.

In the light of the belief that the philosopher’s stone is also an elixir of youth, it is very likely that when Alneto promised Her Majesty to create for her “that wonderful elixir for making gold”<sup>334</sup>, she might have conceived of it also as a panacea able to “bestow youth, longevity and wisdom”<sup>335</sup>. The alchemist Thomas Charnock, in his “Booke dedicated vnto the queenes maiestie”, promised her both the “wealth and *health*” (italics mine) of the alchemical stone<sup>336</sup>. Furthermore, the myth of eternal youth linked to alchemical practices well suited the queen’s motto *semper eadem*, “always the same”, that appears on her coat of arms and accompanied her imagery as a goddess on earth throughout her reign. The maxim *semper eadem*, in its turn, can be juxtaposed to the alchemical cycle known as *solve et coagula*, or *rota alchemica*, i.e. the never-ending and, therefore, eternal process of the *opus alchymicum*, constantly going back to the beginning and starting anew, as a phoenix perpetually renews itself from its ashes. In the light of her god-like status, Elizabeth was specifically associated with Astraea, the goddess of justice, with Gloriana, and with the moon-related divinities Diana and Cynthia<sup>337</sup>. The numerous portraits of the queen, always displaying her in a resplendent and magnificent guise, also contributed to highlight her seemingly timeless beauty, an outer symbol of the glory of her “Godly, quiett

---

<sup>332</sup> *Ibidem*, ll. 23-25, p. 434.

<sup>333</sup> Elias Ashmole, “Prolegomena”, TCB sig. B3v.

<sup>334</sup> “Declaration, by Cornelius de Lannoy, that if it please the Queen to release him from confinement, he will without delay put in operation that wonderful elixir for making gold for Her Majesty’s service. Lat”. Elizabeth, Vol. XL. 44. [August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1566. Tower of London].

<sup>335</sup> See ‘philosopher’s stone’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>336</sup> Robert M. Schuler, “Charnock, Thomas”, ODNB 11: 205. See also Allan Pritchard, “Thomas Charnock’s Book Dedicated to Queen Elizabeth”, cit., p. 63: “At the end of the seven years, if his [Charnock’s] and her [Charnock’s wife’s] life are spared so long, he will present to her [Queen Elizabeth] the perfect philosophers’ stone, which will henceforth preserve her health and prolong her life: it conserves youth and has a power to cure all infirmities far beyond any other medicine”.

<sup>337</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975, p. 29 ff.

reigne”, as it was defined by the alchemist Edward Cradock<sup>338</sup>. In Edmund Spenser’s “Cantos of Mutabilitie”, in *The Faerie Qveene* (1590), Mercury is summoned by Jove to defend Cynthia-Elizabeth from her adversary, the Titaness Mutabilitie<sup>339</sup>. One of the features alchemists attribute to the stone is precisely its immunity against the destroying action of time, thus becoming “a heavenly thing that has its habitation in the highest region of the firmament”<sup>340</sup>. Also termed “a Quintessence wherein there is no corruptible Thing”<sup>341</sup>, the alchemical stone is conceived of as a reproduction of the fifth element, or aether, i.e. the imperishable substance of which the heavenly bodies are composed according to Aristotle’s *Physics*, a text alchemists constantly refer to. Since the stone “endowes the possessor with Divine Gifts”<sup>342</sup>, alchemical philosophers believe that the condition of incorruptibility proper of the elixir is transferred also to the practitioner himself, who becomes a sharer in the perfection of heaven. As Mircea Eliade argues, alchemists aim at achieving “permanence and immortality”<sup>343</sup>, somehow abolishing the passing of time, thus following one the precepts in the *Corpus Hermeticum*: “outstrip all time, become eternity and you will understand god”<sup>344</sup>. An alchemical approach to time seems to pervade also Shakespeare’s sonnets<sup>345</sup>: the poet himself, “in war with Time”, aims at preserving the quintessential essence of the Youth in the attempt to save it from temporal decay, in the same way as alchemists try to reproduce eternity and overcome the destructive effects of time: “all in war with Time for love of you / As he takes from you, I engraft you new” (Sonnet 15, ll. 13-14). In sonnet 54, the lyrical voice clearly argues that

<sup>338</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher’s Stone*, l. 47, AP 12. Several portraits of Queen Elizabeth are reproduced in Frances A. Yates, *Astraea*, cit.

<sup>339</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Qveene*, “Two Cantos of Mutabilitie”, Book VII, Canto VI, Stanza 8, in *Id.*, *The Faerie Qveene*, edited by A.C. Hamilton, Longman, London, 2001, p. 692: “Thence, to the Circle of the Moone she [Mutabilitie] clambe, / Where Cynthia raignes in euerlasting glory, / To whose bright shining palace straight she came, / All fairely deckt with heuens godly story”. See also stanza 14, *Ibidem*, p. 694: “Meane-while, the lower World, which nothing knew / Of all that chaunced here, was darkned quite; / And eke the heuens, and all the heuenly crew / Of happy wights, now vnpurvaide of light, / Were much afraid, and wondred at that sight; / Fearing least *Chaos* broken had his chaine, / And brought againe on them eternall night: / But chiefly *Mercury*, that next doth raigne, / Ran forth in haste, vnto the king of Gods to plaine”.

<sup>340</sup> Basilius Valentinus, *Twelve Keys*, “Eight Key”, HM 172. His pseudonym meaning “the mighty king”, the true identity of Basilius Valentinus, or Basil Valentine, is still unknown. The treatise *Twelve Keys* was first published in 1599 and went through several editions in different languages. As pointed out by Nicholl, “the most typical voice of this alchemical renaissance is Basil Valentine”. Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 81. Latin text: “ut iterum coeleste quid, quod in suprema firmamenti regione habitationem suam habebit”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum Duodecim Clavibus*, VIII Clavis, MH 414.

<sup>341</sup> Elias Ashmole, “Prolegomena”, TCB sig. Bv.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, “Mind to Hermes”, XI: 1, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 37. On the alchemical conception of time, see Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, Flammarion, Paris, 1956, p. 176.

<sup>344</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, “Mind to Hermes”, XI: 20, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>345</sup> For a reading of Shakespeare’s sonnets in the light of alchemical symbolism and terminology, see Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy, and the Creative Imagination. The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011.

the true essence of the Fair Youth is distilled by means of poetry: “And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth: / When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth” (Sonnet 54, ll. 13-14). The Fair Youth, “master” and “mistress” at the same time, and “Gilding the object” whereupon his eyes gaze<sup>346</sup>, is endowed by the poet with the same features of androgynous perfection alchemists ascribe to the alchemical quintessence, a substance capable of resisting the action of time, as will be discussed.

Able to purge her realm of all sorts of evil, Queen Elizabeth appeared to aspiring alchemists not only as the ideal patron, due to her knowledge of natural philosophy and alchemy, but even as an embodiment of the art of alchemy itself, sometimes represented as a lady in contemporary emblems<sup>347</sup>. As a case in point, the alchemist William Blomfield describes the queen in alchemical terms, as if she were an elected prophet chosen by God to regenerate the country:

god of his goodness. From tyme to tyme hath tried [...] and proved you [...] As he dyd prove [...] many other prophets and prophetises [...] And by soch tryall hath found your highness with the reste of his electe worthy of his owne selfe. And [...] hath [...] clensed and purged you<sup>348</sup>.

In the same way as metals are ‘tested’ by fire in the alchemical alembic, the queen has been “tried”, “clensed”, and “purged” by God and has finally proved to be a noble representative of divine wisdom on earth. As already said, alchemists describe their art as a divine gift and themselves as prophets divinely appointed to carry on God’s action of redeeming both

---

<sup>346</sup> “A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted, / Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion; / A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted / With shifting change as is false women’s fashion; / An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling, / Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth” (Sonnet 20, ll. 1-6). See, for instance, the frontispiece to K. Gesner, *The practise of the new and old physicke*, Printed by Peter Short, London, 1599, and Id., *The newe Jewell of Health*, London, 1576 (see plates 58 and 59). The plate shows a lady in an alchemical laboratory, carrying some alchemical tools and standing between the symbols of the sun and moon. As Archer remarks, “‘Alchymya’, the muse of alchemy, faces the title page of *The newe jewell of health* (1576), George Baker’s edition of the alchemical receipts of Conrad Gesner, which Baker dedicated to Anne Cecil de Vere, Countess of Oxford [...]. Surrounded by the apparatus of her art, Alchymya stands between the sun and moon, *sol* and *luna*, representing, respectively, the masculine and feminine principles which must be isolated, synthesised, and transmuted”. Jayne Elizabeth Archer, “*Rudenesse itselfe she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia”, cit., p. 46. A lady, possibly a symbol of alchemical art itself, appears also in one of the plates of Johannes Mylius’s *Philosophia reformata* (1622, **Errore. L’origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**). As a matter of fact, one of the illustrations shows a lady standing between the king and the king, the sun and the moon. See also the plates representing “Alchymia” in L. Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia*, 1570-1574 (see plates 56 and 57).

<sup>348</sup> William Blomfield, *The Quintaessens: Or, the Regiment of Lyfe*, c. 1574, fols. 6v-7r, quoted by Jayne Elizabeth Archer, “*Rudenesse itselfe she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia”, cit., pp. 56-7. Archer reports that Blomfield’s *Quintaessens* exists in a single and uncomplete manuscript preserved in the library of the University of Cambridge (Cambridge University Library, MS Dd. III. 83, Item 6). On the Elizabethan alchemist William Blomfield, see Robert M. Schuler, “William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist”, cit., pp. 75-87. Schuler attests that William Blomfield, of whom very little is known, was involved in the political life of Elizabeth’s father, King Henry VIII. See Robert M. Schuler, “William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist”, cit., p. 78.

the microcosm and the macrocosm. It is interesting to note that John Donne, who often employs alchemical language in his sermons and poems<sup>349</sup>, uses precisely the expression ‘to be tried’, as it appears in Blomfield’s words addressed to Elizabeth, in a sermon preached upon the Penitential Psalms:

Therefore *David*, who was metall tried seven times in the fire, and desired to be such gold as might be laid up in Gods treasury, might consider, that in the transmutation of metals, it is not enough to come to calcination, or a liquefaction of the metal, (that must be done) nor to an Ablution, to sever drosse from pure, nor to a Transmutation, to make it a better metall, but there must also be a Fixion, a settling thereof, so that it shall not evaporate into nothing, nor returne to its former nature<sup>350</sup>.

The verbs to “cleanse” and “purge”, employed by William Blomfield to describe Queen Elizabeth’s purification at the hands of God, also appear in Donne’s sermon, thus attesting to the interdependence between alchemical and religious vocabulary:

Therefore he [David] saw that he needed not only a liquefaction, a melting into tears, or only an abluion and a transmutation; those he had by this purging and this washing, [...]. but he needed [...] an establishment, which the comparison of Snow afforded not; That as he had *purged* him with Hyssop, and so *cleansed* him, that is, enwrapped him in the Covenant and made him a member of the true Church (italics mine)<sup>351</sup>.

Elizabeth herself makes use of a language that is highly evocative of alchemy in two prayers she wrote between 1579 and 1582: “pulling me from the prison to the palace; and placing me a sovereign princess over Thy people of England. [...] It is Thou who hast *raised* me and *exalted* me by Thy providence to the throne” (italics mine)<sup>352</sup>. The terms ‘exalt’ and ‘raise’ recur in alchemical treatises to indicate the process through which matter is “raised to a higher degree of purity and potency through a reiterated cycle of dissolution and coagulation”<sup>353</sup>. In this respect, Roberts observes that “all alchemical processes were governed by the idea of improving or making matter more refined or subtle” and, therefore, “concepts such as ‘exaltation’, ‘elevation’ and ‘making noble’ appear in the definitions of

---

<sup>349</sup> On John Donne’s use of alchemical imagery and language, see Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., pp. 107-135.

<sup>350</sup> John Donne, Sermon No. 15. Preached upon the Penitentiall Psalmes, Psal. 51.7., in Id., *Sermons*, edited by George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1953-1962, vol. V, p. 314.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.* On the relationship between alchemy and religion, see also Thomas Willard, “Alchemy and the Bible”, in Eleanor Cook, Chaviva Hosek, Jay Macpherson, Patricia Parker, Julian Patrick (eds.), *Centre and Labyrinth. Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1983, pp. 115-27.

<sup>352</sup> Queen Elizabeth the First, Prayers 30-31, c. 1579-82, in Id., *Collected Works*, edited by Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 2000, pp. 312-313 and p. 314.

<sup>353</sup> See ‘exaltation’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 72.

many processes such as sublimation and distillation”<sup>354</sup>. In the treatise known as *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, for instance, Paracelsus describes the *opus alchymicum* as a process in which matter is ‘raised’ and ‘exalted’ until it acquires a divine condition:

by a supreme magical separation, a certain perfect substance would come forth, which is at length [...] *exalted and raised* up above the range of vegetable substances into mineral, above mineral into metallic, and above metallic substances into a perpetual and divine Quintessence, including in itself the essence of all celestial and terrestrial creatures<sup>355</sup>.  
(italics mine)

Somehow alluding to the alchemical *rota*, a cycle in which the matter within the alembic ‘is raised’ from a condition of baseness to one of greater, quintessential perfection, the queen is thanking the Creator for making her ‘rise’ to the throne of England, thus achieving a god-like status. The concept of ‘exaltation’ is not limited to the refinement of metals but also indicates the transformation of man into an enlightened philosopher, able to perform the role of a god on earth. The “Tenth Gate” of Ripley’s *Compound of Alchymy* is about the stage of ‘exaltation’, defined as “lyttyll [...] dyfferent from Sublymacyon”, during which “Ower Medycyn [...] shall therby be Nobylyzate”<sup>356</sup>. Ripley describes this phase as the moment when male and female, the opposing principles which alchemists aim at reconciling, reach the glory of the heavenly dimension and, therefore, are reintegrated to original harmony:

Than up to Hevyn they must Exaltyd be,  
Ther to be in Body and Sowle gloryfyate;  
For thou must bryng them to such subtylyte,  
That they assend together to be intronyzate,  
In Clouds of clerenesse, to Angells consociate<sup>357</sup>.

Again, John Donne attests that terms such as ‘exalt’ and ‘raise’ were widely employed in religious and alchemical contexts alike. In his poem *Resurrection, Imperfect*, the poet describes the crucifixion of Christ in alchemical terms, specifically using the verb ‘to raise’ in order to indicate the ascent towards the final stage of the *opus alchymicum*, conceived of

---

<sup>354</sup> Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy. Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, The British Library, London, 1994, p. 59.

<sup>355</sup> Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, HAWP 1: 52.

<sup>356</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 178. *The Compound of Alchymie*, first composed in the 1470s, was initially dedicated to King Edward IV; see “The Epistle of George Ripley written to King Edward IV” in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., pp. 141-8. When it was first published, in 1591, a dedication to Queen Elizabeth I was added; see George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie or The Ancient Hidden Art of Archemie*, Imprinted by Thomas Orwin, London, 1591. The original version of Ripley’s *Compound*, with the dedicatory epistle to Edward IV, is included in Elias Ashmole’s *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*.

<sup>357</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 179.

by alchemical writers as a sort of ‘resurrection’: “Hee was all gold when he lay downe, but *rose / All Tincture*” (italics mine)<sup>358</sup>. In a satirical way, Jonson employs the terms ‘exalt’ and ‘raise’ in *The Alchemist*, when the con artist Subtle discusses with Face, describing the latter’s transformation in alchemical terms:

Thou vermin, have I ta’en thee out of dung...  
[...]  
*Raised thee* from brooms and dust and wat’ring pots?  
*Sublimed thee* and *exalted thee* and fixed thee  
I’ the third region, called our state of grace?  
Wrought thee to spirit, to quintessence, with pains  
Would twice have won me the philosopher’s work?  
(*The Alchemist*, I, i, 64 and 67-71, italics mine)

Taking into account that Martin Luther himself associated alchemy with religion and, specifically, with the Christian concept of resurrection, one should not be surprised that Queen Elizabeth, the heroine of Protestantism who ‘cleared’ England from the Catholicism of her half-sister, known as the ‘Bloody’ Mary, came to be depicted also in alchemical terms. As argued by Hart, Elizabeth personified the ‘Mercurian’ kind of monarch since she was regarded as an “intermediary between heaven and earth and a channel for celestial influences”<sup>359</sup>. Hart, in particular, refers to Edmund Spenser’s employment of the symbolism of Mercury in *The Faerie Queene* in order to celebrate Elizabethan Protestantism in the light of Egyptian Hermeticism<sup>360</sup>. According to Brooks-Davies, Spenser conflated the Greco-Roman Mercury with the Egyptian Thot, i.e. the Greek Hermes Trismegistus, with the aim to “create a Hermetic-Mercurian poem in which Elizabeth’s England is associated with the pure Egypt of the Hermetic writings and especially the Hermetic *Asclepius*”<sup>361</sup>. Taking into account that in alchemical symbolism Mercury stands for the “universal agent of transmutation”<sup>362</sup>, the connection between Queen Elizabeth, the monarch who ‘transformed’ England into a golden reign, and alchemy is even more significant. Edward Kelly defines Mercury as “essentiall truly, / [...] the principall of the *Stone* materiall” and “most truly that One thing, / Out of the which all

---

<sup>358</sup> John Donne, *Resurrection, Imperfect*, ll. 13-14, in Id., *Poems, By J. D. with Elegies on the Authors Death*, Printed by M.F. for Iohn Marriot, London, 1633, p. 162. All quotations from John Donne’s poetic works are from this edition.

<sup>359</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp. 25-6.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26. Hart, in turn, refers to Douglas Brooks-Davies, *The Mercurian Monarch: Magical Politics from Spenser to Pope*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983.

<sup>361</sup> Douglas Brooks-Davies, “Mercury”, in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, edited by A.C Hamilton, Routledge, London, 1990.

<sup>362</sup> See ‘Mercurius’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 124.

profit must springe”<sup>363</sup>. As a defender of ‘true’ religion, the new, enlightened queen seems to appear as an embodiment of alchemical art, i.e. the art given by God to worthy and chosen prophets to purge the microcosm of man of the darkness of ignorance and retrieve “the philosophy of the ancients”, as suggested by Luther:

The science of alchymy I like very well, and, indeed, ‘tis the philosophy of the ancients. I like it not only for the profits it brings in melting metals, in decocting, preparing, extracting, and distilling herbs, roots; I like it also for the sake of the allegory and secret signification, which is exceedingly fine, touching the resurrection of the dead and the last day. For, as in a furnace the fire extracts and separates from a substance the other portions [...], even so God, at the day of judgment, will separate all things through fire, the righteous from the ungodly<sup>364</sup>.

Luther’s words attest that Renaissance alchemy was much more than a practice of producing material gold or a branch of medicine: it represented the possibility to bring the world to its original condition of perfection, overcoming the dualism of the earthly dimension and restoring the true word of God. Furthermore, the above-quoted excerpt evidently testifies to the recurrent overlapping of alchemical and religious vocabulary. Abraham remarks that, since “the language of alchemy permeated seventeenth-century culture on every level”, “we see it frequently used in religious and literary works to express Christian truths”<sup>365</sup>. Terms such as ‘raise’, ‘exalt’, ‘resurrection’, and ‘redemption’ are, therefore, constantly employed by alchemical writers, Christ being for them the true “heavenly Stone”<sup>366</sup>. It is also worth mentioning that Paracelsus was termed “the Luther of Medicine” since his defiance of the orthodox, Galenic medical establishment came to be associated with Protestant reform: “The Paracelsian system rejected traditional medical and religious dogma, and this sounded a sympathetic note with the ideas of many Puritan

---

<sup>363</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle’s Worke*, TCB 329.

<sup>364</sup> Martin Luther, “Of the Resurrection”, *The Table Talk*, edited and translated by William Hazlitt, Bell & Daldy, London, 1872, DCCCV, p. 326. The first English translation of the text, published in 1645, was by Henry Bell and was intended to be an English version of Luther’s *Colloquia Mensalia, or, his Divine Discourses at his Table, held with divers learned Men and pious Divines; such as Philip Melancthon, Caspar Cruciger, etc. containing Divers Discourses touching Religion, and other main points of Doctrine*. On this topic, see also John Warwick Montgomery, “Cross, Constellation, and Crucible: Lutheran Astrology and Alchemy in the Age of the Reformation”, in *Ambix*, ix, 1963, p. 79.

<sup>365</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>366</sup> “Thus, gentle and well-wishing reader, I have briefly and simply set forth to you the perfect analogy which exists between our earthly and chemical and the the true and heavenly Stone, Jesus Christ, whereby we may attain unto certain beatitude and perfection, not only in earthly but also in eternal life”. *The Sophic Hydrolith or, Water Stone of the Wise*, HM 55. Paracelsus argues that “Hence they [alchemists] predicated that, in the last times, there should come a most pure man upon the earth, by whom the redemption of the world should be brought about; and that this man should send forth bloody drops of a red colour, by means of which he should redeem the world from sin. In the same way, after its own kind, the blood of their Stone freed the leprous metals from their infirmities and contagion”. Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, HAWP 1: 56.

reformers and revolutionaries”<sup>367</sup>. In this respect, Webster observes that the initial fortune of Paracelsian arguments was also consequent upon “the general religious mood of the times”: “It was therefore fitting that the first general defence of Paracelsian medicine and philosophy was framed in terms of an analogy with the religious reformation”<sup>368</sup>.

The association between Queen Elizabeth and alchemical art is made explicit in one of John Davies’s *Hymns to Astraea*:

E arly before the day doth spring,  
L et vs awake, my Muse, and sing;  
I t is no time to slumber;  
S o many Ioyes this time doth bring,  
A s time will faile to number.

B ut whereto shall we bend our Layes?  
E uen vp to Heauen, againe to raise  
T he Mayde which thence descended,  
H ath brought againe the golden dayes,  
A nd all the world amended.

R udeness itselſe ſhe doth refine,  
E uen like an Alchymiſt diuine,  
*G roſſe times* of Iron turning  
I nto the *pureſt* forme of gold:  
N ot to *corrupt* till heauen waxe old,  
A nd be *refin’d* with burning<sup>369</sup>.  
(italics mine)

In the last stanza of the lyric Davies defines the queen as “an Alchemist divine”, thus associating her with God. Alchemists actually regard God as the ‘Great Alchemist’ who created the cosmos by means of alchemical distillation, separating what was evil from what was good, thus transforming original chaos into an ordered macrocosm<sup>370</sup>. As recorded by Simon Forman in the treatise “Of the Division of the Chaos”, alchemists consider divine Creation as the primary model for their *opus alchymicum*:

Into darkness then did descend the sprite of god,  
Upon the watrie Chaos, wher on he made his abode.  
Which darknes then was on the face of the deepe,  
In which Rested the Chaos, and in it all thinges asleepe:  
Rude, unformed, wythout ſhape, forme or any good,

---

<sup>367</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>368</sup> Charles Webster, *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, pp. 329-30.

<sup>369</sup> John Davies, Hymne 1, “Of Astraea”, in Id., *Hymnes of Astraea in acroſticke verſe*, Printed by R. Field for I. Standiſh, London, 1599, p. 1.

<sup>370</sup> As pointed out by Margaret Healy, John Donne himſelf deſcribed God in alchemical terms: “Donne alluded to diuine ‘metal’ work in his ſermons, as on Eaſter Monday 1622: ‘God can work in all metals and tranſmute all metals: he can make [...] a Superſtitious Chriſtian a ſincere Chriſtian; a Papiſt a Proteſtant’. [...] In this ſcheme, God is the ‘maker’ par excellence, purifying ſouls by holy alchemy”. Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 2. See John Donne, *Sermons*, cit., vol. IV, p. 110.

Out of which god Created all thinges as yt stoode<sup>371</sup>.

George Ripley himself focuses on the association between divine Creation and the alchemical work of transmutation, thus equating the alchemist's practices with those of God:

In the begynnyng when thou madyst all of nought,  
A globose Mater and darke under confusyon,  
By thee Begynner mervelously was wrought,  
Conteynyng naturally all thyngs withoute dyvysyon,  
Of whych thou madyst in six Dayes dere dystynction;  
As a Genesys apertly doth recorde  
Then Heavyn and Erth perfeityd were wyth thy word<sup>372</sup>.

In the same way as God conferred order onto formless chaos and threw light upon darkness, the alchemist has to reduce the matter in the alembic to the so-called *prima materia*, the primordial stuff of Creation, and from there 'create' the stone, thus becoming a co-creator himself<sup>373</sup>. Thomas Norton, among others, compares the formation of the stone to the generation of the world and of man:

Noble Auctors men of glorious fame,  
Called our Stone Microcosmus by name:  
For his composition is withouten doubt,  
Like to this world in which we walk about<sup>374</sup>.

Queen Elizabeth, as a 'divine alchemist', has removed every kind of 'imperfection' from her realm, thus re-creating on earth that kind of quintessential perfection typical of the heavenly sphere<sup>375</sup>. The queen, acting as an alchemist and, therefore, as a helper of God, is defined by William Blomfield precisely as "Auxilium domini. the helpe of the lord"<sup>376</sup>.

In his Hymn, Davies praises the queen's alchemical ability to convert the "Grosse" into the "purest" and to refine what is "corrupt", thus alluding to the cycle of *solve et*

---

<sup>371</sup> Simon Forman, *Of the Division of the Chaos*, cit., ll. 1-6, AP 56.

<sup>372</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 122.

<sup>373</sup> See 'prima materia', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 153: "first matter, the original, pure substance from which it was believed the universe was created and into which it might again be resolved".

<sup>374</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 85.

<sup>375</sup> As Michela Pereira remarks, alchemical art is the attempt to remove every sort of 'imperfection' from the earthly dimension; from physical matter, from the human body, and from the human soul: "gli alchimisti si aspettavano un risultato che svincolasse il genere umano dall'imperfezione e dalla corrottibilità propri del mondo sublunare, garantendo sulla terra quello stato di perfezione psicosomatica che la dottrina cristiana insegnava a proposito del corpo della resurrezione". Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L'arte del sole e della luna*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>376</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomefylde's Quintaessens, or The Regiment of Lyfe*, c. 1574, quoted by Robert M. Schuler, "William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist", cit., p. 81.

*coagula*, that consists precisely in a series of conversions that, in their turn, reflect God's action of separating "the Pure from the Impure"<sup>377</sup>. The alternation of the terms "Grosse" and "purest", "corrupt" and "refin'd", in the final lines of Davies's poem, also seems to dwell on one of the key concepts of alchemical literature, i.e. the *coniunctio oppositorum*. Alchemical transmutation, or conversion, is regarded as a way to achieve the reconciliation of opposites, "the perfyte Unyte"<sup>378</sup>, thus transcending the duality of the human and temporal dimension and overcoming decay and change. Elizabeth, thanks to her refining action, symbolically rises above the dualism of the Fallen world, thus ensuring to his subjects that state of harmony that makes her reign a golden age on earth. The verb 'refine' is particularly meaningful if read in the light of alchemical symbolism because it does not only indicate the removal of all 'impurities' from corrupted matter, intended on both a physical and spiritual level: it also points at the invulnerability of the newly created stone from degeneration and death, because 'refined' by the action of fire. In like manner, the realm of Queen Elizabeth has been "refin'd with burning", thus being transmuted into an earthly paradise, alien from every sort of corruption and, therefore, sharing the virtues of heaven<sup>379</sup>. One of the numerous epithets alchemists attribute to the stone once it has reached the stage known as *albedo* is precisely 'heaven', since the synthesis of contraries typical of the supernatural world has been attained:

When this black Masse againe is become White  
 Both in and out like snow and shining faire,  
 Then this Child, this Wife, *this Heven so bright*,  
 [...] Then give God thanks for granting thy desire<sup>380</sup>.  
 (italics mine)

In the alchemical allegory entitled *The Hermet's Tale*, collected in Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, the stone is defined as a "A Heav'n on Earth"<sup>381</sup>.

As pointed out by Hughes in his study on the development of alchemical philosophy and practices in medieval and Renaissance England, alchemy provided monarchs with a

---

<sup>377</sup> "We holde by *Moses* doctrine that GOD in the beginning made of nothing a *Chaos*, or Waters, if wee please so to call it. From the which Chaos, Deepe, or waters, animated with the Spirits of God, God as the great workemaister and Creator, separated first of all *Light* from *Darknesse*, and this *Aetheriall Heaven*, which wee beholde, as a fifth Essence, or most pure Spirite, or most simple spirituall body. [...] This was the worke of God, that hee might separate the Pure from the Impure". Joseph du Chesne, *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke*, Printed by Thomas Creede, London, 1605, quoted in AP 64.

<sup>378</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 144.

<sup>379</sup> As pointed out by Abraham, 'heaven' is indeed one of the numerous terms employed by alchemists to define matter once it has reached the highest level of subtlety. See "heaven", in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 97.

<sup>380</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle's Worke*, TCB 330.

<sup>381</sup> Anon., *The Hermet's Tale*, TCB 419.

rich allegorical and emblematic language that could be employed with political aims<sup>382</sup>. The philosopher's stone, the nurturing powers of the sun, that is usually considered as a synonym of the alchemical elixir, the imagery related to the figure of the king, emblem of alchemical gold and symbol of perfection, well served the imagery of kings and queens as earthly gods and models of divine perfection. In the dedicatory epistle of the 1591-version of George Ripley's *Compound of Alchymie*, Queen Elizabeth is compared to the sun, whose beams "dispersed all grosse mists and fogges of ignorance, error, & blinde superstition, and withall so comforted and nourished the plant of infallible truth of the Gospell"<sup>383</sup>. The sun-king analogy is of course not restricted to alchemical language, as testified by some celebrated lines in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, where King Richard is explicitly compared to the sun by Duke Bolingbroke:

See, see, King Richard doth himself appear,  
As doth the blushing discontented sun  
From out the fiery portal of the east  
When he perceives the envious clouds are bent  
To dim his glory and to stain the track  
Of his bright passage to the occident.  
(III, iii, 61-6)

However, that the enlightening and transformative qualities of the sun also had evident alchemical overtones is testified by the following lines from another Shakespearean play, *King John*:

the glorious sun  
Stays in his course and plays the alchemist,  
Turning with splendour of his precious eye  
The meagre cloddy earth to glittering gold.  
(III, i, 3-6)

In alchemical terms, the 'sun' stands for the regenerative powers of the philosopher's stone that, mirroring the daily action of the solar beams, transmutes all metals into gold and leads everything to perfection. Symbolically speaking, the "med'cinable eye" of the sun "Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil", as asserted by Ulysses in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*<sup>384</sup>. Since the sun nourishes the fruits of the earth and leads them to their fullest form, it is conceived of by alchemists as the right symbol of the transforming

---

<sup>382</sup> Jonathan Hughes, *The Rise of Alchemy*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>383</sup> George Ripley, "Epistle Dedicatoire", *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., sig. A2r.

<sup>384</sup> Ulysses: "And therefore is the glorious planet Sol / In noble eminence enthroned and sphered / Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye / Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil" (*Troilus and Cressida*, I, iii, 89-92).

function of alchemical fire. Hermetic philosophers constantly draw on the recurring parallel between the alchemical cycle of destruction and re-creation, the so-called *solve et coagula*, and the alternation of seasons, during which the natural world, thanks to solar light, is continually renewed after the barrenness of winter:

In the winter the multitude suppose everything to be dead, because the earth is bound in the chains of frost, so that nothing is allowed to sprout forth. But as soon as the spring comes, and the cold is vanquished by the power of the Sun, everything is restored to life<sup>385</sup>.

The sunrise also represents the victory of light over darkness and, therefore, is a suitable symbol of the stone, i.e. the product of the transformation of base lead into shining gold. It is, therefore, not surprising that the so-called *rota alchemica* is often represented in terms of the sun's cycle, always rising and overcoming night's blackness. The 'aurora', or 'golden hour', is the phase of the *opus alchymicum* also known as *rubedo*, i.e. the attainment of gold<sup>386</sup>. Since red is notoriously the tint of the sun at dawn and alchemists identify the last stage of the alchemical work with the colours red and gold, the aurora represents precisely the achievement of the philosopher's stone. Conversely, the so-called "black sun" indicates the *nigredo*, or 'black stage', the beginning of the alchemical *opus*, a phase of death and putrefaction<sup>387</sup>. Two plates in Solomon Trismosin's *Splendor Solis* clearly illustrate these two different stages: the absence of daylight, or *sol niger* (see plates 73 and 74), provokes sterility and stands for the 'death' of matter in the alembic during the stage of *nigredo*, whereas the sunrise epitomises the consequent renewal of nature and symbolises the creation of the stone. The alchemical metamorphoses of the sun are especially praised in Shakespeare's sonnets. In particular, sonnet 33 celebrates the course of the sun in terms of the alchemical work of transmutation:

Full many a glorious morning have I seen  
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,  
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,  
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.  
(Sonnet 33, ll. 1-4).

---

<sup>385</sup> *The Three Treatises of Philalethes*, HM 338. Eirenaeus Philalethes ('a peaceful lover of wisdom') was a seventeenth-century alchemist and medical practitioner. As Newman attests, the alchemist known as Eirenaeus Philalethes was in fact George Starkey: "Only the most recent scholarship has definitely proved that he and Philalethes were one". William R. Newman, "Starkey, George", ODNB 52: 297.

<sup>386</sup> See "Aurora", in Alexander Roob (ed.), *Il Museo Ermetico*, cit., pp. 202-215. It is worth noting that one of the most celebrated treatises in the history of alchemy is *Aurora consurgens*, a text that presents itself as a collection of biblical quotations and is usually attributed to Thomas Aquinas. See Thomas Aquinas (attributed to), *Aurora Consurgens. A Document attributed to Thomas Aquinas on the Problems of Opposites in Alchemy*, edited by Marie-Louise von Franz, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966.

<sup>387</sup> See "sol niger" in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 186.

As the sun, with its “heavenly alchemy”, gilds the “meadows green” and all the underlying world, Elizabeth, “the Alchymist divine”, clears her realm from corruption and enlightens it with her inspiring rays. Considering Colin Burrow’s assertion that the idea exploited in the first quatrain of Shakespeare’s lyric is that the sun of the morning is like a monarch<sup>388</sup>, ‘gilding’ his subjects and rising over ‘darkness’, the connection between Queen Elizabeth and the alchemical virtues of the sun acquires even more consistency. Elizabeth, placed by God as a “sovereign princess over the people of England”, recalls the alchemical powers of the sun of sonnet 33 – a sun whose “sovereign eye” perfects everything. It is not a matter of chance that in alchemical language sun and gold are closely related to the idea of royalty, since they embody the apex of perfection<sup>389</sup>: as sun and gold are the ‘kings’ of planets and metals respectively, a monarch embodies the highest function among men, being a mirror of God. Interestingly enough, the central role assigned by alchemists to the greatest of planets recalls Nicolaus Copernicus’s heliocentric theories: quoting Hermes Trismegistus, the scientist grants to the solar star the pre-eminent position among planets, asserting that, sitting on its throne like a king, it guides and enlightens his sons, i.e. the other planets revolving around it<sup>390</sup>. The Hermetic world-view, despite being often regarded as detached from the new scientific theories emerging in the sixteenth century, was, in fact, deeply intertwined with them, as already said. Queen Elizabeth herself, being highly cultivated in several ‘sciences’, is the addressee of treatises about alchemy and natural philosophy<sup>391</sup>. One should recall, for instance, that Francis Bacon associated the Tudor

---

<sup>388</sup> Colin Burrow (ed.), *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 446n.

<sup>389</sup> “By Gold our meaning is the *Sunne*, / Equall to him, metall there’s none”. Jean de la Fontaine, *The Pleasant Fountaine of Knowledge*, ll. 381-2, AP 93. Another term for ‘gold’ or the ‘sun’ is Apollo, as testified by Dom Pernety: “On prend communément *Apollon* pour le soleil qui nous éclaire, et les Chymistes pour le soleil ou partie agente de leur oeuvre”. Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermetique dans le quel on trouve les allégories fabuleuses des poètes les métaphores, les énigmes et les termes barbares des philosophes hermétiques expliquées*, texte conforme à l’édition de 1787, E.P. Denoël, Paris, 1972, p. 53. As will be considered in the following chapters, the figure of Apollo is central in *The Winter’s Tale*. The alchemical symbolism of the ‘king’ will be considered in relation to Leontes’s process of symbolical death and rebirth. As noticed by Pernety, alchemists bestow several meanings to the king; one of these is ‘gold’: “Ce nom a deux sens différens chez les Philosophes. Il s’entend ordinairement du soufre des Sages, ou l’or philosophique, par allusion à l’or vulgaire, appelé Roi des métaux”. Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique*, cit., p. 319.

<sup>390</sup> “In medio vero omnium residet Sol. Quis enim in hoc pulcherrimo templo lampadem hanc in alio vel meliori loco poneret, quam unde totum simul possit illuminare? Siquidem non inepte quidam lucernam mundi, alii mentem, alii rectorem vocant. Trismegistus visibilem deum, Sophoclis Electra intuentem omnia. Ita profecto tanquam in solio regali Sol residens circumagentem gubernat astrorum familiam”. Niccolò Copernico, *De revolutionibus orbium caelestium. La costituzione generale dell’universo*, edited by Alexandre Koyré, Einaudi, Torino, 1975, p. 101. The same excerpt from Copernicus is also quoted by Alexander Roob (ed.), *Il Museo Ermetico*, cit., p. 59.

<sup>391</sup> See Jayne Elizabeth Archer, “*Rudeness itself she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia”, cit., p. 51.

queen with Hermes Trismegistus: prompting the monarch to undertake a renovation of learning by building a library, a garden, a cabinet, and a still-house, Bacon envisions the possibility for the queen to become a “Hermes Trismegistus”<sup>392</sup>.

Taking into consideration that Elizabeth was often identified with Astraea and with the symbolism of *renovatio*, it is not surprising that alchemical imagery, equally connected with the myth of the golden age, well suited the queen’s representations<sup>393</sup>. As suggested by Mebane, the development of alchemical and Hermetic philosophy in the Renaissance was linked to the ideal according to which humankind had been given by God the faculty to actively remove corruption from the earthly world, thus recreating the prelapsarian state of the Golden Age<sup>394</sup>. As recorded in the first Book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Astraea is the divinity traditionally associated with the first stage of humanity, the Golden Age. However, when this era of everlasting peace and prosperity gradually degenerated and was replaced by the ages of silver, lead, and iron, Astraea fled the miserable world of men: “uicta iacet pietas, et uirgo caede madentes / ultima caelestum terras Astraea reliquit”<sup>395</sup>. It follows that the return of the goddess, symbolised by Queen Elizabeth, implies the ‘transmutation’ of the Iron Age into the primeval, ‘golden’ condition of humanity. The first book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, recounting the creation of the cosmos and the alternation of the four ages of the world, is actually regarded by alchemists as a handbook for their operations, along with the book of *Genesis*:

*Chaos* is no more to say, this is doubtles,  
(As *Ovid* writeth in his *Metamorphosin*)  
But a certaine rude substance [...]  
Having divers Natures resting it within,  
Which with the Contrary we may it out twyne.  
By *Philosophers Arte*, who so the feat doth know

---

<sup>392</sup> *Gesta Grayorum*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>393</sup> On the idea of renovation inherent to the symbolism of Elizabeth, it its turn linked with the imperial renovation, see Frances A. Yates, *Astraea*, cit., pp. 38-59. On the relationships between the development of alchemy and Hermetic philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Renaissance myth of the ‘golden age’, see John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age*, cit., pp. 30-40.

<sup>394</sup> John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: the Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1989, pp. 30-40. In *Asclepius*, Hermes praises the mortal part of man, thanks to which he is able to actively cooperate with God: “Mankind is a living thing, then, but none the lesser for being partly mortal; indeed, for one purpose his composition seems perhaps fitter and abler, enriched by mortality. Had he not been made of both materials, he would not have been able to keep them both, so he was formed of both, to tend to earth and to cherish divinity as well”. Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., *Asclepius*: 9, p. 72. Hermes says to Asclepius that it is exactly because man has a dual nature that he can act as a co-creator: “Seeing that the world is god’s work, one who attentively preserves and enriches its beauty conjoins his own work with god’s will when, lending his body in daily work and care, he arranges the scene formed by god’s divine intention”. Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., *Asclepius*: 11, p. 73.

<sup>395</sup> *Met.* I: 149-50. The quotation is from P. Ovidi Nasonis, *Metamorphoses*, edited by Richard J. Tarrant, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

The four Elements from *Chaos* to out draw<sup>396</sup>.

Since the possibility to change ‘forms’ is at the basis of alchemical theory, alchemists interpret Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a work that begins precisely with a focus on the transformations to which earthly bodies are constantly submitted, as an alchemical allegory: “In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora” (*Met.* II: 1-2). Interestingly enough, in the already mentioned poem by John Davies Elizabeth is also compared to Astraea – “The Mayde which thence descended” and “Hath brought againe the golden dayes, / And all the world amended”<sup>397</sup> – thus testifying to the interconnection between alchemical language and the symbolism related to the myth of Astraea, that was already an integral part of Elizabeth’s imagery. Besides being an elixir of youth, health, and immortality, the philosopher’s stone is also described as a ‘heaven’, a ‘new kingdom’, and especially a ‘golden age’<sup>398</sup>, being a microcosmic reproduction of the quintessential perfection of the prelapsarian world. As an alchemist and as Astraea, then, Elizabeth recreated a golden age on earth, recovering the original splendour of the “blessed spot”<sup>399</sup> of England and transmuting her court into an “earthly heaven”<sup>400</sup>. With regards to the queen’s refining and alchemical skills, it is worth quoting a few lines from William Warner’s *Albion’s England*. Warner explicitly compares Elizabeth to an alchemist who heals England’s ‘disease’ and restores the country to its original, quintessential perfection. Warner evidently dwells on both alchemical imagery and on the symbolism related to the myth of Astraea. Elizabeth, defined as “The vndeluding alcumist” and as “A goddesse on the Earth”, has led her reign “to golde againe”, thus symbolically transmuting it:

Our world hath made it course, that as the Moone doth wax and waine,  
From gold to siluer, then to iron, and now to golde againe.  
Of whose faire-cured Leaprosie from former twaine to golde,  
(For in a Quintessence was all eare Gods worlds-curse of olde)  
The vndeluding Alcumist is that *Elizabeth*,  
Whom *English*, yea, and *Alients*, hold a Goddesse on the Earth<sup>401</sup>.

<sup>396</sup> William Blomfield, *Bloomfields Blossoms*, TCB 316. As recorded by Schuler, *Bloomfields Blossoms* was very likely written, or rewritten, in 1557: “This work, which circulated widely in manuscript, certainly contributed to Blomfield’s reputation among the adepts”. Robert M. Schuler, “William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist”, cit., p. 80.

<sup>397</sup> John Davies, Hymne 1, “Of Astraea”, in Id., *Hymnes of Astraea in acrosticke verse*, cit., ll. 8-10, p. 1.

<sup>398</sup> See ‘return’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 171: “The transformation of the iron age into the golden age through the circulation or return of the elements was the main task of the alchemist”.

<sup>399</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, II, i, 50.

<sup>400</sup> George Peele, *Anglorum Feriae*, in Id., *Works*, edited by A.H. Bullen, John C. Nimmo, London, 1888, vol. II, p. 343, quoted by Frances A. Yates, *Astraea*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>401</sup> William, *Albions England a continued historie of the same kingdome, from the originals of the first inhabitants thereof: and most the chiefe alterations and accidents there happening: vnto, and in, the happie raigne of our now most gracious soueraigne Queene Elizabeth. With varietie of inuentiue and historicall intermixtures, First penned and published by William Warner: and now reuised, and newly*

Given the wide circulation of alchemical language and imagery, complexly intertwined with the Renaissance emblematic tradition, even Cranmer's association of the infant Queen Elizabeth with "The bird of wonder" and "the maiden phoenix" (V, iv, 40) in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* would possibly have had alchemical resonances to the ears of Elizabethan audiences. In alchemical terms, the phoenix stands for "renewal and resurrection"<sup>402</sup>, two features that had been ascribed to the reign of the Virgin Queen since her accession to the Tudor throne. That the phoenix was notoriously part of the rich metaphorical apparatus of alchemy is also attested by Ben Jonson in *The Alchemist*, when Mammon alludes to the death of the phoenix in the fire, conceived of by alchemists as a metaphor for their work of 'dissolution' and 'solution', 'death' and 'rebirth': "To burn i' this sweet flame; / The phoenix never knew a nobler death" (IV, i, 68-9). Alchemists describe the alchemical stone as a phoenix because it is created out of a process of 'destruction' and 're-creation', specifically known as *solve et coagula*. During the paradoxical course of the *opus alchymicum*, matter is refined only after being 'dissolved' and, therefore, the production of the stone is not a birth but, rather, a 'rebirth': "The Sages call it the Phoenix and Salamander. Its generation is a resurrection rather than a birth, and for this reason it is immortal and indestructible"<sup>403</sup>.

Elizabeth was identified, and liked to identify herself, with goddesses variously symbolising regeneration: along with Astraea, the goddess Ceres, whose symbolism recalls the natural cycle of death and rebirth alluded to by the Proserpina myth, was part of the queen's articulated iconography as a further celebration of her phoenix-like features. As noticed by Yates, both Astraea and Ceres were traditionally identified with grain, an association which Elizabethans were aware of and which they inherited from the Classics<sup>404</sup>. Moreover, Elizabeth was compared to Diana, who is connected to Ceres and

---

*inlarged by the same author*, Printed by the widow Orwin, for Ioan Broome, London, 1597, p. 211.

<sup>402</sup> See 'phoenix', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 152.

<sup>403</sup> Michael Sendivogius, *The New Chemical Light*, cit., HM 242. Latin text: "Ideo Philosophi Phoenicem et Salamandram creant. Si enim ex duorum corporum conceptione fieret esset res morti obnoxia: at quia se tantum revivificat, destructo corpore priori, emicat aliud incorruptibile". *Novum Lumen Chemicum*, MH 589.

<sup>404</sup> As documented by Frances Yates, in his description of the myth of Astraea Ovid draws on Greek sources, among which was the Greek astronomical poet Aratos, who "explains that when the virgin Justice left the world in the iron age she took up her abode in the heavens as the constellation Virgo; the figure of the just virgin now shines in the sky, bearing an ear of corn in her hand". The identification of Astraea and Virgo carrying an ear of corn was further developed by the Latin poets and, as Yates remarks, was well known in Elizabethan times. The parentage of Virgo-Astraea, Yates continues, is obscure but the corn identifies her also with Ceres. See Frances Yates, *Astraea*, cit., pp. 29-32. Edmund Spenser clearly identifies Astraea with Virgo in *The Faerie Qveene*. See Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Qveene*, cit., Book VII, Canto vii, Stanza 37, p. 707: "The sixth was *August*, being rich arrayd / In garment all of gold downe to the ground: / Yet rode he not, but led a louely Mayd / Forth by the lilly hand, the which was cround / With

Proserpina also in Classical mythology: Proserpina, the daughter of Ceres and Zeus, merrily spent her childhood with the other daughters of the god, among whom was precisely Diana<sup>405</sup>. Considering that Ceres and Proserpina epitomise the everlasting renewal of nature, it goes without saying that the queen, already distinguished by the formula *semper eadem* and resembling the bird that constantly renews itself from its ashes, loved to compare herself with the two goddesses of grain and agriculture. Clearly dwelling on the idea of ‘return’, the pageant organised for Elizabeth’s proclamation, in 1559, displayed the figure of Truth, traditionally Time’s daughter, while coming out of a cave, thus portraying the regenerative, and obliquely alchemical, qualities of the new monarch. As will be discussed in the following pages, the myth known as *temporis filia veritas* is at the basis of *The Winter’s Tale*, a romance in which time as a destroying and redeeming force plays a central role: it is worth noting that the subtitle of *The Winter’s Tale*’s main literary source, Robert Greene’s *Pandosto* (1588), is precisely *The Triumph of Time*. In Shakespeare’s play, the daughter of Time is Perdita, the seemingly ‘lost’ one. When appearing on stage at the beginning of the fourth act, functioning as a Chorus introducing the second half of the drama, Time announces that he will disclose “the freshest things now reigning” (IV, i, 13), i.e. Perdita, in “fair Bohemia” (IV, i, 21), after sixteen years have passed from her supposed death in a shipwreck. The figures of Perdita and of her mother, Queen Hermione, are strongly reminiscent of the story of Proserpina and Ceres. Not only does Perdita herself allude to Proserpina<sup>406</sup>, but it has been suggested that Shakespeare’s inversion of the relation Sicily-Bohemia as it is in *Pandosto* has to be read in the light of the myth of the two goddesses: according to this theory, Shakespeare, unlike Greene, would have decided to begin and end the play in Sicily, because this is where Proserpina was abducted by Pluto<sup>407</sup>. Perdita and Hermione, first despised and cast away, ‘die’ in order to ‘be reborn’ and reunited after a “wide gap” of time (IV, i, 7)<sup>408</sup>, thus personifying the

---

ears of corne, and full her hand was found; / That was the righteous Virgin, which of old / Liv’d here on earth, and plenty made abound; / But, after Wrong was lov’d and Iustice solde, / She left th’vnrighteous world and was to heauen extold”. On the relationship between Ceres, Astraea, and Queen Elizabeth, see also Milena Romero Allué, “What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Id., *Immagini della mente. Scrittura e percezione visiva nella letteratura inglese del Rinascimento*, Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, Venezia, 2016, p. 76 ff.

<sup>405</sup> See Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1951, cit., p. 120.

<sup>406</sup> Perdita: “O Proserpina, / For the flowers now that, frighted, thou let’st fall / From Dis’s wagon!” (IV, iv, 116-8-9).

<sup>407</sup> Northrop Frye, “*Shakespeare’s Romances: The Winter’s Tale*”, in Harold Bloom (ed.), *William Shakespeare: Romances. New Edition*, Infobase Publishing, New York, 2011, p. 9. According to Romero, the chaos of both the microcosm and the macrocosm that characterises the end of the third act, after Perdita is abandoned in Bohemia, mirrors Ceres’s rage after Proserpina’s abduction. See Milena Romero Allué, “No Shepherdess, but Flora / Peering in April’s front”, cit., p. 133.

<sup>408</sup> Note that this celebrated line has become the title of the recently published novel by Jeanette Winterson

renovation of truth, virtue, order, and all the positive values denied in the first, tragic half of the play. Hermione, whose name phonetically evokes the term *harmonia*, was in classical tradition the daughter of Helen and Menelaus and an emblem of concord<sup>409</sup>. Again, this possible connection between Shakespeare's Hermione and the one of Greek mythology, provides another interesting correlation with Elizabethan symbolism. If, according to the legend, the Tudors descended from the Trojan Brutus, one of Aeneas's kins and founder of London<sup>410</sup>, then the indirect allusion in *The Winter's Tale* to Trojan characters might be read as a celebration of the noble roots of the Tudor dynasty, coming from Roman ancestors.

Elizabeth was considered as the imperial virgin who re-established a period of peace and wealth: it follows that as the 'rebirth' of Hermione, at the end of *The Winter's Tale*, might hint at the re-establishment of Roman greatness in the figure of Queen Elizabeth-Astraea. At the time when *The Winter's Tale* was composed, in late 1610, Elizabethan values were embodied by the two children of King James I, namely Princess Elizabeth and Prince Henry, sister and brother of Charles, who would be king of England between 1625 and 1649. Elizabeth Stuart, in particular, "was both haunted by, and also used for her own benefit, the analogy Queen Elizabeth I"<sup>411</sup>. Elizabeth and Henry Stuart were keen on Hermetic studies, thus further making them the "symbolical heirs" of the deceased Tudor queen<sup>412</sup>. In her study *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, Frances Yates suggests that the 'resurrection' of queen Hermione, transformed from statue to living woman, is not only the core of the whole play but also, and above all, the symbol of the restoration of a kind of virtue and goodness by then lost. Yates sees a connection between the Hermetic philosophy displayed in *The Winter's Tale*, especially evident in the statue scene, and Giordano Bruno's plan for a moral and religious reform, based on Hermetic and alchemical ideals. Shakespeare's indirect allusion to the Egyptian rituals of statue animation recorded in the treatise *Asclepius* would suggest, in Yates's opinion, that Hermione's restoration to

---

based on Shakespeare's play: *The Gap of Time. The Winter's Tale Retold*, Hogarth, London, 2015.

<sup>409</sup> See William E. Engel, "The Winter's Tale: Kinetic Emblems and Memory Images in *The Winter's Tale*", in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 84-5. On the significance of the name Hermione, see also John Pitcher (ed.), *The Arden Shakespeare. The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 141.

<sup>410</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Astraea*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>411</sup> Nadine Akkerman, "Semper Eadem: Elizabeth Stuart and the Legacy of Queen Elizabeth I", in Sara Smart and Mara R. Wade (eds.), *The Palatine Wedding of 1613: Protestant Alliance and Court Festival*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2013, 146-7.

<sup>412</sup> "I due giovani Stuart, fratelli maggiori del futuro re d'Inghilterra Carlo I, sono colti e raffinati, si interessano di letteratura, filosofia, scienze, arti, cultura ermetica e, soprattutto, rinverdiscono gli ideali cavallereschi e medievaleschi resi popolari dalla regina defunta, accostandosi in tal modo ai suoi valori e alle sue idee: per questo motivo il giovane principe Henry, patrono illuminato delle arti e delle scienze, e la ancor più giovane principessa Elizabeth, intelligente e di rara bellezza, sono percepiti dai nostalgici come gli eredi, i 'figli' e i continuatori morali del mito di Astrea". Milena Romero Allué, "No Sheperdess, but Flora / Peering in April's front", cit., pp. 139-40.

life alludes to Hermetic magic and religion, i.e. to that kind of ‘occult’ philosophy that was so dear to the Tudor queen<sup>413</sup>. With regards to Shakespeare’s deployment of hermetic conceptions in *The Winter’s Tale*, Delsigne observes that Hermeticism “provided a spiritual path that transcended the divide between Catholics and Protestants”<sup>414</sup>. If read from this perspective, the reunion of Leontes and Hermione, a scene that is reminiscent of the ‘chemical wedding’, becomes the perfect end of a play that evidently longs for the reconciliation of opposites, both from a thematic and structural perspective, as will be discussed.

As already said, alchemists tend to read every sort of metamorphosis as an allegory of the process of transmutation. In the belief that the noble authors of the past detained the secret knowledge of alchemical art, Petrus Bonus of Ferrara lists with Hermes Trismegistus, “the father and prophet of the Sages”, also Homer, Virgil, and Ovid<sup>415</sup>. The tales recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* were often interpreted as alchemical parables of transformation<sup>416</sup>. The practice of reading the Ovidian myths as parables describing in highly emblematic terms the different stages leading to the creation of the elixir – a practice that was especially widespread in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance – was further developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century by the German Michael Maier (1568-1622) and in the eighteenth century by the French Dom Pernety (1716-

---

<sup>413</sup> Frances Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, cit., p. 91: “The return of Hermetic or ‘Egyptian’ magical religion involves, in the Hermetic texts and in Giordano Bruno’s interpretation of them, the return of moral law, the banishment of vice, the renewal of all good things, a holy and most solemn restoration of nature herself. There is perhaps something of this magical religious and moral philosophy in the profundities about ‘nature’ in *The Winter’s Tale*. The episode of Paulina’s daring magic, with its allusion to the magical statues of the Asclepius, may thus be a key to the meaning of the play as an expression of one of the deepest currents of Renaissance magical philosophy of nature”.

<sup>414</sup> Jill Delsigne, “Hermetic Miracles in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich (eds.), *Magical Transformations* cit., p. 99.

<sup>415</sup> “Hermes termegistus pater et propheta philosophorum. Pythagoras, [...] Homerus, Ptolemeus, Virgilius, Ovidius et alii quamplurimi Philosophi, et huius veritatis amatores: [...] horum plurium libros vidimus et juxta posse nostrum et modicum ingenium studiumus, quamvis operationi et labori fuerimus raro dediti”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita novella*, cit., p. 16. See the English translation of *Pretiosa margarita novella*, in Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *The New Pearl*, cit., pp. 79-80: “Hermes, [...] the father and prophet of the Sages, of Pythagoras, [...] Homer, Ptolomeus, Virgil, Ovid and many other philosophers and lovers of truth. [...] Of most of these we have seen and studied the works, and can testify that they were, without a single exception, adepts, and brothers of this most glorious order, and that they knew what they were speaking about”.

<sup>416</sup> See Thomas Willard, “The Metamorphoses of Metals: Ovid and the Alchemists”, in Alison Keith and Stephen Rupp (eds.), *Metamorphosis. The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto, 2007, pp. 151-63. It should be pointed out that Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* were one the most renowned and quoted texts of the English Renaissance, also thanks to Arthur Golding’s translation dating from 1567. Given that Ovid is the classical author most quoted and imitated in Shakespeare’s plays and poems, the romances particularly display the dramatist’s indebtedness to the Latin author. On this topic, see, among others, Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, and Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

1796)<sup>417</sup>. As argued by Northrop Frye, “poetic language, a language of myth and metaphor, is the language best adapted to a world of process and change, where everything keeps turning into something else”<sup>418</sup>. In *Pretiosa margarita novella*, Petrus Bonus of Ferrara explicitly argues that the latent significance of the transformations of gods and goddesses recounted by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* is alchemical: “Et hoc est aurum in Ovidio occultatum”<sup>419</sup>. Considering the custom to interpret Ovid’s fables in the light of alchemical beliefs, the myth of Proserpina and Ceres, traditionally linked with the alternation of the seasons, bears astonishing similarities with the process of the *opus alchymicum*, in its turn a reflection of the cycle of nature<sup>420</sup>. That the story of the two goddesses could have been read through alchemical lenses is attested by Francis Bacon in *De Sapientia Veterum*. Even though distancing himself from the alchemists’s theories, defined by the author as “sine fundamento”<sup>421</sup>, Bacon testifies to the affinity between the myth of Proserpina and the alchemical conception according to which the stone allegedly allows “the return of natural bodies from the gates of Hell”<sup>422</sup>. Proserpina and her mother Ceres well represent the alchemical conception that death is a necessary prelude to new life: it should be recalled that alchemists most frequently employ the metaphor of the seed of grain, which ‘putrefies’ before sprouting, as a parable of the *opus alchymicum*, clearly relying upon a biblical passage from the Gospel of John: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls

---

<sup>417</sup> “l’intention des Auteurs de ces fictions étoit d’y envelopper les mysteres de l’Art Hermétique”. Dom Pernety, *Les Fables Egyptiennes et Grecques dévoilées et réduites au même principe*, Delalain, Paris, 1786, tome premier, p. 436.

<sup>418</sup> Northrop Frye, “*Shakespeare’s Romances: The Winter’s Tale*”, in Harold Bloom (ed.), *William Shakespeare: Romances New Edition*, Bloom’s Literary Criticism, New York, 2011, p. 16.

<sup>419</sup> Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *Pretiosa margarita novella*, BCC 2: 43. *Pretiosa margarita novella* was originally written in the 1330s and published by the Aldine Press in Venice in 1546. As Willard remarks, it “was reprinted in several important collections”. Thomas Willard, “The Metamorphoses of Metals”, cit., p. 152. Paracelsus himself draws on the idea that Classical authors, such as Homer, transmitted Hermetic truths in allegorical terms: “It was the custom of the Egyptians to put forward the traditions of that surpassing wisdom only in enigmatical figures and abstruse histories and terms. This was afterwards followed by Homer with marvellous poetical skill”. Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, HAWP 1: 50.

<sup>420</sup> On the relationship between the myth of Ceres and alchemy, Dom Pernety observes: “L’agriculture est un symbole parfait des opérations du grand œuvre. [...] les Auteurs des Fables ont dit la même chose d’Osiris, de Denys, de Cérès & de Triptoleme. Osiris parcourut toute la terre, pour apprendre à ses habitants l’art de la cultiver. [...] Cérès en a fait autant. [...] Le Laboureur a une terre qu’il cultive pour y semer son grain ; le Philosophe à la sienne. *Semez votre or dans une terre blanche feuillée*, disent les Philosophes. [...] Le grain ne sçauroit germer, s’il ne pourrit en terre auparavant. Nous avons parlé très-souvent de la putréfaction des matieres Philosophiques, comme de la clef de l’oeuvre”. Dom Pernety, *Les Fables Egyptiennes et Grecques dévoilées et réduites au même principe*, tome second, Bauche, Paris, 1763, pp. 261-2.

<sup>421</sup> Francis Bacon, *De Sapientia Veterum*, in Id., *Collected Works of Francis Bacon*, with a new introduction by Graham Rees, Routledge, London, 1996, vol. VI (2), p. 682.

<sup>422</sup> “De virga autem illa aurea, vix videmur sustinere posse impetum Chymistarum, si in nos hac ex parte irruant; cum illi ab eodem lapide suo, et auri montes et restitutionem corporum naturalium veluti a portis inferorum promittant”. *Ibid.*

into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”<sup>423</sup>. As remarked by the medieval alchemist George Ripley, “Chryst do it wytnes, wythowt the grayne of Whete / Dye in the ground, encrease may thou not gete”<sup>424</sup>. In this biblical saying alchemists see the key of their work, that begins precisely with the stage of ‘putrefaction’ or ‘dissolution’:

To return again to putrefaction, O seeker of the Magistry and devotee of philosophy, know that, in like manner, no metallic seed can develop, or multiply, unless the said seed, by itself alone, and without the introduction of any foreign substance, be reduced to a perfect putrefaction<sup>425</sup>.

The metaphor related to the growth of the seed of wheat, that ‘dies’ within the earth before it ‘is reborn’, perfectly condenses the alchemical idea that death is a necessary condition for the renewal of matter: “Neither human nor animal bodies can be multiplied or propagated without decomposition; the grain and all vegetable seed when cast into the ground, must decay before it can spring up again”<sup>426</sup>. Moreover, the stages of the *opus alchymicum* are constantly described in terms of the seasonal cycle of decay and regeneration:

As to the (length of) time required for the preparation, you must begin it in the winter [...] and extract the moisture until the spring, when all things become green, and when our substance, too, should exhibit a variety of colors. In the summer the substance should be reduced to powder by means of a powerful fire. The autumn, the season of ripeness, should witness its maturity, or final redness<sup>427</sup>.

---

<sup>423</sup> John 12: 24.

<sup>424</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 148.

<sup>425</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., HM 171. Latin text: “Et ut iterum ad putrefactionem redeam, inquisitor magisterii et deditus Philosophiae sciat, quod pari ratione nullum metallicum semen operari possit, aut sese augmentate, nisi hoc semen metallicum per sese solummodo absque ulla peregrini additione aut permixtione ad perfectam putrefactionem redactum sit”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum Duodecim Clavibus*, VIII Clavis, MH 413. See also ‘seed’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>426</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., HM 170. Latin text: “Omnis caro sive humana, sive animalium sui augmentationem aut propagationem nullam producere potest, nisi id fiat principio per putrefactionem: semen quoque agri et omne, quod vegetabilibus subiectum est et appropriatum, augmentari nequit, nisi putrefactione”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum Duodecim Clavibus*, VIII Clavis, MH 409-410.

<sup>427</sup> *A Very Brief Tract Concerning the Philosophical Stone. Written by an Unknown German Sage*, HM 131. Latin text: “Scias tempus laboris, et, quum annus quatuor partes divisus siet, opus hoc in hyeme inchoandum est, quae humida est: et tum humiditatem extrahamus usque ad Ver, quod virescit, ut tunc nobis etiam colores leni quodam in igne sub labore adpareant. Dein ad aestatem progredimur, et tunc opus forti igne pulverisandum est: Ultimo ad autumnum accedimus, et tunc, fructibus maturescentibus, ad nobilem operis rubedinem pervenimus”. *De Lapide Philosophico Perbreve Opusculum, Quod Ab Ignoto Aliquo Germanico Philosopho*, MH 334. The association between the seasonal cycle and the *opus alchymicum* is recurrent in alchemical treatises. The seventeenth-century alchemist Jean d’Espagnet, among others, notices: “Philosophers in handling their Philosophical work, begin their yeare in Winter, to wit, the Sun being in *Capricorne*, which is the former House of *Saturne*, and so come towards the right hand”. Jean D’Espagnet, *The Summary of Physics Recovered, The Summary of Physicks Restored (Enchyridion Physicae Restitutae)*, edited by Thomas Willard, Garland, New York and London, 1999, p. 182. Equally drawing on the parallelism between the alchemical work and the natural cycle of seasons, Dom Pernety remarks: “Souvenez-vous donc bien qu’il faut dissoudre en hiver, cuire au printemps,

In the same way as Proserpina, according to a number of versions of the myth, emerges from the underworld after six months, thus embodying the restoration of life in springtime, the seed of wheat bears its fruits only after being ‘buried’ underground. Again, alchemical imagery seems to intermingle with Elizabeth’s complex allegorical apparatus as a goddess of renewal. If considered in this light, *The Winter’s Tale*, displaying a world where “things newborn” spring from “things dying” (III, iii, 110-1), evidently following the natural cycle of seasons, and where women play a central role, might be read as a homage to the healing, and obliquely alchemical, qualities of the dear Tudor queen in a time characterised by a retrieval of the cult of Elizabeth, as already said<sup>428</sup>. It should also be noted that the female dimension, that is central in the play, is also of paramount importance in alchemical literature and symbolism: while performing the work of creating the stone, the alchemist symbolically retraces the steps through which the foetus grows within the uterus, thus imitating the female life-giving task, the *opus alchymicum* being, in its turn, an imitation of the transmutation of metals that occurs within the womb of Mother Earth. John Donne himself dwells on the analogy between the creation of the stone and human generation in the poem *Loves Alchymie*: “And as no chymique yet th’Elixar got, / But glorifies his *pregnant pot*” (italics mine)<sup>429</sup>.

Another alchemical motif that well applies to Queen Elizabeth’s imagery is the hermaphrodite or androgyne, that, in the language of alchemists, is an emblem of the primeval unity of Creation. Believing in Adam’s original androgyny, alchemists define him as the first natural philosopher<sup>430</sup> and especially as a symbol of the undivided, prelapsarian state of the world, when the human and the heavenly dimensions were fully integrated. Alchemical writers, as much as Neoplatonic and Gnostic philosophers, base their belief

---

coaguler en été, et cueillir les fruits en automne, c’est-à-dire, donner la teinture”. Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>428</sup> As will be discussed, in the first years of the reign of the new monarch James I Stuart, the symbolism related to Queen Elizabeth was recovered and applied to Prince Henry, often associated with Astraea and, on the whole, regarded as a figure of renewal. See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., and Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored. The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603-42*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1981. As a case in point, in Samuel Daniel’s masque *Tethys Festival, or The Queen’s Wake* (1610), organised on the occasion of the investiture of Henry Stuart as Prince of Wales, the sword of Astraea is given precisely to Prince Henry. For an account of the masque, see John Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First: His Royal Consort, Family, and Court; Collected from Original Manuscripts, Scarce Pamphlets, Corporation Records, Parochial Registers, Etc.*, John Nichols, New York, Franklin, London, Society of Antiquaries, 1828, vol. II, pp. 351 ff.

<sup>429</sup> John Donne, *Loves Alchymie*, ll. 7-8, in Id., *Poems*, cit., p. 230.

<sup>430</sup> “This spirituall substance [the Quintessence or Philosopher’s Stone] is that onely thing, which from aboue was shewed vnto Adam, and most desired by the holy fathers, which *Hermes* and *Aristotle* doe call the truth without lye, the certaine most certaine, and the secret of all secrets”. Giovanni Baptista Agnello, *The Revelation of the Secret Spirit*, cit., p. 3.

that Adam was originally androgynous on the following passage from *Genesis*: “Male and female created hee them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created”<sup>431</sup>. In the highly emblematic language of alchemists, Adam is another term for the alchemical hermaphrodite and denotes the main objective of the *opus alchymicum*: the recovery of the lost golden age. The Fall of Adam actually stands for the loss of the primordial harmony that existed between man and God, microcosm and macrocosm, and of that ideal time when the secret workings of nature were fully accessible to the first-created of human beings<sup>432</sup>. Interestingly enough, Elizabeth used to describe herself in androgynous terms, as both a queen and a king, thus transcending her earthly nature and defying all prejudices against her unwillingness to marry. In a speech delivered in 1601, she argued to have both “the glorious name of a King” and the “royal authority of a Queen”<sup>433</sup>, thus evoking the “perfect integration of male and female energies”<sup>434</sup> that characterises the alchemical hermaphrodite. George Ripley himself celebrates the androgynous virtues of Queen Elizabeth when claiming that God endowed her with “feminine patience” as well as sustained her with “incomparable magnanimitie, far passing all humane wisdom and mans force”<sup>435</sup>. As noticed by Eliade, the hermaphrodite as a symbol of man’s spiritual perfection is not limited to alchemy but is to be found in Eastern and Western cultures alike, from prehistoric to modern times<sup>436</sup>. Bearing in mind Eliade’s authoritative studies, it should also be pointed out that the motif of androgyny as an emblem of the original unity of the cosmos and, therefore, as an ideal condition that has to be retrieved, received a new emphasis after Marsilio Ficino’s fifteenth-century translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, an event that promoted the rediscovery of alchemical literature in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In the treatise known as *Asclepius*, in particular, Hermes Trismegistus discusses with his disciple about the androgyny of God:

«Do you say that god is of both sexes, Trismegistus?» «Not only god, Asclepius, but all things ensouled and soulless. [...] For each sex is full of fecundity, and the linking of the two or, more accurately, their union is incomprehensible. If you call it Cupid or Venus or both, you will be correct»<sup>437</sup>.

<sup>431</sup> *Genesis*, 5:2. See also *Genesis*, 1:27: “So God created man in his owne Image, in the Image of God created hee him; male and female created hee them”.

<sup>432</sup> See the “Fall of Adam” in Alexander Roob (ed.), *Il Museo Ermetico*, cit., pp. 148-57.

<sup>433</sup> Queen Elizabeth the First, *The golden speech of Queen Elizabeth to her last Parliament, 30 November, Anno Domini, 1601*, Printed by Tho. Milbourn, London, 1659.

<sup>434</sup> See ‘hermaphrodite’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 98.

<sup>435</sup> George Ripley, “The Epistle Dedicatoire”, in Id., *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit, A3v.

<sup>436</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Mefistofele e l’androgine*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma, 1995 (or. ed. Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles et l’androgynie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1962).

<sup>437</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 79. Latin text: “Vtriusque sexus ergo deum dicis, o Trismegiste? – Non deum solum, Asclepi, sed omnia animalia et inanimalia. [...] procreatione enim uterque plenus est sexus et eius utriusque conexio aut, quod est uerius,

The fact that alchemical imagery was so complexly interwoven with the symbolism built around the figure of the Tudor queen seems to be an additional reason to read Elizabeth's symbolical androgyny also in the light of alchemy. Mercury itself, that, as already said, was part of the celebratory apparatus of the queen<sup>438</sup>, is usually depicted by alchemists as a hermaphrodite, as ironically suggested by Ben Jonson in *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*: "I am their Crude, and their Sublimate; [...] sometimes their *Hermaphrodite*"<sup>439</sup>. Transcending the dichotomy inherent in the couple male-female is another sign of the god-like and quintessential status of the queen and, consequently, of her reign. As argued by Simon Forman, the conjunction of contraries is a quality of heaven and a synonym of immortality, whereas the world "under the skie" is characterised by a constant struggle among opposing polarities and is bound to decay and death: "For yt is *Omne oppositum* under the skie, / Which is the only cause all Creatures doe die. / For in their simile all thinges doe Rejoice"<sup>440</sup>. According to Eliade, the recovery of primeval androgyny entails an initiation to a higher dimension, where the so-called *coniunctio oppositorum* is accomplished: the retrieval of androgyny, as much as the concept known as *regressus ad uterum*, presupposes a 'death' in this world and a consequent 'rebirth'<sup>441</sup> in another, more perfect reality. Again, Elizabeth is presented as a figure of moral and spiritual renewal: as a reflection of God, the queen, already described by Davies as "an Alchymist divine", cannot be praised but in androgynous terms.

In Shakespeare's sonnet 20 the hermaphrodite is associated with alchemical gold. The poet praises the androgyny of the Fair Youth, presented as an embodiment of divine virtues and of 'gold', in terms that are highly evocative of alchemical imagery:

A woman's face with nature's own hand painted,  
 Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;  
 A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted  
 With shifting change as is false woman's fashion;  
 An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,  
 Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth.  
 (Sonnet 20, ll. 1-6)

The hermaphroditic traits of the Fair Youth, "master" and "mistress" at the same time,

---

unitas inconprehensibilis est, quem siue Cupidinem siue Venerem siue utrumque recte poteris nuncupare".  
*Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 330.

<sup>438</sup> See Douglas Brooks-Davies, *The Mercurian Monarch*, cit., and Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic and the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., pp. 25-6.

<sup>439</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 39-41, p. 435.

<sup>440</sup> Simon Forman, *Of the Division of the Chaos*, ll. 95-7, AP 58.

<sup>441</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mefistofele e l'androgine*, cit., p. 98.

makes him a personification of alchemical gold, so much so that with his eye he ‘gilds’ everything whereupon he gazes, in the same way as the philosopher’s stone ‘gilds’ imperfect metals. As the sun, “gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy”, and the alchemical elixir, turning all metals into gold, Shakespeare’s Youth has the faculty to bring everything to a superior state of excellency. The association between the Fair Youth, in whose person contraries are reconciled, and gold constantly recurs in Shakespeare’s sonnets, thus suggesting that the boy is a mirror of heavenly harmony. His androgyny is indeed a further sign of his ‘golden’ perfection: as already said, in alchemical literature the hermaphrodite is a synonym of ‘gold’ since it stands for the highest possible degree of wholeness. In sonnet 114 the lyrical voice further praises the transformative, and alchemical, faculties of the Youth:

Or whether shall I say mine eye saith true,  
 And that your love taught it this alchemy?  
 To make of monsters, and things indigest,  
 Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble.  
 Creating every bad a perfect best.  
 (Sonnet 114, ll. 3-7)

Interestingly enough, in the 1609-edition of the Sonnets, the term ‘alchemy’ in sonnet 114 evidently stands out because written in italics and with capital letter, thus capturing the reader’s attention: “And that your loue taught it this *Alcumie?*”<sup>442</sup>. By transmuting “monsters” and “things indigest” into “cherubins”, the Youth distils goodness out of evil, thus “Creating every bad a perfect best” and, therefore, uncovering the golden essence hidden in matter. Overstepping the limits inherent in the dichotomy male-female implies the attainment of a renewed and ‘refined’ dimension and “the extinction of the earlier differentiated state”<sup>443</sup> – a condition of harmony that alchemists usually depict as a ‘chemical wedding’. As will be considered below, this is a key topic in *The Winter’s Tale*, a play in which the final reunion between King Leontes and Queen Hermione, the couple that has been “dissevered” (V, iii, 155) in order to be ‘reconciled’, stands for the reintegration of all previously opposing forces. The astonishing ‘resurrection’ of Hermione, that symbolises the “recuperation of feminine nature [...] and the undoing of the demonisation of (hetero)sexuality”<sup>444</sup>, is the prelude to the final wedding between the

---

<sup>442</sup> William Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, Being a Reproduction in Facsimile of The First Edition 1609, From the Copy in the Malone Collection in the Bodleian Library, With Introduction and Bibliography by Sidney Lee, Clarendon Press, London, 1905, Sonnet 114, l. 4.

<sup>443</sup> See ‘chemical wedding’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>444</sup> Ian McAdam, “Magic and Gender in late Shakespeare”, in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare*, cit., p. 255.

queen and her king: a marriage, that, in its turn, is highly reminiscent of the contemporary alchemical writings and emblems illustrating the completion of the *opus alchymicum* as a royal wedding between a king and a queen (see plates from 1 to 17).

As pointed out by Frances Yates, an integral part of the iconography that was created around the figure of Elizabeth was the representation of the queen as the one and only Tudor rose, joining together the two previously opposing roses of the York and Lancaster families: “It is an all-pervasive commonplace of Elizabethan symbolism that she is the one Tudor Rose in whom the red and white rose of York and Lancaster are united”<sup>445</sup>. The red and white roses accompanied the portrayals of the queen in both paintings and poems: “The conflation of the white and red roses present in many of her official portraits aimed at stressing her legitimacy as a monarch, recalling her Tudor lineage”<sup>446</sup>. The red and the white roses are equally relevant in alchemical imagery, symbolising the reconciliation of opposites: male and female, king and queen, *Sol* and *Luna*, gold and silver, macrocosm and microcosm (see plates 24 and 60, “Rosa Rubea” and “Rosa Alba”). Alchemists paradoxically speak of the existence of the red and white elixirs that, being two, are, in fact, only one: the “Elixer both red and white”<sup>447</sup> that denotes the perfect union of gold and silver. The well-known tendency of alchemical writers to overcome the duality of the earthly dimension and to bring everything back to primordial harmony, in order to “accomplish the miracles of One Thing”<sup>448</sup>, is evident in the numerous illustrations that show unity growing out of duplicity: the fusion of the red and white roses is only one of the several emblems alluding to the reunion of contraries, such as the ‘chemical wedding’ between the king and the queen. The blending of the two roses in the figure of Elizabeth, as well as the celebration of her androgynous features, further strengthen the fact that she is a personification of the alchemical hermaphrodite or Adamic state of “undivided unity”<sup>449</sup>. The alchemical symbolism related to the white and red roses clearly recurs in the pseudo-Arnaldian *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550) and in Michael Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens* (1618). The epigram to emblem XXVII in *Atalanta fugiens* reads as follows: “The Rosegarden of Wisdom has an abundance of various flowers, / But the gate is always closed with strong bolts”<sup>450</sup>. The ‘rosegarden’, being a metaphor for the secret place in

---

<sup>445</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Astraea*, cit., pp. 50-51.

<sup>446</sup> Armelle Sabatier, *Shakespeare and Visual Culture. A Dictionary*, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London and New York, 2017, p. 199.

<sup>447</sup> George Ripley, “The Epistle of George Ripley written to King Edward IV”, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 142.

<sup>448</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula smaragdina*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>449</sup> See ‘hermaphrodite’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 98.

<sup>450</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem XXVII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, edited and translated by H.M.E. De Jong, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1969, p. 201. All quotations from Maier’s emblems in *Atalanta fugiens* will refer

which the adept is initiated to the secrets of the alchemical art, is accessible only to those who possess the right ‘key’, i.e. the appropriate knowledge to enter it. The source of Maier’s emblem is precisely *Rosarium philosophorum*, in which the allusion to the white and red roses is explicit:

Quicumque vult intrare Rosarium nostrum, et ibi videre, et habere rosas tam albas quam rubeas absque illa re vili, cum qua nostrae reseraturae reserentur, ille assimilatur homini ambulare volenti absque pedibus; quia in illa re vili est clavis, ex qua septem portae metallicae aperiuntur<sup>451</sup>.

As I have tried to demonstrate so far, alchemy did not serve the Crown only for monetary and economic purposes: it provided the monarch with highly symbolical imagery and language that emphasised the already elaborate iconography of the sovereign as a representative of divine power. In this respect, it is worth quoting Thomas Norton’s preface to *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, an excerpt where the author focuses on the honour and glory the knowledge of alchemy would confer upon English monarchs. The ruler who is learned in the secrets of the art of alchemy would be an example for all other kings and, above all, his realm would be transmuted into a ‘golden age’ of virtue and goodness:

These had adorn’d the *English-Throne*,  
If they had trusted *God* alone:  
For he that hereby *Honor* wins,  
*Shall change the old for better things*.  
And when he comes to *rule* the Land,  
*Reforme* it with a *vertuous hand*:  
Leaving *examples* of *good deedes*  
To every *King* that him *succeedes*:  
Then shall the People *Jubilize*  
In *mutuall love*; and *sacrifise*  
*Praises* to God. O *King* that shall  
These *Workes*! implore the *God* of all  
For timely helpe, in this *good thing*:  
So to a *Just*, and *Glorious King*,  
*Most goodly Graces shall descend*.  
When least look’d for: *To Crown his End*<sup>452</sup>.

As claimed by Cradock in the preface to a treatise in honour of Queen Elizabeth, the

---

to this edition. *Atalanta fugiens* was originally published in Latin: Michaele Maiero, *Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, Emblemata nova de secretis naturae chymica*, Oppenheimii, Ex typographia Hieronymi Galleri, Sumptibus Joh. Theodori de Bry, 1618.

<sup>451</sup> *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 278-79.

<sup>452</sup> Thomas Norton, Preface to *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, TCB 5.

alchemical stone is such a great wonder that alchemical writers have rightly unveiled its secrets only to eminent sovereigns, among whom is of course the queen herself:

May itt please your highnes, Sovereigne *Lady Queene*,  
Here of a Jewell worthy to bee seene  
To take a view [...].  
For that I see that famous learned Clerkes  
Have dedicated heretofore such workes  
To Governors and Kings of nobloe fame,  
Much rather then to men of meaner name.  
For well they saw if good therby might come  
That due itt is to Princes all and some<sup>453</sup>.

Detaining the secrets of alchemical transmutation did not only imply outward wealth and fame, but also allowed the queen to present herself as the incarnation of the more spiritual and religious values associated with the philosopher's stone and with alchemical art: these values, that could be grasped only by those that could properly understand them, are everlastingness, immortality, purity, truth, and heavenly wisdom.

### 3.3. King James's *Daemonologie* and Renaissance Hermeticism

Unlike Queen Elizabeth, King James I has often been regarded as totally hostile to the world of Renaissance Hermeticism. However, "the stereotype of Queen Elizabeth as a passive and gullible victim of the occult"<sup>454</sup> and the equally stereotyped vision of her successor as a fierce opponent of Renaissance magic are two conceptions that need to be reconsidered especially in order to understand the role of Hermeticism in Shakespeare's last plays. As already said, Elizabeth was not a blind supporter of occult practices: her attitude towards alchemical and Hermetic philosophy was simultaneously "definite" and "covert"<sup>455</sup>. In like manner, James was not completely adverse to alchemy and natural magic as he was of witchcraft. As will be discussed below, if James's attitude towards

---

<sup>453</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher's Stone*, ll.1-3 and 29-34, AP 12. In like manner, the alchemist William Bloomfield dedicated his treatise *Quintaessens, or the Regiment of Lyfe* (c. 1574) to Queen Elizabeth employing the following words: "Havyng no thing that I may better pleasure your highnes withall, then this hid treasure that God of his mercy hat gyvyn unto me, myne intent is to revele the same. That to such a singular princess a most preciose & singular Iowel or preciose perle". The treatise is quoted in Robert M. Schuler, "William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist", cit., p. 81.

<sup>454</sup> Jayne Elizabeth Archer, "*Rudenesse itselpe she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia", cit., p. 51.

<sup>455</sup> See Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 17.

black, demonic magic is explicit, his position concerning other kinds of ‘occult’ practices, conversely, is less straightforward.

King James’s treatise on witchcraft, *Daemonologie*, included in the 1616-edition of the monarch’s complete works<sup>456</sup>, was first published in Edinburgh in 1597, and went through two editions in London, in 1603, and several translations in French, Dutch, and Latin<sup>457</sup>. The work, that is usually taken as evidence of the king’s rejection of every form of magical and occult disciplines, was mainly a response to the theses expounded by Reginald Scot in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and by Johann Weyer in *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (1563)<sup>458</sup>. Unlike Scot, who ridiculed the idea “that there can be such a thing as Witch-craft”<sup>459</sup>, and Weyer, who ascribed mainly to the use of herbal drugs the seemingly supernatural actions attributed to witches<sup>460</sup>, James firmly believed in their powers, as Epistemon, the mouthpiece of the monarch in the treatise, claims: “For the trewth in these actions, it wil be easily confirmed, to any that pleases to take paine vpon the reading of diuers authenticke histories, and the enquiring of daily experiences”<sup>461</sup>. Rejecting the existence of witchcraft, Epistemon continues, is denying God since the devil is the very contrary of the Creator and, therefore, the latter’s greatness is further enhanced by the former’s evil:

For since the Diuel is the very contrarie opposite to God, there can bee no better way to know God, then by the contrarie; as by the ones power (though a creature) to

---

<sup>456</sup> See King James the First, *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, Iames by the Grace of God, King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith*, Printed by Robert Barker and John Bill, London, 1616.

<sup>457</sup> See Stuart Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship”, in Sydney Anglo (ed.), *The Damned Art. Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1977, p. 156.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.* As Clark remarks, “Two dialogues which could have been actual models for the *Daemonologie* had recently appeared in England, Lambert Daneau’s *Les sorciers* translated as *A dialogue of witches* (1575), and Holland’s *Treatise against Witchcraft*. Discussions of magic as well as witchcraft, of spirits and possession and of examinations and punishments were usual”. *Ibidem*, p. 169. As documented by Thorndike, Scot maintained that “to ascribe to witches powers which were fit for God alone was to belittle the miracles of Christ by crediting the like to witches”. Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, cit., vol. VI, p. 529.

<sup>459</sup> King James the First, “Preface to the Reader”, *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogve, Diuided into three Bookes, Written by the High and Mightie Prince, Iames by the Grace of God King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith*, in Id., *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince*, cit., pp. 91-92: “The fearefull abounding at this time in this Countrey, of these detestable slaues of the Diuel, the Witches or enchaunters, hath mooued mee [...] to dispatch in post, this following Treatise of mine [...] to resolute the doubting hearts of many; [...] against the damnable opinions of two principally in our aage, whereof the one called *Scot*, an Englishman, is not ashamed in publike Print to deny, that there can be such a thing as Witch-craft: [...] The other called *Wierus*, a German Physition, sets out a publike Apologie for all these craft-folkes”.

<sup>460</sup> See Giovanna Silvani, Introduction to Giacomo I Stuart, *Demonologia (Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into Three Bookes)*, a cura di Giovanna Silvani, Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento, 1997, p. ix.

<sup>461</sup> King James the First, *Daemonologie*, cit., p. 105.

admire the power of the great Creatour<sup>462</sup>.

In several points of the text, King James is so specific in describing the arrangements under which necromancers and witches sign a pact with the devil that he seems to be quoting Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*:

Fra they be come once vnto this perfection in euill, in hauing any knowledge (whether learned or vnlearned) of this blacke arte; they then begin to be wearie of the raising of their Maister, by coniured circles, being both so difficile and perillous, and so come plainely to a contract with him, wherein is specially contained formes and effects<sup>463</sup>.

*Daemonologie* has long led scholars to conclude that “Renaissance magic itself was looked on with suspicion by the Stuart Court”<sup>464</sup> and has been conceived of as a proof of “the Court’s apparent hostility to magic”<sup>465</sup>. However, as Hart observes, James’s treatise reflects the contradictory disposition towards natural magic that was typical of the time:

James’s warnings in *Daemonologie* were centred on what he considers black, demonic magic, as distinct from angelic, white magic, his wider purpose here being an attempt to distinguish between the two; and it was quite common for Englishmen to attack witchcraft whilst praising the natural magic of such groups as the Paracelsians<sup>466</sup>.

It is worth noting that throughout his work on demonology, the Stuart king refers exclusively to *Necromancie*, *Witch-craft*, and *Astrologie* with no allusion to the ‘white’ magic of the kind Prospero performs in *The Tempest*, as will be seen below. Of particular importance is the fact that James regularly stresses the distinction between magicians and witches. Even though they are equally allies of the devil, the former are moved by their thirst for knowledge, whereas the latter act with the vile intent of harming men and acquiring material riches:

For where the *Magicians*, as allured by curiositie, in the most part of their practices, seeke principally the satisfying of the same, and to winne to themselues a popular honour and estimation; these *Witches* on the other part, being inticed, either for the desire of reuenge, or of worldly riches, their whole practises are either to hurt men and their goods, or what they possesse, for satisfying of their cruell mindes in the former<sup>467</sup>.

---

<sup>462</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>464</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.* As Hart points out, “Certainly Stuart courtiers frequently displayed contradictory signs as to their personal enthusiasm for practical magic. James reflected this himself, fearing the magic of Agrippa but patronising the magic drama of masque”.

<sup>467</sup> King James, *Daemonologie*, cit., p. 112.

Further emphasising the difference between the two categories, the king concludes that “Witches are seruants onely, and slaues to the diuel; but the Necromanciers are his Masters and commanders”<sup>468</sup>.

In order to shed light on King James’s view of Renaissance magic, it is worth considering Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Since the Stuart monarch was the patron of Shakespeare’s theatre company, the King’s Men, from 1603, it goes without saying that the dramatist’s plays were expected to please the king’s tastes. As Kurland observes, the character and interests of the king and the concerns related to his person, politics, and court are key issues to a proper understanding of Shakespeare’s last plays<sup>469</sup>. In particular, the King’s Men performed *The Tempest* at court before their patron in November 1611 and the play was later staged in the winter season of 1612-13, along with *The Winter’s Tale*, in honour of the celebrations for the wedding between Princess Elizabeth Stuart, James’s daughter, and Frederick V, the Elector Palatine<sup>470</sup>. As documented by Kronbergs, “the Palatine Wedding celebrations [...] represented the climax of Shakespeare’s career as a patronage dramatist”<sup>471</sup>. The figure of Prospero, the emblem of the Renaissance magus who employs his magical art in order to restore harmony, truth, and order might have appealed to King James’s ideas, being in complete contrast with the kind of demonic magic that was usually associated with personalities as Henry Cornelius Agrippa and Roger Bacon<sup>472</sup>. According to Hart, the magic practised by Prospero would have seem admissible to the king since, as will be discussed, he used to present himself as a “Philosopher King”<sup>473</sup>, able to understand those secret laws of nature that were impenetrable to others:

In this spirit magic would seem acceptable to James when used to reaffirm the monarch’s natural position at the head of the cosmic order, and unacceptable when advocated as an agent of reform or used to challenge the monarchy<sup>474</sup>.

---

<sup>468</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>469</sup> Stuart M. Kurland, “Shakespeare and James I: personal rule and public responsibility”, cit., p. 210.

<sup>470</sup> As attested by Graham Parry, *The Winter’s Tale* was among the twenty plays performed by the King’s Men: “For the celebrations during the winter of 1612-13 some twenty plays were given at Court by the King’s Men, which was Shakespeare’s company. These plays included *Much Ado*, both parts of *Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*”. Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., pp. 100-101.

<sup>471</sup> Ann Kronbergs, “The Significance of the Court Performance of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* at the Palatine Wedding Celebrations”, in Sara Smart and Mara R. Wade (eds.), *The Palatine Wedding of 1613: Protestant Alliance and Court Festival*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2013, p. 343.

<sup>472</sup> In Robert Greene’s *The Honorable Historie of Frier Bacon*, for instance, Roger Bacon is clearly depicted as a conjurer and as a magus who practised black magic, as will be discussed. See Robert Greene, *The Honorable Historie of Frier Bacon, and Frier Bongay As it was plaid by her Maiesties seruants*, Printed by Adam Islip for Edward White, London, 1594.

<sup>473</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

In line with his conception of divine rule, King James was used to expressing his ideas in print, “another extension of the desire to settle controversies and instruct his subjects”<sup>475</sup>. As Goldberg observes in relation to James’s penchant for writing, the monarch knew very well that the root of ‘authority’ is ‘author’<sup>476</sup>. Praising King James’s unequalled “gift of speech”, Francis Bacon compares him to Augustus Caesar:

And for your gift of speech, I call to mind what Cornelius Tacitus saith of Augustus Caesar; *Augusto profluens, et quae principem deceret, eloquentia fuit*; [that his style of speech was flowing and prince-like: ]. [...] your Majesty’s manner of speech is indeed prince-like, flowing as from a fountain, and yet streaming and branching itself into nature’s order, full of facility and felicity, imitating none, and inimitable by any<sup>477</sup>.

James was aware that making his ideas circulate in print would allow him to defend them “from the wrong of time” and, above all, to keep instructing his subjects even after death, as Bacon himself remarks in another passage from *The Advancement of Learning*:

the Images of mens wits and knowledges remaine in Bookes, exempted from the wrong of time, and capable of perpetuall renouation: Neither are they fitly to be called Images, because they generate still, and cast their seedes in the mindes of others, prouoking and causing infinit actions and opinions, in succeeding ages<sup>478</sup>.

In “a long line of royal textbooks”, Clark points out, *Daemonologie* was the earliest expression of the Stuart monarch’s conception of divine kingship<sup>479</sup>. The king’s treatise on demonology, the scholar continues, “was integral to his view of monarchy as expressed in the *Basilikon Doron* and the *Trewe law of free monarchies* and it led to his famous self-identification with King Solomon as the paradigm ruler”<sup>480</sup>. *Basilikon Doron*, the treatise James first dedicated to his eldest son, Prince Henry, and, later, to Charles, in order to instruct them on their duties as princes and future kings, is one of his first attempts to illustrate his conception of royal authority<sup>481</sup>. Monarchs are the mirror of God’s perfection

---

<sup>475</sup> Stuart Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship”, cit., p. 165.

<sup>476</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature. Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1983, p. 18.

<sup>477</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, “To the King”, in Id., *Collected Works of Francis Bacon*, cit., vol. III, Part I, p. 262.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 318.

<sup>479</sup> Stuart Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship”, cit., p. 165.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.* A few words below, Clark observes that “*Daemonologie* was not tangential to, let alone aberrant from, his other early political writings. Its arguments complemented the Biblical, historico-legal and patriarchal defences of monarchy attempted in *The Trewe law of free monarchies* and it dealt with one aspect of a kingship idealised in the *Basilikon Doron*”. *Ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>481</sup> *Basilikon Doron* was first written in the form of a letter addressed to Prince Henry and officially published in 1603. After Henry’s death, in 1612, James dedicated the treatise to his other son and future king of England, Charles I.

and, therefore, are required to show their peoples the right path towards righteousness and to “giue light to all their steppes” as “brighte lampes of godlines and vertue”:

Remember then, that this glistering worldly glorie of Kings, is giuen them by God, to teache them to preasse so to glister & shine before their people, in al works of sanctification & righteousnes, that their persons as brighte lampes of godlines and vertue may, going in & out before their people, giue light to all their steppes. Remember also, that by the right knowledge, and feare of God (whiche is *the beginning of wisdom*, as *Salomon* faith) ye shall know all the thinges necessary for the discharge of your duety, both as a christian, & as a King, seeing in him, as in a mirrour, the course of all earthly yhings, whereof he is the spring and onely moouer<sup>482</sup>.

The same conceptions recur in the *Trewe law of free monarchies*, where King James explicitly defines himself as the lieutenant of God on earth, divinely appointed to take care of the microcosm of man and behave as “a loving father” and “a careful watchman” of his subjects:

And therefore in the coronation of our own Kings [...] they give their oaths [...] to maintain concord [...] as a loving father, and a careful watchman, caring for them more than for himself; knowing himself to be ordained for them, and they not for him; and therefore countable to that great God, who placed him as his lieutenant over them, upon the peril of his soul to procure that weal of both souls and bodies as far as in him lieth, of all them that are committed to his charge<sup>483</sup>.

Monarchs, James declares, “are justly called gods for that they exercised a manner of resemblance of divine power upon earth”<sup>484</sup>.

As might be expected, then, witchcraft represented a challenge to the “well-fare and peace” the monarch was expected to maintain in his divinely-appointed reign. It follows that the subject of demonology was complexly related to James’s belief in the divine right of kings<sup>485</sup>. Since he presented himself as a representative of God on earth and as the sun enlightening his realm, “it was natural that he should seize this early opportunity to unravel publicly, in court and in print, the mysterious vice of witchcraft, especially drawing on the ‘latest’ Continental theories”<sup>486</sup>. In the role of “teacher and patriarch”<sup>487</sup> and as a “natural father & kindly master”, a “good King” has to protect his realm from any kind of disorder and vice:

---

<sup>482</sup> King James the First, *Basilikon Doron or His Maiesties Instrvctions to his Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince*, Printed by Robert Walde-grave, Printer to the Kings Majestie, Edinburgh, 1603, sig. C2.

<sup>483</sup> King James the First, *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, 1603, in Kate Aughterson (ed.), *The English Renaissance*, cit., p. 118. James’s treatise was first published in 1599 and later published again in 1603.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>485</sup> See Stuart Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship”, cit., p. 166.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*

A good King, thinking his highest honor to consist in the due discharge of his calling, employeth all his studie and paines, to procure and maintaine, by the making and execution of good lawes, the well-fare and peace of his people; and as their naturall father & kindly maister, thinketh his greatest contentment standeth in their prosperity, and his greatest suretie in hauing their harts, subiecting his owne private affections and appetites to the weale and standing of his subiectes, euer thinking the common interesse his cheefest particulare<sup>488</sup>.

Witchcraft is actually one of the crimes which the monarch has to guard his peoples against, along with sodomy, murder, and incest:

so is there some horrible crimes that ye are bound in conscience neuer to forgiue: suche as Witch-craft, wilfull murther, Incest (especiallie with-in the degrees of consanguinitie) Sodomy, Poysoning, and false coine<sup>489</sup>.

Rather than a definite stance against Renaissance magic as a whole, then, it seems that *Daemonologie* should be read more as “a re-statement of the need for order and its goodness, seen from a different perspective”<sup>490</sup>. In Clark’s opinion, James’s campaign against witchcraft allowed him to settle his ideals of kingship and especially to present himself as the right figure to accomplish them: “[a]t a vital stage in his early career they [witches] helped him to establish a view of monarchy and his own fitness for implementing it”<sup>491</sup>. By removing witches from his godly reign, James could further enhance his image as a divine viceroy on earth since witchcraft was not only conceived of as one the worst of human vices but, above all, as a rebellion against God<sup>492</sup>. As the king makes clear in *Daemonologie*, those who have been placed by God as His lieutenants are required to be uncompromising in the punishment of witches, “For where God begins iustly to strike by his lawfull Lieutenants, it is not in the deuils power to defraud or beraue him of the office, or effect of his powerfull and reuenging Scepter”<sup>493</sup>. It follows that everyone coming to terms with the devil, as witches were believed to do, was opposing both divine and royal authority<sup>494</sup>. At the same time, however, James warns from the danger of punishing an innocent:

---

<sup>488</sup> King James the First, *Basilikon Doron*, cit., pp. 24-25.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>490</sup> Stuart Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship”, cit., p. 177.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>492</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 174: “James himself acknowledged the usefulness of the argument by antithesis in distinguishing monarchy from tyranny, ‘for *contraria iuxta se posita magis elucescunt*’. He also used the language of inversion to describe the disorder that would follow disobedience to kings. [...] But the most elaborate attempt to characterise disorder by inversion was surely to be found in Renaissance treatises on witchcraft”.

<sup>493</sup> King James the First, *Daemonologie*, cit., p. 120.

<sup>494</sup> Stuart Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship”, cit., p. 166: “The king’s Christian rectitude made him the Devil’s principal target”.

Judges ought indeede to beware whom they condemne: for it is as great a crime (as Salomon saith,) *To condemne the innocent, as to let the guiltie escape free*; neither ought the report of any one infamous person, be admitted for a sufficient prooffe, which can stand of no law<sup>495</sup>.

Particularly significant is the fact that the Stuart king, as scholars have noted, was not as harsh in the actual condemnation of supposed witches as he was in *Daemonologie*. Moving from Kittredge's studies, Thorndike points out that "James's bark was much worse than his bite" since "there were only about two executions a year in England during his reign there"<sup>496</sup>. Kittredge actually downsizes the idea that King James's reign in both Scotland and England witnessed a renewed period of ferocious prosecutions of witches. The scholar notices that two of the greatest prosecutions in Scotland, in 1640-1650, and in 1660-1663, did not fall in James's reign and that the trials of 1590-1597 were not initiated by the Stuart king<sup>497</sup>. As far as the convictions that began in 1590 are concerned, Kittredge remarks that it was James's "intellectual curiosity – well known to be one of his most salient characteristics" that "led him to attend the examinations". Furthermore, the scholar continues, "he was not naturally credulous in such matters" and "found the confessions beyond belief, and he pronounced the witches 'extreame lyars'"<sup>498</sup>. Kittredge also highlights the fact that James's statute against witchcraft, dating from 1604, "follows Elizabeth's in the main, even in phraseology"<sup>499</sup> and made the latter stricter only "in some respects"<sup>500</sup>. The 1604-law introduced the clause that it was also a felony to "'consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed, or reward' any such [evil] spirit for any purpose"<sup>501</sup> even though no harm was perpetrated. However, the new king's measures were not a novelty in early modern England, where witchcraft was established as a crime punishable by death already in 1542 by King Henry VIII. It is also worth noticing that "James's accession was not in any sense the signal for an outburst of prosecution" since the first trial for witchcraft during the new monarch's reign occurred only in 1612<sup>502</sup>. A further detail that contrasts the conventional view that the Stuart king was an inflexible and

---

<sup>495</sup> King James the First, *Daemonologie*, cit., p. 135.

<sup>496</sup> Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, cit., vol. VI, p. 550. See also George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1929, p. 277.

<sup>497</sup> George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, cit., p. 278. On the history of Elizabethan and Jacobean witchcraft, see also Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: a Regional and Comparative Study*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970.

<sup>498</sup> George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, cit., p. 278.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 281 and ff.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 283.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>502</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 288.

relentless prosecutor of witches and magicians is provided by the cases in which the accused were eventually absolved by James himself, thus testifying to the latter's clemency rather than blind cruelty<sup>503</sup>. As Kittredge observes, these historical facts "prove both that James was no bigoted and indiscriminating witch-finder and witch-prosecutor, and that the judges tried to get at the truth"<sup>504</sup>, as the monarch himself advocates in *Daemonologie*.

King James, as already anticipated, constantly cultivated his image as a Philosopher King, as Solomon, able to harness what was secret to others. In the dedicatory epistle preceding *The Great Instauration*, Francis Bacon explicitly associates James with Solomon:

you who resemble Solomon in so many things – in the gravity of your judgments, in the peacefulness of your reign, in the largeness of your heart, in the noble variety of the books which you have composed<sup>505</sup>.

The vastness of the king's knowledge is further praised by Bacon in the letter addressed to James with which *The Advancement of Learning* begins:

there hath not been since Christ's time any king or temporal monarch which hath been so learned in all literature and erudition, divine and human. [...] to drink indeed of the true fountains of learning, nay to have such a fountain of learning in himself, in a king, and in a king born, is almost a miracle<sup>506</sup>.

James's erudition in both human and divine subjects makes him the most learned king that had ever existed since Christ's time. It should be recalled that one of Solomon's most important virtues was the knowledge of arcana<sup>507</sup>. In the dedicatory epistle to the king, Bacon himself remarks that "nothing parcell of the world, is denied to Mans enquirie and inuention" since as "hee [Solomon] sayth, *The Spirite of Man is as the Lampe of God, wherewith hee searcheth the inwardnesse of all secrets*"<sup>508</sup>. James, therefore, embodied the theory of knowledge celebrated by Plato, the conception according to which all knowledge is innate and dwells in one's inner soul:

your Majesty were the best instance to make a man of Plato's opinion, that all knowledge is but remembrance, and that the mind of man by nature knoweth all things, and hath but her own native and original notions. [...] so hath God given your

---

<sup>503</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 314-15.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibidem* p. 315.

<sup>505</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration*, "Epistle Dedicatory", in Id., *Collected Works of Francis Bacon*, cit., vol. IV, p. 12.

<sup>506</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, "To the King", cit., p. 263.

<sup>507</sup> See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>508</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, "To the King", cit., p. 265.

Majesty a composition of understanding admirable, being able to compass and comprehend the greatest matters, and nevertheless to touch and apprehend the least<sup>509</sup>.

Parry observes that “James, after all, considered himself to be a learned monarch” and, therefore, “he could exhibit his learning and taste in spectacles of emblematic wit of a high order”<sup>510</sup>, such as the court masques.

The celebration of James I as “the British Solomon” reached its climax in Rubens’s painting on the ceiling of the Banqueting House<sup>511</sup>. Since Solomon was also a natural philosopher, it is difficult to believe that this kind of symbolism did not apply to the Stuart king as well. Bacon further praises James’s education claiming that he is “learned in all literature [...], divine and human”<sup>512</sup>. Interestingly enough, Birrell documents that the king’s library was extremely furnished and covered a wide variety of topics, including a number of esoteric books:

A student working in the British Library on the political and religious thought of the Jacobean age will find that many of the books he is using, especially the more esoteric ones, are James’s own copies<sup>513</sup>.

In order to better understand James’s ambiguous attitude towards occult knowledge, it is worth mentioning a conversation between the Stuart monarch and Sir John Harrington that occurred in 1604-05. After questioning him on his opinions on witchcraft<sup>514</sup>, the king revealed to Harrington that he was able to foretell the death of his mother, Queen Mary, before it actually happened. However, the monarch also warned his interlocutor against certain kinds of books that he had himself read because they would lead him to “evile consultations”:

More serious discourse did next ensue, wherein I wantede roome to continue, and sometime roome to escape; [...] His Highnesse tolde me [the queen’s] ... deathe was visible in Scotlande before it did really happen [...]. He then did remarke muche on this gifte, and saide he had sought out of certaine bookes a sure waie to attaine knowledge of future chances. Hereat, he namede many bookes, which I did not

---

<sup>509</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 262.

<sup>510</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 66.

<sup>511</sup> See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 26. For a reproduction of Rubens’s paintings on the ceiling of the Banqueting House, see the plates in Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 33 and Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>512</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, “To the King”, cit., p. 263.

<sup>513</sup> Thomas A. Birrell, *English Monarchs and their Books: from Henry VII to Charles II*, The British Library, London, 1986, p. 27.

<sup>514</sup> “His Majestie did much presse for my opinion touchinge the power of Satane in matter of witchcraft; and asked me, with muche gravitie, ‘If I did trulie understande, why the devil did worke more with anciente women than others?’”. See John Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First*, cit., vol. I, pp. 492-93.

knowe, nor by whom written; but advised me not to consult some authors which would leade me to evile consultations<sup>515</sup>.

The above-quoted words suggest that King James himself, seemingly adverse to every form of magic, nevertheless believed to possess a “gifte” to predict the future, an ability that “he had sought out of certaine bookes”. Rather surprisingly, the monarch, who strenuously opposed witches and conjurers, liked to present himself as a sort of Prospero, the erudite Hermetic philosopher who cultivated knowledge for the attainment of wisdom and goodness and, unlike others, able to discern between good and evil consultations. Again, James’s behaviour contrasts with what he declares in *Daemonologie*, where he defines the so-called *sortari*, those who devote themselves to soothsaying, as the devil’s associates. In particular, James condemns the soothsayers’ practice to decree whether a diseased person would die or live:

The cause wherefore they were called *Sortiary*, proceeded of their practiques, seeming to come of lot or chance, such as the turning of the riddle, the knowing of the forme of prayers, or such like tokens, if a person diseased would liue or die: And in generall, that name was giuen them for vsing of such charmes, and freits, as that Craft teacheth them. Many points of their craft and practiques are common betwixt the *Magicians* and them: for they serue both one Master, although in diuers fashions<sup>516</sup>.

In another excerpt of his treatise, the Stuart monarch further denounces the desire typical of learned men to climb higher “vpon the slipperie and vncertaine scale of curiositie”<sup>517</sup> by acquiring the ability to predict future events:

For diuers men hauing attained to a great perfection in learning, [...] finding all naturall things common, aswel to the stupide pedants, as vnto them they assay to vindicate vnto them a greater name, by not onely knowing the course of things heauenly, but likewise to clime to the knowledge of things to come thereby<sup>518</sup>.

There is one further point that should be mentioned in order to consider King James’s complex relationship with Hermetic disciplines. As a matter of fact, the figure of Solomon, with which the Stuart monarch was most frequently identified, was also associated with alchemy. Along with Adam, Noah, and Moses, Solomon was regarded as one of the first prophets of the alchemical art. As Ashmole remarks in the Prolegomena to *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, in ancient times Hermes, Moses, and Solomon possessed the

---

<sup>515</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 493. See also Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>516</sup> King James the First, *Daemonologie*, cit., p. 110.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*

secrets of the philosopher's stone:

*After Hermes had once obtained the Knowledge of this Stone, he gave over the use of all other Stones, and therein only delighted: Moses, and Solomon, (together with Hermes were the only three, that) excelled in the Knowledge thereof, and who therewith wrought Wonders*<sup>519</sup>.

Hermes, Adam, Noah, and Solomon were among the fathers of the so-called *prisca sapientia*, the original wisdom revealed by God to the first patriarchs<sup>520</sup>. Principe observes that “Chymistry itself became one part of a broader ‘Hermetic knowledge’, traceable not just to Hermes but to the most distant and venerable past, to a body of knowledge known as the ‘original wisdom’”<sup>521</sup>. That the association between Solomon and alchemy was well known in Jacobean England is attested by Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*. Mammon actually reveals to have some authoritative alchemical books written by Moses and her sister, the legendary Maria Prophetissa, Adam, and Solomon:

Pertinax Surly,  
Will you believe antiquity? Records?  
I’ll show you a book where Moses and his sister  
And Solomon have written of the art,  
Ay, and a treatise penned by Adam.  
(II, i, 79-83)

Evidence of King James’s closeness to alchemical and Hermetic imagery is provided, rather surprisingly, also by Francis Bacon<sup>522</sup>. In the dedicatory epistle to *The Advancement of Learning*, Bacon associates the Stuart monarch not only with Solomon but also with Hermes Trismegistus:

And the more, because there is met in your Majesty a rare conjunction as well of divine and sacred literature as of profane and human; so as your Majesty standeth invested of that triplicity which in great veneration was ascribed to the ancient Hermes; the power and fortune of a King, the knowledge and illumination of a Priest, and the learning and universality of a Philosopher<sup>523</sup>.

As the Egyptian Hermes, James himself is “three times great” since, as Bacon writes, he is endowed with “the power and fortune of a King, the knowledge and illumination of a Priest, and the learning and universality of a Philosopher”. Moreover, it can be assumed

---

<sup>519</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Prolegomena*, TCB sig. B2r.

<sup>520</sup> Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, cit., p. 181.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>522</sup> As I have highlighted in chapter 2, Bacon himself displayed a contradictory approach towards alchemical knowledge and practices.

<sup>523</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, “To the King”, cit., p. 263.

that, on the model of both Hermes and Solomon, James regarded himself as the heir of an ancient, purer wisdom, a knowledge that he felt compelled to publicly express in print, as already said. The association between the Stuart king and Hermes Trismegistus recurs also in the first book of Robert Fludd's massive work *Utriusque cosmi historia*, known as *The History of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm*<sup>524</sup>. The first of the two volumes appeared in 1617 and was dedicated to King James. In the dedicatory epistle, Fludd addresses James with the epithet "Ter Maximus", thus indirectly connecting the Stuart king with Hermes Trismegistus: "Serenissimo et Potentissimo Principi Jacobo Imperatoris Coelorum et Terrarum Ter Maximi, et Sui Creatoris Incomprehensibilis, in Regnis Magnae Britanniae, Franciae et Hyberniae Ministro et Praesidi Proximo"<sup>525</sup>. In a manuscript work written in 1620 and entitled *Philosophicall Key*, Fludd added a dedication to King James, whom he defines as "surmounting in literature the pich of any subiect, excelling in iustice and iudgement all Magistrats of this oure age and Whos Wisdome is not to be paralleled by any Prince or Potentat now breathing"<sup>526</sup>. What is particularly remarkable in this context is the fact that Fludd, when seeking royal protection, labels James "Ter Maximus", explicitly associating him with Hermetic imagery<sup>527</sup>. As documented by Ian Maclean, Fludd was "a respected and successful London gentleman and physician" and, most importantly, was "well connected in the society of the capital and at court"<sup>528</sup>. Moreover, the latter had "several attested meetings" with the Stuart monarch and "discussed his medical and philosophical ideas" with him<sup>529</sup>. It is Fludd's support of the Rosicrucians that seemed to have alarmed James, who summoned him to reply and explain his position in writing, something that the former did in the two texts *Declaratio Brevis* and *Philosophicall key*. Fludd himself reported that the monarch, who seemed to have accepted the dedication as 'Ter Maximus' that appeared in the first volume of *Utriusque cosmi historia*<sup>530</sup>, was

---

<sup>524</sup> "It [*Utriusque cosmi historia*] consists in two massive folios which are copiously illustrated with remarkable mystical emblems representing relationships between man, the cosmos, and the godhead. [...] Fludd's originality lay in his revival of the fifteenth-century Neoplatonism of Ficino and Pico and their sources in the *corpus hermeticum*, and his uniting of these with an alchemical account of the creation based on a literal reading of the book of Genesis". Ian Mclean, "Fludd, Robert", ODNB 20: 192.

<sup>525</sup> Robert Fludd, Dedication to King James, in Id., *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia*, Aere Johan-Theodori de Bry, typis Hieronymi Galleri, Oppenheimii, 1616-1621, vol. I, p. 2. See also Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>526</sup> Robert Fludd, "To the most high and mighty King", in Id., *Philosophicall Key*, being a transcription of the manuscript at Trinity College, Cambridge, with an introduction by Allen G. Debus, Science History Publications, New York, 1979, p. 65.

<sup>527</sup> See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>528</sup> See Ian Maclean, "Fludd, Robert", ODNB 20: 191.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>530</sup> See Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd. Hermetic Philosopher and Surveyor of Two Worlds*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979, p. 9.

satisfied by the account of himself he presented in the two works<sup>531</sup>.

In order to shed further light on James's connections with Hermetic and alchemical imagery, it is worth reflecting on the significance of the caduceus that appears next to the monarch in Rubens's painting in the Banqueting House. According to tradition, the caduceus is the rod that the god Hermes-Mercury received from Apollo, a tool thanks to which the former placated a fight between two serpents, that finally entwined around the rod. By the time of the Renaissance, as Friedlander writes, "Hermes/Mercury was commonly known in the West to be characterized by a young man with wings, petasus and talaria, and/or caduceus"<sup>532</sup>. Since it was also a medical symbol, the caduceus perfectly applied to King James's imagery. As a matter of fact, the king regularly claimed that a monarch's role is similar to a good physician's:

And that ye may the readier with wisdom and justice governe your subjects, by knowing what vices they are naturally most inclined to, as a good Physician, who must first knowe what peccant humours his patient naturally is most subject vnto, before he can begin his cure<sup>533</sup>.

In a speech he delivered in Parliament in 1609, James further associated his role as a monarch with that of a good physician, able, where necessary, to "cut off corrupt members": "as for the head of the natural body, the head hath the power of directing all the members of the body to that use which the iudgment in the head thinks most conuenient. It may apply sharpe cures, or cut off corrupt members"<sup>534</sup>. James also believed in the royal ability to cure certain diseases with the touch of his hands, a practice that was also inherited by his younger son, Charles I. The royal prerogative to heal through touch is clearly documented in one of the first Shakespearean tragedies written during the Jacobean reign, *Macbeth*. In Act IV, the doctor says to Malcolm that "there are a crew of wretched souls" who wait for being welcomed by the king because "at his touch [...] They presently amend":

Ay, sir. There are a crew of wretched souls  
That stay his cure. Their malady convinces  
The great essay of art, but at his touch,  
Such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand,  
They presently amend.  
(IV, iii, 142-46)

---

<sup>531</sup> Ian Maclean, "Fludd, Robert", ODNB 20: 192.

<sup>532</sup> Walter J. Friedlander, *The Golden Wand of Medicine. A History of the Caduceus Symbol in Medicine*, Greenwood Press, New York-London, 1992, p. 76.

<sup>533</sup> King James the First, *Basilikon Doron*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>534</sup> King James the First, *The King Maiesties Speech to the Lords and Commons of this Present Parliament at Whitehall, on Wednesday the xxi of March, ANNO DOM. 1609*, Robert Barker, London, 1609, sig. B2v.

As Hart notices, James's faith in his healing, almost magical, powers testifies to his contradictory approach towards Renaissance occult philosophy: "this paradox might provide an explanation for James's ambiguous attitude to magic, his burning of individual 'witches' whilst apparently cultivating their powers himself"<sup>535</sup>.

The caduceus, as already noticed, was also a well-known alchemical emblem. According to Schouten, it was precisely through alchemy that Hermes's tool entered the medical field<sup>536</sup>. In like manner, Friedlander, discussing the significance of the caduceus in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, highlights the relevance of "the alchemic pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus" in the circulation of the caduceus as both a medical and alchemical symbol: "under the name Hermes or Hermes Trismegistus, [he] became accepted as the founder or at least one of the leading lights of alchemy; and alchemy became a significant part of medieval and renaissance medicine"<sup>537</sup>. Mercury is central in the imagery of alchemy not only because it recalls the god Hermes, but also because it stands for the substance of alchemical transmutation<sup>538</sup>. Several illustrations testify to the prominent role of the caduceus in alchemy (see plate 80). Mercury with the caduceus clearly appears on the title-page of the 1603-Frankfurt edition of Paracelsus's *Opera Medico-Chimica*, that testifies to the conflation of alchemical and medical symbolism<sup>539</sup>. An illustration of the caduceus is collected also in a seventeenth-century manuscript, *Livre des figures hiéroglyphes*, reproduced by Mino Gabriele<sup>540</sup>. Mercury and his symbol are to be found also in a plate from *Splendor solis*: the Mercurian god is represented with his traditional rod in the illustration that shows a queen, usually representing the female counterpart of the *opus alchymicum*, known precisely as "mercury and argent vive"<sup>541</sup>, within an alembic (see plate 61). Given the substantial presence of the caduceus in the alchemical treatises of the time, it can be assumed that James's association with the Mercurian rod did not only connect the monarch with the traditional attributes of the god Mercury-Hermes (the messenger of the gods and a mediator between the heavenly and the

---

<sup>535</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>536</sup> Jan Schouten, *The Rod and Serpent of Asklepios*, Elsevier Publishing, Amsterdam, 1967, p. 120: "In my opinion, the fact that the caduceus of Hermes, apart from its original meaning, in later times also became a medico-pharmaceutical emblem springs from the history of the development of alchemy".

<sup>537</sup> Walter J. Friedlander, *The Golden Wand of Medicine*, cit., p. 73.

<sup>538</sup> See 'Mercurius', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 124.

<sup>539</sup> The plate is reproduced in *Alchemy and the Occult. A Catalogue of Books and Manuscripts from the Collection of Paul and Mary Mellon Given to Yale University Library*, Yale University Library, New Haven, 1968, vol. 1, p. 196.

<sup>540</sup> Abraham Eleazar, *Livre des figures hiéroglyphes*, XVII century, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris (MS. 3047), reproduced in Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., ms. cat. N. 1.

<sup>541</sup> See Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 167. As Abraham observes, Mercury or argent vive is usually the female principle that has to be united with the male one, i.e. sulphur.

earthly dimension), but also with those aspects of the caduceus that were so dear to alchemical and Hermetic culture. Moreover, if taking into account Bacon's definition of James as "invested of that triplicity which in great veneration was ascribed to the ancient Hermes" and Fludd's description of the king as "Ter Maximus", then the links between the Stuart monarch's iconography and the imagery related to the Hermetic philosophy of the time are even more evident.

The alchemical symbolism of Mercury and the caduceus is further exploited in Jonson's *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, a masque in which Mercury invokes the help of the monarch in defending himself from the tortures the alchemists submit him to. Jonson actually satirises the role of Mercury in alchemical literature since the latter is usually given several names and functions: "I am their crude and their sublimate, their precipitate and their unctuous, their male and their female, sometimes their hermaphrodite; what they list to style me"<sup>542</sup>. At a certain point, Mercury requests the king's help by comparing him to the sun: "You that are both the Sol and Jupiter of this sphere, Mercury invokes your majesty against the sooty tribe here; for in your favour only I grow recovered and warm"<sup>543</sup>. Butler observes that Sol and Jupiter "are alchemical terms, used as synonyms for gold, the ruler of other metals, and here applied to King James"<sup>544</sup>. Mercury, who "defends himself with his caduceus", as the stage direction reads, evidently associates King James with the alchemical imagery of the sun. The king is celebrated in alchemical terms as Sol, that in the language of alchemists stands for philosophical gold and is also represented as the chemical king, or *rex chymicus*, i.e. "the raw matter for the Stone; the philosopher's stone itself; the hot, dry, active, male principle of the opus, the masculine seed of metals known as 'our sulphur', 'our gold' and Sol"<sup>545</sup>. Most interestingly, Mercury says that it is only in the monarch's favour that he grows "recovered and warm", as if to suggest that only King James, as Sol and as alchemical gold, can comprehend the secrets of transmutation. Hart actually notices that in Jonson's masque "the king even transcended the Mercury of the alchemists in his power over nature"<sup>546</sup>. In a similar way, in his commentary to *Mercury Vindicated*, Butler observes that "Jonson's theme was the perfection and freedom of the king's sunlike power to make his own

---

<sup>542</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 39-41, p. 435. See 'Mercurius', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 124: "the central symbol in alchemy, also known by the equivalent Greek name Hermes, symbolizing the universal agent of transmutation".

<sup>543</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 80-82, pp. 437-438.

<sup>544</sup> See the critical apparatus of Martin Butler to Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., p. 438n. See also 'Sol', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 185-6.

<sup>545</sup> See 'king', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 110.

<sup>546</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 26.

‘creature’<sup>547</sup>. As a matter of fact, Mercury, addressing King James, complains about the alchemists’s tendency to “outwork the sun in virtue” and, therefore, to exceed the monarch himself:

Sir, would you believe it should be come to that height of impudence in mankind, that such a nest of fire-worms as these are – [...] should therefore with their heats [...] profess to outwork the sun in virtue and contend to the great act of generation, nay, almost creation?<sup>548</sup>

With regard to the association between the alchemical symbolism of the sun and royal imagery, it is worth quoting, again, Shakespeare’s sonnet 33, in which the sun is explicitly celebrated in alchemical terms and compared to a king who enlightens and, therefore, symbolically ‘transmutes’, his subjects:

Full many a glorious morning have I seen  
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,  
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,  
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.  
(Sonnet 33, ll. 1-4).

It is possibly this kind of alchemy, a form of heavenly and positive transformation, that James accepted, not the art of transmuting base metals into gold with the intent to produce counterfeit money, a kind of practice he listed among those vices a monarch should punish: “so is there some horrible crimes that ye are bound in conscience neuer to forgiue: suche as Witch-craft, wilfull murther, Incest [...] Sodomy, Poysoning, and false coine<sup>549</sup>. Interestingly enough, James never mentions alchemy in *Daemonologie*, unlike Reginald Scot, who, in his treatise on witchcraft, argues that alchemical art consists “wholie of subtiltie and deceit, whereby the ignorant and plaine minded man through his too much credulitie is circumvented”<sup>550</sup>.

The sun appears also in the frontispiece to King James’s 1616-edition of his *Workes*<sup>551</sup> (see plate 91). In the same way as the sun in Shakespeare’s sonnet “gilds” the meadows green with its “sovereign eye”, the king has to clear his realm from every sort of evil, somehow ‘transmuting’ it into a microcosm of heavenly order and perfection. As

---

<sup>547</sup> See Martin Butler, Introduction to Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated*, cit., p. 432.

<sup>548</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 94-100, p. 438.

<sup>549</sup> King James the First, *Basilikon Doron*, cit., p. 31.

<sup>550</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, cit., p. 300.

<sup>551</sup> In the edition of James’s *Workes* I have consulted and that is collected in the Senate House in London the frontispiece is missing: King James the First, *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, James by the Grace of God, King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith*, Printed by Robert Barker and John Bill, London, 1616. The frontispiece to James’s *Workes* is reproduced in Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 70.

James himself writes in *Basilikon Doron*, a monarch should guide his subjects by “glistening and shining before them” with his superior knowledge and divine wisdom:

this glistening worldly glorie of Kings, is giuen them by God, to teache them to preasse so to glister & shine before their people, in al works of sanctification & righteousness, that their persons as brighte lampes of godliness and virtue may [...] giue light to all their steppes<sup>552</sup>.

James’s iconography seems to recall the theoretical apparatus of the Hermetic *Corpus*, where man is said to be able to enlighten the sublunary world because he himself is enlightened by God: “Not only is mankind glorified; he glorifies as well. He not only advances toward god; he also makes the gods strong”<sup>553</sup>.

According to Hart, James’s paradoxical attitude towards magic and Hermetic disciplines was shared by a number of courtiers: “Stuart courtiers frequently displayed contradictory signs as to their personal enthusiasm for practical magic”<sup>554</sup>. As far as alchemy is concerned, Francis Bacon himself evidently acknowledges the value of alchemical research in *The Advancement of Learning*, even though condemning the actual possibility to create gold:

And yet surely to alchemy this right is due, that it may be compared to the husband whereof Aesop makes the fable, that when he died, told his Sonnes, that he had left unto them gold, buried under ground in his vineyard; and they digged over all the ground, and gold they found none, but by reason of their stirring and digging the mould about, the roots of their vines, they had a great vintage the year following: so assuredly the search and stirre to make gold hath brought to light a great number of good and fruitful inventions and experiments, as well for the disclosing of nature; as for the use of man’s life<sup>555</sup>.

Bacon praises the alchemists’s experimentations on matter since they lead to a high number of “fruitful inventions”, both for “the disclosing of nature” and “the use of man’s life”. As already said, in a speech attributed to him and known as *Gesta Grayorum*, Bacon prompts Queen Elizabeth to become like Hermes Trismegistus and even advocates the building of an alchemical laboratory<sup>556</sup>. Acknowledging Bacon’s sometimes contradictory view of alchemy, Debus remarks that he “may have condemned the ‘futile’ and fantastic theories of the chemists, but he recognized that their goals of health and longevity for man

---

<sup>552</sup> King James the First, *Basilikon Doron*, cit., sig. C2v.

<sup>553</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 80. Latin text: “non solum inluminatur uerum etiam inluminat. nec solum ad deum proficit, uerum etiam conformat deos. *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 334.

<sup>554</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>555</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, “To the king”, cit., p. 289.

<sup>556</sup> See section 2.1. “Alchemy: Between Science and Esoteric Philosophy”, pp. 55ff.

were noble ones”<sup>557</sup>. Given the fact that *The Advancement of Learning* is dedicated to James, it is legitimate to believe that the attitude towards alchemical practices expressed by Bacon, an approach that is simultaneously benign and unfavourable, was very likely shared by the king himself.

If, as argued by Clark, “James became a witch-hunter and demonologist in order to satisfy political and religious pretensions at a time when they could be expressed in few other ways” and “found in the theory and practice of witch persecution a perfect vehicle for his nascent ideals of kingship”<sup>558</sup>, then it can be assumed that the monarch’s treatise on demonology does not provide irrefutable evidence of his hostility to the Renaissance Hermetic tradition as a whole. A number of personalities in several ways connected to the world of Hermeticism actually maintained significant relationships with the Jacobean court, as will be considered below.

### 3.4. King James’s Relationships with John Dee, Walter Raleigh, Arthur Dee, Michael Maier, Cornelis Drebbel, and Tycho Brahe

The tragic endings of the celebrated John Dee and Walter Raleigh, both representative of Elizabethan Hermeticism, are usually regarded as evidence of King James’s refusal of that culture that, instead, reached a climax in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. As it is well known, the popularity Dee enjoyed during the Elizabethan era irretrievably declined under King James’s reign. Roberts reports that after James’s accession to the throne, Dee declared to have become the new king’s “sworne servant” but was alarmed by the latter’s well-known opinions on witchcraft<sup>559</sup>. Dee’s fears were not unjustified: James refused his plea for mercy when the former asked him to be discharged from the accusations of being a conjuror of demonic spirits. As a matter of fact, in *Daemonologie* the monarch firmly condemns also astrology and defines the “preaching of the Starres” as “vtterly vnlawfull”:

The other is called *Astrologia* [...], the word and preaching of the Starres: Which is diuided into two parts: [...] The second part is to trust so much to their influences, as thereby to foretell what common-weales shall flourish or decay: what persons shall be fortunate or vnfortunate: [...] what way, and of what aage shall men die: [...]: And this last part of *Astrologie* whereof I haue spoken, which is [...] vtterly vnlawfull to be

---

<sup>557</sup> Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, cit., p. ix.

<sup>558</sup> Stuart Clark, “King James’s *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and Kingship”, cit., p. 164.

<sup>559</sup> See R. Julian Roberts, “Dee, John”, ODNB 15: 674.

trusted in, or practised amongst Christians [...] and it is this part which I called before the Diuels schoole<sup>560</sup>.

As Thorndike documents, James allows only for “a moderate amount of astrological medicine and weather prediction” to be practised since “the rest of astrology leads on to the black and unlawful science of magic”<sup>561</sup>. A letter dating from 1604 and now collected in the British Library attests Dee’s attempt to obtain the Stuart monarch’s favour against what he defines as the “horrible and damnable [...] Sclaunder”:

So it may please your sacred Maiestie, eyther in your owne royall presence and hearing; Or, of the Lordes of your Maiesties most honorable priuie Counsell: Or, of the present assembled Parliament States, to cause your Highnesse sayd Seruant, to be tried and cleared of that horrible and damnable, and to him, most grieuous and damageable Sclaunder: generally, and for these many yeeres last past, in this Kingdome rayseed, and continued, by report, and Print, against him: Namely, That he is, or hath bin a *Coniurer*, or *Caller*, or *Invoker* of diuels<sup>562</sup>.

Even though Dee’s death in poverty and disgrace is usually associated with King James’s disdain for occult practices, his decline had started well before the Stuart monarch’s accession to the English throne. As a matter of fact, during his stay in Poland, Dee’s library was robbed and several of his books and instruments damaged or stolen<sup>563</sup>. After he returned from Poland, in the 1580s, Dee spent much of his time trying to recover his losses and lived mainly on royal grants, loans, and fees from students<sup>564</sup>. As documented by Roberts, “Dee and his family were hard-pressed for money, and perhaps for food also during the famines of the 1590s”<sup>565</sup>. In the following years, Dee’s poverty irreparably deepened, a condition that did not improve with the accession of King James<sup>566</sup>.

As was the case with John Dee, Walter Raleigh’s reputation was gradually discredited under the new monarch’s regency. Raleigh was incarcerated and executed in October 1618, but his conviction was due to political reasons and was not related to his alchemical and Hermetic studies. A dispute with Cecil seemed to have caused Raleigh’s later disagreements with King James, even though, as observed by Nicholls and Williams, “[c]auses for the rift are still elusive”<sup>567</sup>. It seems that during the last two years of

---

<sup>560</sup> King James the First, *Daemonologie*, cit., pp. 100-101.

<sup>561</sup> Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, cit., vol. VI, p. 550.

<sup>562</sup> John Dee, *To the Kings most excellent Maiestie. A petition from Dee to James I*, 1604. The letter is available on the British Library website (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-dees-petition-to-james-i-asking-to-be-cleared-of-accusations-of-conjuring-1604>).

<sup>563</sup> See R. Julian Roberts, “Dee, John”, ODNB 15: 673.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>566</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 674.

<sup>567</sup> Mark Nicholls and Penry Williams, “Raleigh, Walter”, ODNB 45: 851.

Elizabeth's reign, Henry Howard regularly wrote to James assuring him of his, and Cecil's, loyalty and, conversely, warning him against traitors such as Raleigh<sup>568</sup>. The latter was eventually tried for treason against the king and finally imprisoned. Most interestingly, while he was confined in the Tower of London, Raleigh established a deep bond with the Prince Henry Stuart, becoming "a sort of unofficial councillor" to him<sup>569</sup>. The latter actually consulted the former on advice on naval matters: "Their friendship dated from about 1608, when Henry sought him out for advice on shipbuilding methods; their mutual interest in naval matters drew them together"<sup>570</sup>. As attested by Parry, Raleigh wrote several treatises to the young prince, among which are *Observations concerning the Royall Navy and Sea-Service* and *A Discourse of the Invention of Ships*<sup>571</sup>. It was precisely for Henry that Raleigh started working on the project of his *History of the World*, whose writing he interrupted after the prince's death, in November 1612.

As already said, while he was incarcerated Raleigh also dedicated himself to alchemical experimentation<sup>572</sup>. Interestingly enough, when Prince Henry was ill, in late 1612, Raleigh produced a quintessence that he sent to the prince in the hope that it could help him to recover:

all the world were ready in this despaire to bring cordiall waters, diaphoretick and quintessentiall spirits, to be given unto him; amongst which one in the afternoon was ministred [...]. Sir Walter Raleigh also did send another from the Tower, which whether or no to give him they did a while deliberate. [...] as the last desperate remedy, with the leave and advice of the Lords of the Counsell there present, the cordial sent by Sir Walter Raleigh [...] was given unto him<sup>573</sup>.

Nichols observes that "Sir Walter Raleigh may be said to have been that person, whose future destiny Prince Henry's death affected more than that of any other individual"<sup>574</sup>. The bond between Henry of Wales and the greatest of the Elizabethan courtiers, i.e. Raleigh, also renowned for his alchemical and Hermetic interests, is evidence of Henry's role as a representative of Elizabethan values: "In befriending Raleigh, Henry was once again displaying that tendency to associate himself with the spirit of the high Elizabethan age"<sup>575</sup>.

---

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>569</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.* See also Mark Nicholls and Penry Williams, "Raleigh, Walter", ODNB 45: 853-54.

<sup>572</sup> "He was allowed his two rooms in the Bloody Tower, his books, a 'stilhow's' [...], or laboratory, a garden for his exercise, and congenial company". See Mark Nicholls and Penry Williams, "Raleigh, Walter", ODNB 45: 853.

<sup>573</sup> John Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First*, cit., vol. II, p. 484.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 488n.

<sup>575</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 85

Roy Strong has actually defined Henry of Wales as “the Prince *par excellence* of Renaissance hermetic science in England”<sup>576</sup>. As documented by Birrell, a number of ‘esoteric’ books were included in Prince Henry’s library, thus connecting his person with that kind of tradition that was cherished by John Dee:

It is a commonplace that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was no hard and fast line between mathematics and astronomy on the one hand, and astrology, natural magic and occult science in general on the other. Prince Henry has the standard authors in the esoteric field: Reuchlin, Pistorius, Trithemius – the sort of tradition one associates with Dr John Dee<sup>577</sup>.

Unlike John Dee, his eldest son, Arthur, “a fine hermetic philosopher and alchemist, in the Rosicrucian tradition”<sup>578</sup>, enjoyed a completely different treatment at the Stuart court. Arthur Dee worked as physician to James’s wife, Queen Anne of Denmark, and the king himself truly appreciated him. In 1621, when the Tsar Mikhail asked for a skilful physician to be employed at his court, James recommended him the experienced Arthur Dee:

wee [...] have thought it most fitt to take into our special consideration this gentleman Arthur Dee, Doctor in Physick a sworn servant of ours, one well approved for his worth and experience by our College of Physicians of our cytty of London<sup>579</sup>.

Arthur Dee’s alchemical interests, which he started cultivating very early under his father’s guidance, resulted in the publication of *Fasciculus chemicus* (1629), on which he worked during his stay in Russia and that is a compendium of quotations from several alchemical authors<sup>580</sup>. After staying at the Russian court for fourteen years, Dee definitely returned to England in 1635, when he became “sworn physician-in-ordinary to King Charles I”<sup>581</sup>.

As documented by Abraham, “Dee’s position as physician to Queen Anne possibly came about through the influence of the Paracelsian, Sir Theodore Turquet de Mayerne [...], a faithful friend of Dee’s and the Queen’s personal physician”<sup>582</sup>. Abraham attests that the Swiss-born Mayerne, who later became chief physician to King James, journeyed to England because the intellectual community was more willing to accept the Paracelsian

---

<sup>576</sup> Roy Strong, *Henry, Prince of Wales*, cit., pp. 213-15.

<sup>577</sup> See T.A. Birrell, *English Monarchs and their Books*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>578</sup> See John H. Appleby, “Dee, Arthur”, ODNB 15: 665.

<sup>579</sup> Wilhelm Michael von Richter, “Four Letters between King James I and Charles I and Tsar Mikhail mentioning Arthur Dee”, *History of Medicine in Russia II*, 1820: Supplement to part 2 cited by Lyndy Abraham, in Id., Introduction to Arthur Dee, *Fasciculus Chemicus*, cit., p. xxv.

<sup>580</sup> “By his own testimony Dee devoted most of his Russian leisure time to alchemical literature, resulting in his compilation of alchemical writings”. See John H. Appleby, “Dee, Arthur”, ODNB 15: 664.

<sup>581</sup> Lyndy Abraham, Introduction to Arthur Dee, *Fasciculus Chemicus*, cit., p. xli.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xxiii.

philosophy<sup>583</sup>. Mayerne was a well-known supporter of Paracelsism as a consequence of his father's acquaintance with the French Joseph du Chesne, known as Quercetanus, "the most famous Paracelsian and Hermetic physician of the time"<sup>584</sup>. While working for James, Mayerne, whose main objective was to "incorporate Paracelsian and Hermetic ideas in a basically Galenic system"<sup>585</sup>, resumed a project that had been advocated by the members of the College of Physicians during the reign of Elizabeth I: the composition of a London pharmacopoeia. Mayerne, acquiring the papers of the Paracelsian Thomas Moffett, one of the members of the college, undertook the project and eventually completed the *Pharmacopoeia* (1618), a section of which was actually devoted to chemical remedies<sup>586</sup>. Mayerne, who served the king "as a confidential agent in various literary, diplomatic, and political affairs", was knighted by James in 1624<sup>587</sup>.

Remarkable, and possibly unexpected, connections between the Stuart court and the Hermetic-chemical philosophy of the time are provided by another central figure of European Renaissance Hermeticism, the German Michael Maier. Maier had worked as physician and alchemist to the Emperor Rudolf II, in Prague, since 1609<sup>588</sup>. Rudolf's imperial court, where both Edward Kelly and John Dee were employed for a certain amount of time, was renowned for being a place where the study of Hermetic disciplines was strongly encouraged: "in and around the Imperial court of Kaiser Rudolf II of Habsburg there reigned a spirit of tolerance and interest for all arts and sciences, the Hermetic arts included"<sup>589</sup>. It is in 1611 that Maier travelled to England and arrived at the Jacobean court, where he made the acquaintance of the Paracelsian alchemist Francis Anthony and with the personal physician to King James, William Paddy, to whom Maier dedicated the treatise *Arcana arcanissima*<sup>590</sup>. Francis Anthony was renowned for the

---

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>584</sup> See Hugh Trevor-Roper, "Mayerne, Sir Theodore Turquet de", ODNB 37: 578.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 580.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 579.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>588</sup> Karin Figala and Ulrich Neumann, "Michael Maier (1569-1622): New Bio-Bibliographical Material", in Z.R.W.M von Martels (ed.), *Alchemy Revisited: Proceedings of the International Conference on the History of Alchemy at the University of Groningen*, 17-19 April 1989, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1990, p. 41: "Rudolf formally took him [Maier] into service on nineteenth September 1609".

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.* In another article of theirs on Michael Maier, Figala and Neumann remark that "it will scarcely have escaped Maier that in and around the Imperial Court of Kaiser Rudolf II of Habsburg there reigned a spirit of tolerance and interest for all arts and sciences, the Hermetic arts included". See Karin Figala and Ulrich Neumann, "'Author cui nomen hermes malavici'. New Light on the Bio-Bibliography of Michael Maier (1569-1622)", in Antonio Clericuzio and Piyo Rattansi (eds.), *Alchemy and Chemistry in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1994, p. 129.

<sup>590</sup> See Bruce T. Moran, *The Alchemical World of the German Court. Occult Philosophy and Chemical Medicine in the Circle of Moritz of Hessen (1572-1632)*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1991, p. 107 and Michael Srigley, *Images of Regeneration: A Study of Shakespeare's The Tempest and its Cultural Background*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Uppsala, 1985, p. 99. On Maier's dedication of *Arcana arcanissima* to William Paddy, see Lauren Kassell, "Paddy, Sir William", ODNB 42: 318.

production of “a medicine made from gold and mercury”, the so-called *aurum potabile*<sup>591</sup>. Interestingly enough, Anthony’s *Medicinae chymicae et veri potabilis auri assertio* (1610) was dedicated precisely to James I, who highly esteemed him<sup>592</sup>. As documented by White, Anthony’s alchemical and Hermetic research was supported by the king himself. On the title-page of *Panacea aurea*, a work where Anthony defends his use of chemical remedies and replies to the accusations raised by some members of the College of Physicians, an endorsement from James himself appears: “Should I punish Anthony, because God has blessed him?”<sup>593</sup> (see plate 90).

In London Maier “would remain for some five years working actively on numerous alchemical publications, likely to have included *Atalanta fugiens*”<sup>594</sup>, and translated Thomas Norton’s *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, originally written in English, into Latin. According to De Rola, the first of Maier’s books to appear in print, *Arcana arcanissima*, was published precisely in England in 1614, a detail that would further strengthen the relationships between Maier and the English culture of the time. The scholar remarks that since this edition has no publication place, it has long been believed to have been published in Oppenheim by Theodor De Bry, who was also the publisher of Robert Fludd’s *Utriusque cosmi historia*<sup>595</sup>. However, De Rola notices that in the catalogue of the Frankfurt Book Fair for 1614, under the heading *Libri historici, politici & geographici* is the entry *Arcana arcanissima ... Michaele Maiero Med.D. Londini in 4*<sup>596</sup>. In this respect, Heisler remarks that Maier’s work was entered in the Stationers’ Register in 1613 and printed possibly by Thomas Creede, who also published some of Shakespeare’s works, in 1614<sup>597</sup>. Heisler’s theory is accepted also by the scholar Hereward Tilton, who refers to Thomas Creede as the publisher of Maier’s *Arcana arcanissima*<sup>598</sup>.

In order to better understand the links between Michael Maier and the English court of James I, it is worth mentioning the two greeting cards the former offered to both the

---

<sup>591</sup> See F.V. White, “Anthony, Francis”, ODNB 2: 288.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 288-89.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 288. The English translation of James’s statement on the title-page of Anthony’s *Panacea aurea* is by White. The Latin text reads as follows: “Numquid ego ANTONIUM puniam, quia Deus illi benedixit?”. See title-page of *Francisci Antonii Philosophy et Medici Londinensis Panacea aurea sive Tractatus duo de ipsius Auro Potabili*, Ex Bibliopolio Frobeniano, Hamburgi, 1618.

<sup>594</sup> Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse, 1603-1625*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, p. 58.

<sup>595</sup> See Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia*, cit.

<sup>596</sup> See Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>597</sup> Ron Heisler, “Michael Maier and England”, *The Hermetic Journal*, November 1989, p. 119: “On the 28<sup>th</sup> May 1613 *Arcana arcanissima* was registered with the Stationers’ Company, having been approved by the censors. Presumably Thomas Creede, who brought out some first editions of Shakespeare, published the book within a few months”.

<sup>598</sup> Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, cit., p. 80n.

monarch and his eldest son, Henry, on Christmas 1611, immediately after he arrived in England<sup>599</sup>. The two manuscript cards Maier donated to the king and the prince present a central motif – an eight-petal rose in the one for James and a pyramid in the one for Prince Henry – and several poems. As reported by Figala and Neumann, some of the poems were supposed to be accompanied by some music, thus anticipating that kind of combination of poetry, music, and painting that will be the main feature of the collection of alchemical emblems *Atalanta fugiens*, first published in 1617<sup>600</sup>:

In each case the centre-piece is flanked by more poems, some of which were supplied with melodies in musical notation – a combination of pictorial symbol, words and sounds that later gave the most famous of his works, the *Atalanta fugiens*, its characteristic charm<sup>601</sup>.

Adam McLean, who has first drawn attention to Maier's *Strena natalitia* to James, provides a detailed description of the manuscript, now collected in the Scottish National Archives:

Two long poems together with two pieces of music, a fugue and a canon, flank the centrepiece of the manuscript, a large Rose of eight petals in red ink, upon which is superimposed a cross composed of letters of gold<sup>602</sup>.

McLean suggests that the golden and red rose at the centre of the manuscript is very likely a Rosicrucian symbol, especially if considering Maier's connections with the brotherhood<sup>603</sup>. As Godwin documents, in the inscription around the rose the following words can be read: "Rosa nec crucis sit ROSA, nec Boreae. Copia Amaltheae vigeat fructu ubere cornu"<sup>604</sup>. Tilton, as Srigley, disagrees with McLean's surmise, noticing that the radiating lines that divide the eight petals of the rose do not necessarily represent a cross

---

<sup>599</sup> Karin Figala and Ulrich Neumann, "Michael Maier (1569-1622): New Bio-Bibliographical Material", cit., p. 43: "Soon after his arrival the Imperial Count Palatine made contact with the English Royal Court. At Christmas 1611 he presented both King James I [...] and his son Henry Frederick [...] a manuscript greetings-card, whose lavish style gave him ample opportunity to display his poetical talent".

<sup>600</sup> On the publication date of Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*, see Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 68. Smith observes that "[w]hilst not quite an early draft of his emblem book, then, Maier's 1611 manuscript is an exercise in the conjunction of alchemically emblematic figures, music, visual puzzles and Latin verses that he would later revive in *Atalanta fugiens*". Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>601</sup> Karin Figala and Ulrich Neumann, "Michael Maier (1569-1622): New Bio-Bibliographical Material", cit., p. 43.

<sup>602</sup> Adam McLean, "A Rosicrucian Manuscript of Michael Maier", *The Hermetic Journal*, n. 5, Autumn 1979, p. 5.

<sup>603</sup> The Rosicrucian seal clearly appears on the title-page of Robert Fludd's *Clavis philosophiae et alchymiae*, reproduced in Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., op. a st. cat. N. 8.

<sup>604</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, "Michael Maier's Christmas Greeting to King James I and VI (1611)", in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, edited and translated from the Latin by Joscelyn Godwin, Phanes Press, Grand Rapids, USA, 1989, p. 207.

and that Maier became involved in the issues concerning the Rosicrucian brotherhood only when he returned to Germany, in 1616<sup>605</sup>. The golden letters that compose the lines that separate the petals form the following inscription: “Vive Jacobe diu rex magne britannice salve tegmine quo vere sit rosa laeta suo”<sup>606</sup>. Tilton maintains that Maier’s manuscript represents “the red rose of England (with the secondary, implied significance of the alchemical rose)”<sup>607</sup>. In alchemical symbolism, as already said, the red rose represents the ultimate product of the *opus alchymicum*, the elixir, or philosopher’s stone. What is particularly remarkable is that the card Maier dedicated to the Stuart monarch attests to the connections between one of the most renowned alchemists and Hermetic philosophers of the time and the king of England, usually regarded as completely adverse to Renaissance Hermeticism<sup>608</sup>. Furthermore, the combination of fugues, canons, emblems, and Latin epigrams that characterises Maier’s cards of greeting, two documents that precede all his subsequent publications, testifies to the fact that, at the time when he arrived in England, he was already experimenting with the conjunction of several arts that will be at the basis of all his alchemical works.

The *Strena natalitia* Maier offered to Henry, the Prince of Wales, is now collected in the British Library and was first discovered by Michael Srigley<sup>609</sup> (see plate 84). The illustration in the centre of the parchment is a pyramid adorned with some golden letters and, as in the case of James’s, the main composition is surrounded by a number of poems and epigrams in Latin that celebrate the prince in emblematic terms and alludes to his Hermetic interests. Unlike King James’s manuscript, however, Henry’s *strena natalitia* does not contain any pieces of music. It is also notable that Michael Maier appeared on the list of the guests who attended the funerals of Prince Henry in November 1612<sup>610</sup>. In particular, Maier was among the gentlemen of Frederick V, who would marry Elizabeth Stuart the following year. This detail has led some scholars to believe that the German physician had possibly been sent to England as an ambassador to foster an alliance between Protestant Germany and England. Moving from Maier’s dedication of *Viatorum*

---

<sup>605</sup> Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, cit., pp. 90-91. See also Michael Srigley, *Images of Regeneration*, cit., p. 100: “The eight lines of gold letters running from the centre of the rose to the circumference, dividing the petals, have been interpreted by Adam McLean as forming a cross, but I think this is doubtful”.

<sup>606</sup> Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, cit., p. 90n.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>608</sup> Figala and Neumann attest that Sir Isaac Newton, whose alchemical interests have been largely acknowledged, considered Maier as “the best and most useful author in the field [of alchemy]”. Karin Figala and Ulrich Neumann, “Michael Maier (1569-1622): New Bio-Bibliographical Material”, cit., p. 34.

<sup>609</sup> See British Library Royal Mss. 14B XVI. See Michael Srigley, *Images of Regeneration*, cit., pp. 99-103.

<sup>610</sup> See John Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First*, cit., vol. II, p. 496.

*hoc est de Montibus Planetarum Septem* to Christian von Anhalt, Yates suggests that the former was collaborating with the latter, who was one of the Elector Palatine's closest advisers, "in forming links between England, Germany, and Bohemia, preparatory to the establishment of Frederick and Elizabeth as King and Queen of Bohemia"<sup>611</sup>. Tilton, conversely, argues that Maier became part of Frederick's entourage only when he was already in London<sup>612</sup>.

James's closeness to personalities like Robert Fludd, Arthur Dee, Mayerne, and Michael Maier attests that he was not completely alien to the wide and complex world of Hermeticism. Moreover, if considering that, as will be discussed, technology was deeply intertwined with natural magic, then James's renowned interest in the technological innovations of his time can be read as another sign of his ambivalent attitude towards Renaissance magic. As a case in point, the Dutch Cornelis Drebbel, one of the most celebrated inventors of Europe, spent a great part of his life in the service of the Stuart monarchs James I and Charles I<sup>613</sup>. He was employed at the Jacobean court in 1604, when he entered the service of Prince Henry<sup>614</sup>. Besides working for the preparation of theatrical and court entertainments, he delighted his audiences with several inventions. In 1620 he astonished the citizens of London with an oar-driven submarine that sailed down the Thames from Westminster to Greenwich, an event that heightened his fame<sup>615</sup>. Drebbel was particularly praised by James for another innovation of his, the so-called *perpetuum mobile*, a "perpetual motion clock", actuated by changes in atmospheric pressure and temperature"<sup>616</sup>, that he presented to the king in 1607. Since Drebbel left very few writings of his, it is worth mentioning Thomas Tymme's *Dialogue philosophicall* because it provides an account of the former's *perpetuum mobile*:

I did at sundry times pry into the practise of this Gentleman, with whom I was very familiar. Moreover, when as the King our Soueraigne, could hardly beleuee that this motion should be perpetuall, except the misterie were reuealed vnto him: this cunning Bezaleel, in secret manner disclosed to his Maiestie the secret, whereupon he applauded the rare inuention<sup>617</sup>.

---

<sup>611</sup> Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972, pp. 81 and 88.

<sup>612</sup> Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, cit., pp. 87-91.

<sup>613</sup> Gerrit Tierie, Introduction to Id., *Cornelis Drebbel*, H.J. Paris, Amsterdam, 1932, page unnumbered.

<sup>614</sup> "At the end of 1604 or in early 1605 Drebbel moved to London, where he came into the service of James I and soon into the special service of the ten-year-old Henry, prince of Wales". H.A.M. Snelders, ODNB 16: 900.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 901: "in a short time the story of his submarine became grossly exaggerated. Drebbel did not invent the submarine, nor did he discover oxygen, which he obviously needed to stay in the boat under water. He refreshed the air in the boat by heating saltpetre in a retort, which – as was known – gave an 'air' in which one could breathe". See also Gerrit, Tierie, *Cornelis Drebbel*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>616</sup> See "Drebbel, Cornelis", *Britannica. Micropaedia*, vol. III, p. 660.

<sup>617</sup> Thomas Tymme, *A Dialogue Philosophicall Wherein Natures Secret Closet is Opened, and the Cause of*

Tymme, who declares to have met “this cunning Bezaleel” several times, recounts that James was particularly delighted by the “rare inuention”, whose mysterious principle of operation Drebbel revealed to His Majesty. The *perpetuum mobile* highly contributed to enhance Drebbel’s reputation both in England and abroad, to the extent that he was invited to Emperor Rudolf’s court, where he was employed from 1610:

The same hereof caused the Emperour to entreate his most excellent Maiestie to licence Cornelius Bezaleel to come to his Court, there to effect the like Instrument for him, sending vnto Cornelius a rich chaine of gold<sup>618</sup>.

In Prague, besides perfecting his perpetual motion machine, Drebbel devoted himself to alchemy and, as Tierie reports, “to the making of gold alloys for the German mint”<sup>619</sup>. The court of the Habsburg emperor was a real exhibition of the latest innovations in the field of technology and magic and it also attracted the attention of John Dee. As Hart notices, the “wonder rooms of automata” that astonished Dee employed “a mechanical magic” that was later displayed in the Stuart gardens designed by Isaac and Salomon de Caus and by Constantino de Servi, who also worked for Rudolf<sup>620</sup>.

As already anticipated, a close link between technology and natural magic existed. It is, therefore, significant that Drebbel devised his specimen of the perpetual motion clock for both James I and Rudolf II, two monarchs whose views on Renaissance magic were apparently conflicting. However, Evans observes that “[t]here was also much that was similar in their [James’s and Rudolf’s] tastes and pastimes, especially the interest in occult studies, the spirit world, and the machine”<sup>621</sup>. As Eamon remarks, “the ‘technological dream’ of the late-Middle Ages and the Renaissance was largely a product of the magical world view”<sup>622</sup>. The scholar points out that inventors and engineers were also perceived as magicians in the light of their ability to manipulate nature’s secrets:

Magic, far from being incompatible with technology was seen as its sister art. It not

---

*all Motion in Nature Shewed, out of Matter and Forme, tending to mount Mans Minde from Natures to Supernaturall and Celestiall promotion: And how all things exist in the number of three. Together with the Invention of an Artificiall perpetuall motion*, presented to the Kings most excellent Maiestie, T.S. For Clement Knight, London, 1612, p. 62.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>619</sup> Gerrit Tierie, *Cornelis Drebbel*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>620</sup> See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>621</sup> Robert J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World. A Study in Intellectual History, 1576-1612*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973, p. 81.

<sup>622</sup> William Eamon, “Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance”, *Janus. Revue Internationale de l’histoire des sciences, de la médecine, de la pharmacie et de la technique*, LXX, 3-4, 1983, p. 172.

only gave technology a needed theoretical context, but it also served promote the technological ambitions of engineers by constructing an image of man as a magus who, through his inventions and his manipulation of nature's secrets, gains mastery over the world<sup>623</sup>.

It is worth noticing that Tymme describes Drebbel's invention of the *perpetuum mobile* in a text in which he aims at exposing the secrets of nature. Drebbel, according to Tymme's report, understood the mysterious laws that govern the natural world, his clock being "made by Art in the imitation of Nature"<sup>624</sup>. Tymme's treatise, that is in the form of a dialogue between two characters, Philadelph and Theophrast, begins with the former asking the latter the way to open nature's secret "Closet":

From your well-wishing minde, let me craue of you the spending sometime to acquaint mee with that admirable Queene of the world, Dame *Nature*, whom I suppose you know, considering your great trauailes. Tell mee therefore in good fellowship, haue you beene in that Ladies Court, and seene her most rich Treasure and Closet, replenished (as men write) with inestimable iewels?<sup>625</sup>

This association between technology and magic, of which Cornelis Drebbel is an epitome, goes back to ancient times. Eliade notices that the artisan is traditionally perceived as a "connoisseur of secrets, a magician" since to create something means knowing the magical formula that allows it to be created:

'Faire' quelque chose, c'est connaître la formule magique qui permettra de l' 'inventer' ou de la 'faire apparaître' spontanément. L'artisan est de ce fait un connaisseur de secrets, un magicien – aussi tous les métiers comportent-ils une initiation et se transmettent-ils par une tradition occulte. Celui qui *fait* des choses efficaces est celui qui *sait*, qui connaît les secrets de les faire<sup>626</sup>.

Every sort of creation, Eliade continues, is a superhuman and divine action: "toute 'création', toute 'construction', ne peut être qu'un ouvrage surhumain"<sup>627</sup>. Smiths, ceramicists, and alchemists were equally regarded as experts of the secret laws of the cosmos, as demiurges who knew how to concretely transform matter, employing fire to "magically" act on nature<sup>628</sup>. Moving from Eliade's theories, Eamon points out that this

---

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>624</sup> "I will set before you a memorable Modell and Patterne, representing the motion of the Heauens about the fixed earth, made by Art in the imitation of Nature, by a gentleman of Holland, named *Cornelius Drebbel*". Thomas Tymme, *A Dialogue Philosophicall*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>625</sup> *Ibidem*, sig. Br.

<sup>626</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65: "L'alchimiste, comme le forgeron, comme, avant lui, le potier, est un 'maître du feu'. C'est par le feu qu'il opère le passage de la matière d'un état à un autre. Le potier qui, le premier, réussit, grâce à la braise, à durcir considérablement les 'formes' qu'il avait données à l'argile, dut sentir l'ivresse d'un

relationship between magic and technology was especially evident in Renaissance Europe<sup>629</sup>. It is worth recalling here the figure of Francesco I dei Medici, Duke of Tuscany from 1574 to 1613: the Florentine duke cultivated his renowned passion for alchemical, distillatory, and mechanical experimentations, and also for precious stones and pottery, in his *studiolo* at Palazzo Vecchio, in Florence<sup>630</sup>. In the so-called *studiolo*, Francesco I also collected the products that were created in his *fonderia*, a foundry where prominent artisans from Italy and Europe devoted themselves to the melting of metals, the production of porcelain, the manufacturing of precious stones, and to goldsmithing<sup>631</sup>. As the foundry, the garden of Villa Pratolino, wanted by Francesco I and fully realised thanks to the craftsmanship of Buontalenti e Giambologna, attested to the interconnection between alchemical, magical, and technological concerns: besides the frescoes in the grottoes that showed the working in the mines, the gardens represented a sort of “permanent exhibition of technology” since automata, but also a mill and a forge, all based on hydropower, represented a real delight for its visitors<sup>632</sup>. Francesco’s leading role in supporting technological innovations was so significant that his contemporaries labelled him “Dux Mechanicus”<sup>633</sup>. Cornelis Drebbel himself, besides being an inventor, also dedicated himself to alchemy, thus further testifying to the existence of a complex correlation between technology, natural magic, and other Hermetic arts. Two treatises dealing with alchemical transmutation attest Drebbel’s interest in the field of alchemy: *Van der natuyre der elementen* (1604), that was “reprinted and translated many times”, and *De quinta essentia tractatus* (1621)<sup>634</sup>.

---

démiurge: il venait de découvrir un agent de transmutation. [...] L’enthousiasme démiurgique surgissait de cet obscur pressentiment que le grand secret consistait à apprendre comment ‘faire plus vite’ que la Nature, c’est-à-dire [...] comment intervenir sans risques dans les processus de la vie cosmique environnante. Le feu s’avérait être le moyen de ‘faire plus vite’, mais aussi de faire *autre chose* que ce qui existait déjà dans la Nature: il était, donc, la manifestation d’une force magico-religieuse qui pouvait modifier le monde, qui, par conséquent, n’appartenait pas à ce monde-ci”.

<sup>629</sup> William Eamon, “Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance”, cit., p. 172.

<sup>630</sup> See Cristiano Zanetti, *Janello Torriani and the Spanish Empire. A Vitruvian Artisan at the Dawn of the Scientific Revolution*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2017, p. 175.

<sup>631</sup> See Ruggiero Romano, “Una certa idea dell’‘industria’ nello studiolo di Francesco I dei Medici a Firenze”, in *De Florence à Venise: études en l’honneur de Christian Bec*, réunies par François Livi et Carlo Ossola, Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, 2006, p. 385. See also Luciano Berti, *Il principe dello studiolo. Francesco I dei Medici e la fine del Rinascimento fiorentino*, Edam, Firenze, 1967, p. 61: “Lo Studiolo voluto dal principe Francesco era difatti la mostra o il museo, lo scrigno prezioso dove accogliere i più raffinati prodotti della Fonderia. Ed era anche il punto dove quelle varie ricerche e produzioni trovavano una riunificazione concettuale sistematica, si sollevavano dal livello di laboratorio od officina a sfere più alte e complesse”.

<sup>632</sup> Ruggiero Romano, “Una certa idea dell’‘industria’ nello studiolo di Francesco I dei Medici a Firenze”, cit., p. 387. On the Pratolino gardens, see Costanza Riva, *Pratolino. Il sogno alchemico di Francesco I de’ Medici. Miti, simboli e allegorie*, Sillabe, Livorno, 2013.

<sup>633</sup> Ruggiero Romano, “Una certa idea dell’‘industria’ nello studiolo di Francesco I dei Medici a Firenze”, cit., p. 387

<sup>634</sup> See H.A.M. Snelders, “Drebbel, Cornelis”, ODNB 16: 902.

All this considered, it can be argued that King James's deep interest in technological novelties, that celebrated the human, and magical, ability to harness the hidden workings of the macrocosm, suggests that he was not so distant from the world of Renaissance magic that, instead, was overtly cherished by Rudolf II. Close to Drebbel, the French engineer Salomon de Caus, who devised the marvellous gardens with animated statues, grottoes, automatic fountains and other technological devices for Queen Anne, Prince Henry, and Princess Elizabeth Stuart can be defined as a "Renaissance magus", as Roy Strong observes:

It [the garden] was at the same time practically scientific and technical but also magical and hermetic. The new machines harnessed the magical properties of nature to startling effect and yet that effect was unfolded in the form of symbolic images. In this way de Caus partakes of the nature of a late Renaissance magus<sup>635</sup>.

As in the case of masques, that celebrated the monarch's ability to penetrate "further and more clearly than lesser mortals"<sup>636</sup> into spectacles of complex emblematic significance, Drebbel's and Caus's inventions paid homage to the king's Solomon-like intelligence.

A noticeable anecdote concerning James's enthusiasm for the way man could master nature by understanding its obscure operations is recounted by Hart. The scholar recalls that James "visited the alchemical-astronomical laboratory and garden of Tycho Brahe at Hveen, where he stayed for a week during his time in Denmark between 1589 and 1590"<sup>637</sup>. Brahe's keen interest in alchemy and Paracelsism, an aspect of the Danish astronomer's education that is often overlooked, was particularly heightened during a seven-year study period in Germany:

Tycho Brahe returned from his study tour as a convinced neo-Platonic and eclectic Paracelsian and during the first years following his return he appears to have been preoccupied with alchemical work rather than astronomy<sup>638</sup>.

The studies of alchemy cultivated by Brahe, who was well acquainted with the Paracelsian physicians Peter Severinus and Johannes Pratensis<sup>639</sup>, eventually resulted in the building of

---

<sup>635</sup> Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1979, p. 112.

<sup>636</sup> See Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 7: "James had long cultivated his reputation for learning. Moreover, his book on the duties of a prince, *Basilikon Doron*, contained numerous verbal illustrations of an emblematic nature. Jonson, therefore, could be seen to be paying compliment to the royal intelligence, which, like an eagle's vision penetrated further and more clearly than lesser mortals".

<sup>637</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>638</sup> Ole Peter Grell, "Intellectual Currents", in E.I. Kouri and Jens N. Olesen (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia: 1520-1580*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, vol. 2, p. 94.

<sup>639</sup> Brahe's connections with Paracelsian theories also came about through his acquaintance with the Danish physicians Peter Severinus and Johannes Philip Pratensis, and the English Thomas Moffett. See Allen G.

a laboratory designed to conduct alchemical experiments, the same workshop that King James visited. Grell documents that Brahe's private research academy, Uranienborg, besides confirming the latter's continued interest in alchemy also became "the third cornerstone in a neo-Platonist and Paracelsian triangle", anchored within the court thanks to the royal physician Peter Severinus, and supported by Pratensis from within the university<sup>640</sup>. The Stuart monarch was so impressed by Brahe's experimentations that he praised especially the latter's ability to rule "the *Starres* above" in a poem that follows a dedication to Rudolf II in Brahe's *Astronomicall Coniectur*:

What *Phaeton* dar'd, was by *Apollo* done  
Who rul'd the fiery Horses of the Sunne  
More TYCHO doth; hee rules the *Starres* above  
And is *Vrania*'s Favorite, and Love<sup>641</sup>.

Again, "Rudolf shared with James I a very great interest in matters of this sort"<sup>642</sup>: as documented by Evans, in 1609 the former even sent "two characteristic gifts" to the English king, namely a celestial globe and a clock<sup>643</sup>. If taking into account James's esteem for the works of Drebbel and Caus, and for the kind of researches undertaken by Brahe, then it can be legitimately asserted that he enjoyed the scene of a statue coming to life, such as the one in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, a scene that, as will be discussed, did not only allude to the technological innovations of the time but also to the rituals of statue animation described in the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius*.

---

Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, cit., p. 72. As documented by Thorndike, "On May 7, 1572, in a letter full of mythological, meteorological and alchemical allusion, Johannes Pratensis recommended to Tycho Brahe a Dane of Wiberg who had recently come to Cologne as a 'Greek, Arab, Galenic, Paracelsan, theologaster, philosopher, physician, syrup-mixer, chemist, or anything else you want'". See Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, cit., vol. V, p. 642.

<sup>640</sup> "Brahe's continued interest in alchemy is confirmed by the laboratory he had constructed on Hven. His private research academy, Uranienborg, became the third cornerstone in a neo-Platonist and Paracelsian triangle, which was anchored within the court and its royal physician Peter Severinus, and strongly supported by Pratensis from within the university". Ole Peter Grell, "Intellectual Currents", *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia: 1520-1580*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>641</sup> King James, "An Elogie made and written by IAMES the VI King of Scots, in Commendation of TYCHO BRAHE his Workes, and worth", in Tycho Brahe, *Learned: Tico Brahae his Astronomicall Coniectur of the new and much Admired [star] Which Appered in the year 1572*, Printed at London, By B.A. and T.F. for Michaell [Sparke] and Samuell Nealand, 1632, [p. i]. On King James's commendation of Brahe, see also Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>642</sup> Gerrit Tierie, *Cornelis Drebbel*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>643</sup> Robert J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, cit., p. 81n.



## Chapter 4

### Alchemical Literature and Imagery in Early Modern England

#### 4.1. Alchemy in Shakespeare's Plays

The aim of this study is to offer a reading of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in the light of alchemical imagery and language, deeply intertwined with Renaissance Hermetic philosophy. As already discussed, alchemy played a central role in the way Elizabethans and Jacobean conceived of the place of humankind in the world and interpreted the relationship between man and nature. Shakespeare himself abundantly employs alchemical metaphors in his plays, sonnets, and poetic works. Although *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are two of the dramas in the Shakespearean canon in which alchemical imagery is most evident, allusions to the alchemical and Hermetic background of the time are scattered throughout the Bard's works, as a consequence of the vast circulation of alchemical beliefs in the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages<sup>644</sup>. To best illustrate the extent to which alchemical terminology was widespread when *The Winter's Tale* was written and staged, it is useful to quote the celebrated lines pronounced by Surly in the most renowned of alchemical satires, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. The gamester Surly, addressing Subtle, who performs the role of the shrewd and greedy alchemist, criticises the obscurities and seeming contradictions that are the most evident feature of the alchemical language:

What else are all your terms,  
Whereon no one o' your writers 'grees with other?  
Of your elixir, your lac virginis,  
Your stone, your med'cine, and your chrysosperm,  
Your sal, your sulphur, and your mercury,  
Your oil of height, your tree of life, your blood,  
Your marcasite, your tutty, your magnesia,  
Your toad, your crow, you dragon, and your panther,

---

<sup>644</sup> A very early study on the relationships between alchemy and Shakespeare is Clark Cumberland's *Shakespeare and Science. A Study of Shakespeare's interest in, and literary and dramatic use of, natural phenomena; with an account of the astronomy, astrology, and alchemy of his day, and his attitude towards these sciences*, Cornish Brothers, Birmingham, 1929. Another similar work by the same author is *Shakespeare and the Supernatural*, William & Norgate, London, 1931.

Your son, your moon, your firmament, your adrop,  
Your lato, azoch, zarnich, chibrit, heautarit,  
And then your red man and your white woman,  
[...] And worlds of other strange ingredients,  
Would burst a man to name?  
(Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, II, iii, 182-98).

Surly makes a list of a number of specific expressions and terms that testify to Jonson's awareness of alchemy's terminology. As Holland and Sherman point out, Jonson's almost specialistic knowledge of alchemical vocabulary and conceptions is the consequence of alchemy's "prodigious literature, multiplying its authorities and generating the increasingly elaborate terminology that Surly parodies"<sup>645</sup>. The two scholars, noticing that Jonson gives proof to be "*characteristically well read*"<sup>646</sup> (italics mine), argue that the publication and dissemination of alchemical treatises were so widespread in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that "it is often difficult to be sure when quotation is happening or where Jonson had inadvertently repeated an alchemical commonplace"<sup>647</sup>. In a similar way, Webster attests that the extensive acquaintance with alchemical and Paracelsian literature of personalities such as Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, and John Donne was undoubtedly shared at least by the educated public:

The satirical references of Jonson, the imagery of Donne, or the theories of matter of Bacon would have been placed in a Paracelsian context by an educated public which had gradually assimilated Paracelsian ideas into the framework of neo-Platonic philosophy<sup>648</sup>.

Even though Jonson's objective is to satirise alchemical cryptic and seemingly contradictory language, *The Alchemist* functions as evidence of the 'obsession' with the quest to attain the philosopher's stone that was an important feature of the cultural framework of early modern England and, on a wider perspective, of Europe. Alchemy offered poets and dramatists a rich allegorical apparatus that could be used "as an image of perpetual disappointment or even fraud on the one hand, or of mysterious natural and spiritual transformations on the other"<sup>649</sup>. As argued by Debus in his introduction to Elias Ashmole's anthology *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, "[f]rom our standpoint this

---

<sup>645</sup> Peter Holland and William Sherman, Preface to Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, cit., p. 550.

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>647</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 551.

<sup>648</sup> Charles Webster, *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, p. 322.

<sup>649</sup> Frank Kermode, Foreword to Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. ix.

seventeenth-century concern with alchemy may seem inexplicable”<sup>650</sup>. My intent is precisely to provide an interpretation of *The Winter’s Tale* in the light of a language and mentality now remote but familiar to Shakespeare’s audience.

Moving from the pioneering studies of Frances Amelia Yates<sup>651</sup>, praised by Paolo Rossi himself for their degree of innovation in covering previously obliterated areas of Renaissance culture<sup>652</sup>, numerous literary critics and historians of literature have recognised the importance of alchemical philosophy in the development of Renaissance English culture and literature. Stanton Linden, for instance, remarks that the height of interest in what he terms ‘occult philosophy’, including alchemy but also natural magic, kabbalah, and the theoretical apparatus of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, corresponds to the flourishing of English literature under the reigns of Elizabeth and James:

That this historical era, which marked the height of interest in alchemy and related forms of occult and hermetic thought, should also be the one in which English literature emerged from the confines of insularity and foreign domination to attain, in the reigns of Elizabeth, James I, and their successors a period of its greatest genius and brilliance, provides opportunity to examine the impact of a familiar and controversial subject on a new and flourishing tradition of popular, vernacular literature<sup>653</sup>.

This point of contact between alchemy and the literary and dramatic production of the time has allowed scholars to reconstruct a world of values, motives, and ideologies that provides important insights into a now lost philosophy of man and nature. Northrop Frye argues that “the historical Shakespeare”, whose works inevitably reflect the world-view of the age in which they were born, should remain a primary concern for the critic who wants to delve into that original system of conceptions and beliefs:

We have to keep the historical Shakespeare always present in our minds, to prevent us from trying to kidnap him into our own cultural orbit, which is different from but quite

---

<sup>650</sup> Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, a reprint of the London edition 1652, with a new introduction by Allen G. Debus, Jonson Reprint Corporation, New York and London, 1967, p. x.

<sup>651</sup> See, among others, Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Routledge, London, [1964] 2002; *Shakespeare’s Last Plays: A New Approach*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979; Id., *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, Routledge, London, [1979] 2001.

<sup>652</sup> “Il mondo magico, per gli storici della filosofia, per quelli della scienza, nonché per gli storici delle idee che si occupavano del periodo storico compreso tra Copernico e Newton, era, alla metà degli anni Cinquanta del Novecento, un continente quasi sconosciuto. Anche i rapporti di Giordano Bruno o di Francis Bacon con quel sapere erano rimasti come nascosti agli occhi degli storici. Riemersero, con straordinaria forza, solo dopo la pubblicazione dei saggi di Garin e del libro di Yates. [...] La cosiddetta ‘tradizione ermetica’ è diventata oggetto di appassionate controversie fra gli studiosi di storia della scienza di lingua anglosassone dopo la pubblicazione, nel 1964, dell’importante libro di F.A. Yates su Giordano Bruno”. Paolo Rossi, *Il tempo dei maghi*, cit., pp. 18-9 and p. 278.

<sup>653</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, cit., p. 1.

as narrow as that of Shakespeare's first audiences<sup>654</sup>.

Shakespeare's works dwell on the issues of the social life of the time, topics that were comprehensible to both the playwright and his public. Frye actually remarks that the Bard's plays "present aspects of social life that would have been intelligible to his audience and would have spoken to the assumptions they brought into the theatre with them"<sup>655</sup>. It is on this shared field of knowledge that every dramatist counts for the success of his plays. If, as noticed by Marcello Pagnini, every literary creation is "a cut" on a diachronic axis, that intersects other structures, namely the coeval social, religious, scientific, and artistic situations, then nothing is more contingent than a theatrical performance, because it is profoundly rooted in the context in which it is born and completely dependent on it<sup>656</sup>. Playwright and actors always establish an active relationship with the audience, relying on the latter's ability to decipher certain meanings and allusions connected with the "spirit", or "ethos"<sup>657</sup>, of its age and inevitably lost in subsequent, far away on a temporal scale, performances.

It goes without saying that, as remarked by Honigmann, more than four hundred years after Shakespeare's plays were first composed and performed, "we have to labour to acquire this knowledge", i.e. the contingent sort of communal knowledge shared by dramatist and theatre-goers, even though it "will sit less comfortably in our minds"<sup>658</sup>. Honigmann argues that Shakespeare, first defined by Coleridge as "myriad-minded", assumed his spectators to be equally myriad-minded, expecting them to grasp the "many truths" hidden behind his lines: "Shakespeare certainly expected the judicious of his own day to 'understand minutely' [...] the finer shades of language, of social difference, and of contemporary intellectual debate"<sup>659</sup>, since, as Honigmann claims, "Shakespeare's plays teach many truths"<sup>660</sup>. As already said, alchemical notions are embedded in a number of the playwright's dramatic and poetic works. Lines such as those spoken by Casca in *Julius Caesar* – "that which would appear offence in us, / His countenance, like richest alchemy / Will change to virtue and to worthiness" (I, iii, 158-60) – or as those employed by King

---

<sup>654</sup> Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, edited by Robert Sandler, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986, p. 1.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>656</sup> "Il felice evento teatrale, infatti, non può essere valutato con altri parametri che quelli del suo effetto contingente" Marcello Pagnini, *Struttura letteraria e metodo critico*, D'Anna, Messina, 1967, p. 93, see also pp. 122 and 148.

<sup>657</sup> Marcello Pagnini gives his definition of "stile epocale" in Id., *Pragmatica*, cit., pp. 48-9.

<sup>658</sup> E.A.J. Honigmann, *Myriad-Minded Shakespeare. Essays on the Tragedies, Problem Comedies and Shakespeare the Man*, Macmillan, London, 1998<sup>2</sup>, pp. 1-2.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

John in the drama bearing his name – “To solemnize this day, the glorious sun / Stays in his course and plays the alchemist” (*King John*, III, i, 3-4) – clearly dwell upon alchemical symbolism. What is most difficult, however, is identifying that kind of imagery and vocabulary whose alchemical significance has been obfuscated throughout the centuries and, therefore, is hardly recognisable as such nowadays. As far as the Hermetic imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra* is concerned, Gilberto Sacerdoti remarks that certain ambiguities in the play cease being so when they are placed in the right context. Since alchemical and hermetic writings are complex and deliberately esoteric, however, the attempt to reconstruct this kind of background might be particularly hard<sup>661</sup>. In his essay on the influences of alchemical philosophy on *Macbeth*, Murray suggests that scholars should always consider the relevance of “some special language of the period” to those lines that might appear as devoid of any particular significance to the modern reader:

when we encounter an obscurity, [...] like Duncan’s golden blood, we should beware of calling it a rhetorical device, [...] we should look instead to see whether it might, perhaps, be part of some special language of the period<sup>662</sup>.

Murray refers to the words Macbeth addresses to Macduff immediately after King Duncan’s murder: “Here lay Duncan, / His silver skin laced with his *golden blood*, / And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature” (II, iii, 111-13, italics mine). Moving from the fact that the writings of Paracelsus were “readily available in England”<sup>663</sup> in-between the two centuries, Murray suggests that Macbeth’s enigmatic lines can be considered in the light of alchemical and Paracelsian language. The scholar, in particular, quotes an excerpt from Paracelsus’s treatise *De Sanguine Ultra Mortem*, in which the Swiss alchemist and physician argues that at the Resurrection, “we shall see the blood, the true blood of Man, without alloy or adulteration, the blood of our natural inheritance, and its definite multitude and quantity, not one drop lacking”<sup>664</sup>. In another passage, Paracelsus further associates the idea of blood with the Resurrection:

Those who go beyond our Faith in philosophizing cannot grasp and understand that the blood which oozes out (from a body when the murderer approaches) is the real blood of that man from whom it flows [...] For those who lack faith in the Resurrection

---

<sup>661</sup> See Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo Cielo e Nuova Terra. La Rivelazione Copernicana di Antonio e Cleopatra di Shakespeare*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1990, p. 10.

<sup>662</sup> W.A. Murray, “Why was Duncan’s blood golden?”, in *Shakespeare’s Survey. An Annual Survey of Shakespearean Study & Production*, edited by Kenneth Muir, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1966, vol. 19, p. 35.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>664</sup> Paracelsus, *De Sanguine Ultra Mortem*, quoted in W.A. Murray, “Why was Duncan’s blood golden?”, cit., p. 41.

cannot understand that *the blood is held in the hand of God*, and kept for the time appointed<sup>665</sup>.

Murray maintains that Paracelsus's words offer a proper background to interpret Macbeth's lines. Duncan's blood is "golden", the scholar suggests, because "it is already in the hand of God" and "is part of the perfection of heaven"<sup>666</sup>. John Donne himself, as Murray points out, employs a similar language in one of his poems, *Resurrection, Imperfect*. In describing Christ's Resurrection, Donne claims that "He was all gold when he lay downe, but rose / All tincture"<sup>667</sup>. Alchemists most frequently compare the process of transmutation to Christ's Resurrection since the phases of dissolution and death are fundamental in the *opus alchymicum* and "nature could only be renewed after first dying away"<sup>668</sup>. Murray states that the blood of Duncan, who dies in this world to be reborn in the heavenly dimension, becomes like the alchemical 'tincture', able to transmute substances, as can be inferred from Macbeth's lines:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red.  
(II, ii, 58-61)

The blood of good Duncan, the "saintly king"<sup>669</sup>, "incarnadines" the whole sea, making it of a crimson red, thus recalling the notion of the alchemical 'tincture', another term for the 'red elixir' attained at the final stage of the *opus alchymicum*, the so-called *rubedo*. The expression "making the green one red" is equally evocative of alchemical theories since alchemists often employ the image of "the blood of the green lion"<sup>670</sup> to indicate the state of dissolution, or death, that leads to the final transmutation. As recorded by Abraham, in the language of alchemy, 'blood' is a synonym of "the philosopher's stone, the red tincture or elixir"<sup>671</sup>. Alchemists conceive of blood also as a metaphor for the mercurial water, often described as a 'sea', that cleanses corrupt bodies during the stage of ablution, as will be discussed. Most importantly, Abraham remarks that the idea of "the shedding of blood from a pure being in order to cleanse the sins of the impure occurs frequently in the

---

<sup>665</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>666</sup> W.A. Murray, "Why was Duncan's blood golden?", cit., p. 42.

<sup>667</sup> John Donne, *Resurrection, Imperfect*, cit., ll. 13-14, in Id., *Poems*, cit., p. 162. See also W.A. Murray, "Why was Duncan's blood golden?", cit., 41.

<sup>668</sup> See 'blood', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>669</sup> W.A. Murray, "Why was Duncan's blood golden?", cit., p. 41.

<sup>670</sup> See 'green lion', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>671</sup> See 'blood' in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 28.

alchemical texts”<sup>672</sup>. This kind of imagery alludes to the necessary step of *putrefactio*, when the body is killed in order to be regenerated<sup>673</sup>. With reference to Macbeth’s lines, Egan actually points out that “in alchemy blood has strong associations with the principle that metals must ‘die’ in the original forms to be reborn as gold and with the life-giving red elixir [...] achieved after the white (silver) stage”<sup>674</sup>. All this considered, it can be argued that the association of silver and gold in Macbeth’s words, alongside the image of a dead king, would have prompted the audience to see Duncan’s death as a form of alchemical transmutation. As a matter of fact, the elixir, or tincture, is usually represented by alchemists as a king, emblem of the degree of excellence that is attained at the end of the alchemical work. The king, known as *rex chymicus*, has to ‘die’ in order to achieve the tincture, or red elixir. Once he has reached the last stage of the alchemical journey, passing through phases of death and sacrifice, the chemical king ‘projects’ his own tincture on others, tingeing and transmuting them, a concept that recurs in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The Egyptian queen actually celebrates the virtues of her beloved Mark Antony in alchemical terms, associating him with the alchemical tincture, that ‘tinges’ and ‘gilds’ imperfect matter: “How much unlike art thou Mark Antony! / Yet, coming from him, that great med’cine hath / With his tinct gilded thee” (I, v, 34-6). As Duncan’s blood tinges the whole sea, so the alchemical tincture is said to be able to “transmute over a hundred or a thousand times its own weight of base metal into pure gold”<sup>675</sup>. In Murray’s opinion, then, alchemy unquestionably played a fundamental role in the “world of images and concepts” that constituted “part of the mutual experience of Shakespeare and his audiences”<sup>676</sup>. These considerations of course do not imply that Shakespeare was an alchemist, as Ben Jonson was not an alchemical practitioner just because his knowledge of alchemy’s conceptions is outstanding. They prove that the two dramatists were perfectly aware of the language of their time and inevitably employed it, either to distance themselves from that world-view, as is the case of Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, or to activate the audience’s imagination, relying on a common field of beliefs and imagery. Taking into account that in the eulogy written in honour of Shakespeare, Jonson praises his fellow playwright’s works because they perfectly reflect the “Soule of the Age”<sup>677</sup> in which they both lived, it is not surprising that

---

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>674</sup> Gabriel Egan, “Money, Gold, and G(u)ilt: Shakespearian Alchemy”, in Id., *Shakespeare*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 236.

<sup>675</sup> See ‘tincture’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 200.

<sup>676</sup> W.A. Murray, “Why was Duncan’s blood golden?”, cit., p. 37.

<sup>677</sup> “I, therefore, will begin. Soule of the Age! / The applause! delight! the wonder of our Stage! / My Shakespeare, rise!”. Ben Jonson, *To the memory of my beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare: And what he hath left us*, in William Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare*, based on Folios in the

alchemical philosophy, being an integral part of English Renaissance culture, is such an important component of the Bard's dramatic and poetic production.

That Shakespeare was well acquainted with Paracelsus's pioneering theories on alchemy and medicine, in contrast with the Galenic tradition, is testified by the comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*, performed a couple of years before *The Winter's Tale* was composed. The two gentlemen Paroles and Lafeu, discussing about the seemingly miraculous curing of the king of France, whose healing is defined as the "rarest argument of wonder that hath shot / out in our latter times" (II, iii, 7-8), explicitly mention both "Galen and Paracelsus" (II, iii, 11):

LAFEU: They say miracles are past; and we have our  
philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar,  
Things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that  
We make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves  
Into seeming knowledge, when we should submit  
Ourselves to an unknown fear.

PAROLES: Why, 'tis the rarest argument of wonder that hath  
Shot out in our latter times.

LAFEU: To be relinquish'd of the artists, -

PAROLES: So I say - both of Galen and Paracelsus.  
(II, iii, 1-8 and 10-11)

The fact that Shakespeare juxtaposes Galen and Paracelsus, without evidently promoting either of them, encourages the audience to delve even more deeply into the renowned dispute. As will be discussed, Helena's treatments, with which she will be able to cure the king of France, seem to be of a Paracelsian nature. A treatise by Richard Bostocke, entitled *The Difference Betwene the Auncient Physicke and the Latter Physicke* and published in 1585, attests the already well established presence of Paracelsian beliefs in late sixteenth-century England. Bostocke presents Paracelsus as the harbinger of a new kind of medicine, an "Ars sacra, or magna, & sacra scientia, or Chymia, or Chemeia, or Alchimia [...] following Nature diligently"<sup>678</sup>. As Bostocke argues, "that famous and worthie Philosophicall Chymist *Theophrastus Paracelsus*" was not the inventor of the art of

---

Folger Shakespeare Library Collection, with a new introduction by Peter W. M. Blayney, W. W. Norton & Company, New York-London, 1996, p. 9.

<sup>678</sup> Richard Bostocke, *The Difference Betwene the Auncient Physicke, First Taught by the Godly Forefathers, Consisting in vnitie Peace and Concord: and the Latter Physicke Proceeding From Idolaters, Ethnickes, and Heathen: as Gallen, and such other other consisting in dualitie, discorde, and contrarietie And Wherein the Naturall Philosophie of Aristotle Doth Differ from the Trueth of Gods Worde, and is iniurious to Christianitie and Sounde Doctrine*, Printed by G. Robinson for Robert Walley, London, 1585, sig. Bir-Biv.

alchemy but “the restorer thereof to his puritie”. Moreover, Bostocke continues, “he hath giuen more light thereunto than any other before him”<sup>679</sup>. Paracelsus, according to Bostocke, returned to a purer tradition, “founded vpon the rule of Gods worde”, unlike Galen, whose science, conversely, is defined by the author as “most grosse and worst”<sup>680</sup>. In *All’s Well*, lord Lafeu, considering the medical art of the celebrated physician Gerard de Narbon, thanks to which the king is saved, argues that Narbon has produced a kind of “medicine / That’s able to *breathe life into a stone*” (II, i, 71-2, italics mine), somehow alluding to the alchemical process of ‘fixation’, in which “the Spirit of lyfe”<sup>681</sup>, or volatile spirit, is ‘fixed’ within the stone and life is restored. With regards to the alchemical concept of fixation, Paracelsus explicitly argues that nature operates through a “universal spirit” and a “*divine breath* [...] which vivifies all bodies”<sup>682</sup>. As will be considered in the following pages, one of the central concerns of alchemists is precisely the “Prolongation of life”, that “has been the principall ground whence many Philosophers have addicted themselves”<sup>683</sup>. Further discussing about the ability of Narbon’s art to procure immortality, the Countess claims that, if the said doctor would have been able to live longer, his medical skills “would have made nature immortal, and death / should have play for lack of work” (I, i, 19-20).

*All’s Well* bears significant connections with the alchemical and Paracelsian background of Shakespeare’s England: as a matter of fact, Paracelsus himself was renowned for his “near-miraculous cures” since at least the 1550s, this is the reason why “a widespread search for his manuscripts” began<sup>684</sup>. As attested by Bostocke, Paracelsus “in applyng and ministering the same [medicine] hath performed wondrous, and almost

<sup>679</sup> See Richard Bostocke, Chapter 19. “That Theophrastus Paracelsus, was not the inuentor of this Arte, but the restorer thereof to his puritie: and that he hath giuen more light thereunto then any other before him: and the testimonies of great cures that he did by this Arte; and of diuers writers and learned Physicions, which since his time haue written of this Arte”, in Id., *The Difference Betwene the Auncient Physicke*, cit.

<sup>680</sup> “This is most grosse and worst, and is that phisicke which is most commonly vsed, and most stoutly maintained and defended. This phisicke is founded vpon a contrary Center to the other, therefore a false Center. For it consisteth in dualitie, discord and contrarietie. It maketh warre and not peace in mans bodie. It is not founded vpon the rule of Gods worde, but vpon the authoritie of men reprobate of God, & such as were Idolaters and ignorant of the trueth, consisting onely in God (whome they knewe not) and in his Christ the trueth it self, whome *Galene* the prince of that phisicke, in his works hath blasphemed of set purpose and by expresse wordes”. Richard Bostocke, Chapter 1. “What the auncient Phisicke is”, in Id. *The Difference Betwene the Auncient Physicke*, cit.

<sup>681</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin’s Dreame*, TCB 265.

<sup>682</sup> Paracelsus, *A Short Catechism of Alchemy*, HAWP 1: 289, italics mine.

<sup>683</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses Upon Some Part of the Preceding Worke*, TCB 448.

<sup>684</sup> Allen G. Debus, *Man and Nature in the Renaissance*, cit., p. 20. Considering the possibility to heal all diseases by means of the application of the alchemical tincture, Paracelsus claims: “So, then, the Tincture of the Philosophers is a Universal Medicine, and consumes all diseases, by whatsoever name they are called, just like an invisible fire. The dose is very small, but its effect is most powerful. By means thereof I have cured the leprosy, venereal disease, dropsy, the falling sickness, colic, scab, and similar afflictions; also lupus, cancer, noli-metangere, fistulas, and the whole race of internal diseases, more surely than one could believe”. Paracelsus, *The Tincture of the Philosophers*, HAWP 1: 29.

diuine things”<sup>685</sup>. The Swiss alchemist extensively dealt with the possibility to extend human life thanks to the alchemical tincture:

Some of the first and primitive philosophers of Egypt have lived by means of this Tincture for a hundred and fifty years. The life of many, too, has been extended and prolonged to several centuries [...] For its power [of the tincture] is so remarkable that it extends the life of the body beyond what is possible to its congenial nature, and keeps it so firmly in that condition that it lives on in safety from all infirmities<sup>686</sup>.

As documented by Debus, it was precisely from the 1570s that “the conflict between the Paracelsians and the Galenists become common knowledge”<sup>687</sup>. Shakespeare, in particular, might have been in contact with the new Paracelsian topics also via his son-in-law, doctor John Hall (1574/5?-1635), a renowned physician in Stratford-upon-Avon and husband to the playwright’s daughter, Susanna. John Hall’s casebook of diseases and correspondent cures, first written in Latin and later translated into English by the surgeon James Cook<sup>688</sup>, dwells on both Paracelsian and Galenic remedies:

Hall regularly prescribes chemical medicines [...] alongside Galenic simples or single-source herbal remedies, integrating the two competing medical philosophies [the Paracelsian and the Galenic] with little difficulty<sup>689</sup>.

At a certain point in his casebook, Hall mentions the so-called *Laudanum Paracelsi*<sup>690</sup>, that he prescribes to the twenty-eight-year-old Mrs. Peerse to cure her from “melancholy”, “weaknesse of the whole body”, and “daily Fever”<sup>691</sup>, until “she was well recovered”<sup>692</sup>. Webster remarks that the publication of Paracelsus’s writings undoubtedly fostered a “revitalization of alchemy” and a new faith in the human ability to defeat all sorts of diseases<sup>693</sup>, a faith that is no doubt evident in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Moreover, Webster attests that “during the 1560s Latin editions of Paracelsian works

---

<sup>685</sup> Richard Bostocke, *The Difference Betwene the Auncient Physicke, First Taught by the Godly Forefathers, Consisting in vnitie Peace and Concord: and the Latter Physicke*, cit., Chapter 19.

<sup>686</sup> Paracelsus, *The Tincture of the Philosophers*, HAWP 1: 29.

<sup>687</sup> Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, cit., p. xxiv.

<sup>688</sup> See Joan Lane, “Hall, John”, ODNB 24: 623-4.

<sup>689</sup> Sujata Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language: A Dictionary*, Arden Shakespeare Dictionary Series, Bloomsbury, London, 2011, p. 5. Iyengar also notices that “Paracelsian homeopathy and chemical treatments likewise appear in Shakespeare”.

<sup>690</sup> John Hall, *Select Observations on English Bodies: or, Cures both Empericall and Historically, performed upon very eminent Persons in Desperate Diseases, First, written in Latine by Mr. John Hall Physician, translated by James Cook*, Printed for John Sherley, at the Golden Pelican, in Little-Britain, 1657, Observation XXVII, p. 169. On the connections between Shakespeare’s medical and alchemical knowledge and Paracelsian beliefs, see also W.A. Murray, “Why was Duncan’s blood golden?”, cit., p. 36.

<sup>691</sup> John Hall, *Select Observations*, cit., pp. 168-9.

<sup>692</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 170.

<sup>693</sup> Charles Webster, *Health, Medicine and Mortality*, cit., p. 330.

became increasingly easy to obtain” and, therefore, it can be assumed that “his ideas had been largely assimilated by 1600”<sup>694</sup>. As a consequence, it is not surprising that, as Iyengar argues, Paracelsian remedies are present throughout Shakespeare’s works and are particularly evident in the last plays. The healing of Hermione in the final scene of *The Winter’s Tale*, for instance, hints at Paracelsian beliefs and, Iyengar continues, Cerimon, who seems to revive Queen Thaisa from death in *Pericles*, evidently recalls the theories of Paracelsus: “it is certainly possible to detect in Shakespeare’s aristocratic physician in *Pericles*, Cerimon, the type of the ‘good’ Paracelsian physician who refines chemical medicines from nature”<sup>695</sup>.

Moving from Honigmann’s exhortation to “look in all directions”<sup>696</sup> in order to appreciate the numerous layers of interpretations inherent in the Bard’s plays and with no intention to deny other readings, my study is an attempt to offer an analysis that could add some value to the “many truths”<sup>697</sup> of *The Winter’s Tale*. It has been remarked that Shakespeare’s romance, evidently dealing with Catholic, Protestant, and Hermetic concerns, is characterised by a special kind of syncretism “that enables many valid readings of the play, which depend upon the interpretative frame the reader or viewer emphasises”<sup>698</sup>. The key position of the play within Shakespeare’s 1623-Folio, the first complete edition of the Bard’s dramatic works, edited by the two fellow actors John Heminge and Henry Condell, further testifies to the significance of *The Winter’s Tale* within the playwright’s macrotext. Interestingly enough, *The Tempest* opens the Folio, whose first section is dedicated to the *Comedies*, whereas *The Winter’s Tale* is placed at the end of the same section, as if the editors wanted to suggest that a link exists between the two romances: almost in a circular way, *The Winter’s Tale* mirrors *The Tempest*, traditionally considered as Shakespeare’s ‘last will’, a summa of his works and a romance overtly dealing with the world of Renaissance Hermeticism<sup>699</sup>. In the light of Pagnini’s theories, I intend my study as a way to fill the gap between ‘present’ and ‘past’. The scholar actually notices that the more distant the historical moment in which a literary work of art was created is, the more a critic is prompted to shorten this distance by

---

<sup>694</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 323.

<sup>695</sup> Sujata Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>696</sup> E.A.J. Honigmann, *Myriad-Minded Shakespeare*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>698</sup> Jill Delsigne, “Hermetic Miracles in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich (eds.), *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2014, p. 93

<sup>699</sup> “Sebbene tutti gli ultimi *romances* di Shakespeare presentino affinità tematiche e stilistiche, quelli più saldamente legati tra loro sono senza dubbio *The Tempest* e *The Winter’s Tale*, come sembra segnalare la scelta editoriale di Heminges e Condell di porli rispettivamente in apertura e in chiusura della sezione delle *comedies*”. Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done*. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 49.

studying the cultural traits of that epoch<sup>700</sup>. In order to better understand the role of alchemy in Shakespeare's England and before proceeding with the study of the possible influences of the discipline on *The Winter's Tale*, I believe it is useful to dwell on the kind of writings that contributed to shape the alchemical mindset of the time and that were very likely known to Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

## 4.2. Alchemical texts in Shakespeare's England

Considering that a communal set of beliefs and values between a dramatist and his public exists, it can be assumed that the specific knowledge of alchemical issues displayed by Jonson in his satiric comedy was also shared by his audience – very likely also the audience of Shakespeare's 'late plays'. It is not worthless to point out that Jonson's *The Alchemist* was performed by Shakespeare's theatre company, the King's Men, in the same year in which *The Winter's Tale* was composed, in late 1610<sup>701</sup>. According to McMullan,

---

<sup>700</sup> "Il componimento è inserito in altre strutture (sovrastutture), come le coeve situazioni sociale, religiosa, scientifica, artistica (non solo della letteratura) e queste strutture in qualche modo lo intersecano. È quindi possibile una considerazione sincronica più vasta, un taglio che comprende l'intero flusso della storia colto in un momento del suo divenire. Questa considerazione è necessaria al critico che voglia vedere l'opera nel suo ambiente originario, e questi sempre più ne sentirà l'esigenza man mano che andrà crescendo la distanza con la comparsa storica del componimento". Marcello Pagnini, *Struttura letteraria*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>701</sup> "Jonson wrote *The Alchemist* for the King's Men, possibly in the early summer 1610. In late August or early September, the company performed the play in Oxford. [...] While the Oxford performance is the earliest known, the King's Men were on tour because of the plague which closed the theatres from July to probably November 1610" (Peter Holland and William Sherman, Preface to Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, cit., p. 544). Scholars usually assume that *The Winter's Tale* was composed around 1610. As noticed by John Pitcher, "Shakespeare probably started *The Winter's Tale* six weeks or more before the end of 1610, and completed it by early May 1611" (see John Pitcher (ed.), Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 88). A detail that might be helpful to identify with more precision the date of the composition of Shakespeare's play is provided by an allusion in *The Winter's Tale* to Ben Jonson's *Masque of Oberon*, whose dance of satyrs was performed before King James at court on 1 January 1611. During the sheep-shearing festival, in Act IV of *The Winter's Tale*, the countrymen who perform the satyrs's dance claim to have already "danced before the King", thus possibly alluding to Jonson's *Masque of Oberon*: "One three of them, by their own report, sir, hath danced before the king" (IV, iv, 342-3). Pitcher remarks that "many scholars conclude that Shakespeare wrote *The Winter's Tale* between 1 January and the Globe performance on 15 May [...]. We might reasonably push the earlier date back a few months, however, because preparations for the masque – costuming, building painted screens and teaching courtiers how to dance their parts – must have taken several weeks. The King's Men, providing the professional dancers, would have had an outline of the masque by, say, mid-November" (John Pitcher (ed.), Introduction to *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 88). In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, *The Winter's Tale* date of composition is placed between 1609 and 1610 (see Catherine M.S. Alexander (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. xi). In a similar, the editors of *The Oxford Shakespeare* argue that the romance was very likely written in 1609-10: "*The Winter's Tale*, first printed in the 1623 Folio, is usually thought to

the collaborative nature of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama should prompt scholars to look at the chronologies of the plays staged by both Shakespeare's company and by other successful theatrical companies of the time:

[we] should make sense of the plays not only in relation to the earlier work in the Shakespeare canon but also in relation to the other plays in the King's Men's repertory and in the rival repertories with which that company competed<sup>702</sup>.

The idea that Shakespeare was a solo genius does not reflect the reality of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama: playwrights usually responded to each other's works and moulded their production according to the expectations and tastes of their public. It follows that the presence of *The Alchemist* in the repertory of the King's Men almost at the same time of *The Winter's Tale*, first represented in 1611 at the Globe Theatre and written in 1609-10, suggests that alchemical imagery and symbolism were no doubt "part of the air they [Elizabethans and Jacobean] breathed"<sup>703</sup>. As noticed by Dillon, seeing the parallels between *The Alchemist* and *The Winter's Tale* actually "depends upon recognizing the closeness in time of the two plays and the fact of their performance by the same company in the same theatre for the same fashionable and knowing audience"<sup>704</sup>.

Stanton Linden asserts that in Renaissance England alchemy, "though controversial, was popular and thriving"<sup>705</sup>. The diffusion of alchemical ideas and language in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, evidenced by *The Alchemist*, was due to the vast circulation and publication of treatises on alchemy. These writings appeared either singularly or in new, large collections. As already said, John Dee's massive library testifies to the wide dissemination of writings of alchemical and Hermetic matrix, also including a variety of medieval texts that until then had circulated only in manuscript form<sup>706</sup>. As documented by Michela Pereira, from the late Middle Ages onwards the flow of the

---

have been written after *Cymbeline*, but stylistic evidence places it before that play, perhaps in 1609-10". See Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, Introduction to *The Winter's Tale*, in William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005<sup>2</sup>, p. 1123.

<sup>702</sup> Gordon McMullan, "What is a 'late play'?", in Catherine M.S. Alexander (ed.), *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, cit., p. 21.

<sup>703</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>704</sup> Janette Dillon, "Scenic Memory", in Andrew Gordon and Thomas Rist (eds.), *The Arts of Remembrance in Early Modern England. Memorial Cultures of the Post Reformation*, Routledge, London and New York, 2013, p. 207.

<sup>705</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, p. 16.

<sup>706</sup> "Paracelsus' influence on the alchemy of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was such that the interest in it strongly increased again. The result was that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century alchemical medieval writings, which have circulated until then in manuscript form, were published in alchemical collective works, as a consequence of which they became widely spread". H.M.E. De Jong, Introduction to Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*, cit., p. 39.

alchemical written production became almost overwhelming<sup>707</sup>. In the Prolegomena to one of the most renowned of alchemical anthologies, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, Ashmole remarks that “they [alchemical authors] have Written more than they would Speake” and “left their Lines so Rich, as if they had dissolved Gold in their Inke, and clad their Words with the Sovereign Moysture”<sup>708</sup>. Handing down “like Rivers”<sup>709</sup> their knowledge of alchemical and Hermetic theories, English philosophers, Ashmole notices, were the most learned authorities in the fields of alchemy and Hermeticism so much so that “no Nation hath written more, or better”<sup>710</sup> than England. In Ashmole’s view, his country did not excel only in the practice and theory of alchemy but also in that of natural magic, of which alchemy is usually considered to be a branch: “As for Magick, Pliny tells us, It flourished in Britaine, and that the People there were so devoted to it”<sup>711</sup>. It should be recalled that the first translation of an alchemical treatise from Arabic into Latin, the *Testament of Morienus*, was actually accomplished by the English monk Robert of Chester in 1144<sup>712</sup>. Furthermore, as argued by Debus, one of the first thinkers who engaged in a systematic discussion on the new art of alchemy was the English Franciscan monk Roger Bacon (c.1214-1292?). Bacon’s *The Mirror of Alchimy*<sup>713</sup> was indeed one of the most celebrated alchemical writings of the English Renaissance and should be regarded as “an Elizabethan digest of basic alchemical theories”<sup>714</sup>.

As pointed out by Stanton Linden, when the first English translation of *The Mirror* from Latin was published, in 1597, “many of its learned readers were acquiring a collection of treatises with which they were likely familiar”<sup>715</sup>. It can be assumed, therefore, that the appearance in print of *The Mirror of Alchimy* was the consequence of a huge demand of alchemical writings: “his [Bacon’s] reputation as an authority on alchemy and magic was confirmed, in both France and England, at the beginning of the age of the

<sup>707</sup> Michela Pereira, *Arcana sapienza*, cit., pp. 194-5.

<sup>708</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena, TCB sig. B4v.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibidem*, sig. A2v.

<sup>710</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>711</sup> *Ibidem*, sig. A3.

<sup>712</sup> See chapter 1.1. “Alchemy: from its Ancient Origins to the Renaissance”.

<sup>713</sup> Roger Bachon, *The Mirror of Alchimy, Composed by the thrice-famous and learned Fryer, Roger Bachon*, Printed for Richard Oliue, London, 1597. In the present work I will quote from the edition of *The Mirror of Alchimy* edited by Stanton J. Linden, Garland, New York-London, 1992. The Latin text of *Speculum alchemiae* is to be found in the following collection: *In Hoc Volumine De Alchemia continentur haec. Gebri Arabis, Philosophi solertissimi, rerumque naturalium, praecipue metallicarum peritissimi, De investigatione perfectionis metallorum. [...] Speculum Alchemiae, doctissimi viri Rogerii Bachonis. Correctorium Alchemiae doctissimi viri Richardi Anglici. Rosarius minor, de Alchemia, Incerti auctoris. Liber Secretorum Alchemiae Calidis filium Jazichi Judaei. Tabula Smaragdina de Alchemia, Hermetis Trismegistis. Hortulani philosophi, super Tabulam Smaragdinam Hermetis, Commentarium*, Norimbergae apud Joh. Petreium, 1541.

<sup>714</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>715</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchimy*, cit., p. ix.

scientific revolution”<sup>716</sup>. The figure of Roger Bacon, the celebrated Medieval *magus*, was particularly enhanced in Renaissance England, as testified by Robert Greene’s *The Honorable Historie of Frier Bacon and Frier Bongay* (1594). In Greene’s comedy, Bacon’s fame as a magician is mainly due to the speaking head of brass he had allegedly built, as suggested by the lines pronounced by Burden:

I tell thee Bacon, Oxford makes report,  
[...] Thart making of a brazen head by art,  
Which shall vnfold strange doubts and Aphorismes,  
And read a lecture in Philosophie,  
And by the helpe of Diuels and ghaftly fiends,  
Thou meanst ere many yeares or daies be past,  
To compasse England with a wall of brasse<sup>717</sup>.

Roger Bacon’s brazen head well epitomises the Renaissance dream to master nature, a dream that could easily arouse accusations of necromancy. Burden actually wonders if it is “by the helpe of Diuels and ghaftly fiends” that Bacon is planning to build a brazen wall with which to surround the whole of England. Further testifying to the blurred boundaries that separated natural magic from necromancy, ‘lawful’ from ‘unlawful’ practices, the thirteenth-century Catalan thinker Arnald of Villanova was said to have destroyed the *homunculus* he had created for fear that this would be regarded as an action against divine law<sup>718</sup>. In 1547 John Dee designed an automatic *scarabeus* for the performance of a Greek comedy by Aristophane, at Trinity College in Cambridge. As might be expected, the show caused both wonder and fear, as recorded by Dee himself: “Hereupon I did sett forth [...] a Greeke comedy of Aristophanes [...] with the performance of the *Scarabaeus* [...]; whereat was a great wondring, and many vaine reports spread abroad of the means how that was effected”<sup>719</sup>. Dee’s flying beetle aroused suspicions not only because of the iconoclastic movement promoted by the English reformers<sup>720</sup>, who regarded all kinds of icons as a form of idolatry to be eradicated, but also because it pointed to the contemporary debates concerning the limits of human art before nature and the relationship between

---

<sup>716</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xii.

<sup>717</sup> Robert Greene, *The Honorable Historie of frier Bacon, and frier Bongay As it was plaid by her Maiesties seruants*, Printed by Adam Islip for Edward White, London, 1594, sig. Bv-B2r.

<sup>718</sup> See John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: the Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson and Shakespeare*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1989, p. 74, and William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, cit., pp. 6-7.

<sup>719</sup> John Dee, “Compendious Rehearsall”, *Autobiographical Tracts*, edited by James Crossley, Kessinger Publications, London, 1999, pp. 5-6, quoted by Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis on the Stage of Theatre History*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2011, p. 26.

<sup>720</sup> On the relationship between Iconoclasm and automata in Renaissance England, see Kara Reilly, “Iconoclasm and Automata”, in Id., *Automata and Mimesis*, cit., pp. 16-47.

benign magic and demonic art. At the end of *The Winter's Tale*, Paulina herself, immediately before making the statue of Queen Hermione move, a scene unquestionably alluding to the technological marvels of the time and to the Egyptian rituals of statue animation recorded in the Hermetic *Asclepius*, assures the audience of the lawfulness of the practice:

If you can behold it,  
I'll make the statue move indeed, descend,  
And take you by the hand. But then you'll think –  
Which I protest against – I am assisted  
By wicked powers.  
(V, iii, 87-91)

It is fairly evident that Paulina, like Roger Bacon, is “versed in the magic of animating statues”<sup>721</sup>. As will be discussed, in Renaissance England natural magic was complexly intertwined with technology, as testified by the automata, speaking statues, and other technological devices, such as the *perpetuum mobile* created by the praised inventor Cornelis Drebbel, that delighted King James I and his family and that were part of the Mannerist Stuart gardens. In this respect, the text *Les Raisons des Forces Mouvantes*, written by the engineer Salomon de Caus, who worked for the Stuart family, offers a number of illustrations of the automata and hydraulic machines that could be admired in the royal gardens of the time, such as those at Somerset House and Richmond Palace, designed for Queen Anne and Prince Henry respectively<sup>722</sup>. As Roy Strong remarks, “Salomon de Caus’s magical, mechanical wonders [...] bring us into contact [...] with a tradition central to late Renaissance garden making, that of automata”<sup>723</sup>. Shakespeare, according to Strong, was acquainted with this tradition and knew the late Mannerist gardens’ marvels very well, as attested by what is usually considered his last play, *The Tempest*. While seeing the play, Strong suggests, we seem “to be wandering through a garden by de Caus where we are suddenly confronted by dreamlike monsters, or entering a

---

<sup>721</sup> Jill Delsigne, “Hermetic Miracles in *The Winter's Tale*”, in Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich (eds.), *Magical Transformations*, cit., p. 106.

<sup>722</sup> See Salomon de Caus, *Les raisons des forces mouvantes, avec diverses machines tant utiles que plaisantes: ausquelles sont adjoints plusieurs desseins de grottes & fontaines*, Hierosme Drouïart, Paris, 1624. On the moving statues and technological marvels of the Mannerist Stuart gardens, see Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis*, cit., pp. 35-6 and Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., pp. 73-112. On the technological devices invented by De Caus for the gardens at Heidelberg castle, where Princess Elizabeth Stuart lived for a while with her husband Frederick V, the Elector Palatine, Yates remarks: “The improvements made by De Caus in the enlargement and modernizing of the building, the marvels of his mechanical statues, water-organs, and other wonders of modern magico-science, were in themselves enough to excite amazement”. Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972, p. 59.

<sup>723</sup> Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden*, cit., p. 75.

wild grotto to be struck suddenly [...] with surprise and wonder at moving statues and magical music”<sup>724</sup>.

Debus notices that the number of works published in Renaissance England and, more in general, in Europe, shows that “the high point of alchemy dates from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries and this corresponds with the most influential period of Paracelsian medicine”<sup>725</sup>. The writings of the Swiss physician were actually published posthumously, i.e. in the second half of the sixteenth century<sup>726</sup>, when “vast collected editions were printed, and a whole school of Paracelsians battled with Aristotelians and Galenists”<sup>727</sup>. Claiming that “[w]hatever is poured forth from the bosom of Nature, he who adapts it to that purpose for which it is destined is an alchemist”<sup>728</sup>, Paracelsus widened and ennobled the scope of alchemical theory and practice, thus amply contributing to the circulation of alchemical ideas. In Paracelsus’s opinion, every kind of ‘art’ that perfects what has been left imperfect should be termed ‘alchemical’. It follows that medicine, as much as the art of “carpenters” and “sculptors”, is a form of alchemy, because it leads nature to the highest possible degree of excellence:

This, indeed, is alchemy, which directs to its final end everything which has attained some intermediate end [...]. This only is alchemy, which by preparation through fire, separates what is impure and draws out what is pure. [...] So also there are alchemists of wood, such as carpenters [...] or sculptors, who take away from the block of wood whatever does not form part of the contemplated statue. So too there are alchemists of medicine, who take away from medicine what is not medicine<sup>729</sup>.

Along with Roger Bacon and Paracelsus, George Ripley, also known as the ‘Canon of Bridlington’, is considered as one of the most influential English alchemists. The latter is especially renowned for the treatise entitled *The Compound of Alchymie*, composed in the 1470s and first published in 1591<sup>730</sup>. *The Compound* was circulating well before its publication and Ripley, constantly quoted by subsequent alchemical authors such as Edward Kelly and Thomas Charnock, was regarded as one of the “most famous and revered alchemists”<sup>731</sup>. As documented by Linden, the high number of manuscripts existing

---

<sup>724</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103.

<sup>725</sup> Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, cit., p. xxiv.

<sup>726</sup> “Although Paracelsus had died in 1541 few of his works appeared in print on the continent until the mid-1550s”. *Ibidem*, pp. xxiii-xxv.

<sup>727</sup> Allen G. Debus, *Man and Nature*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>728</sup> Paracelsus, *Alchemy: the Third Column of Medicine*, HAWP 2: 148.

<sup>729</sup> Paracelsus, *The Labyrinthus Medicorum*, HAWP 2: 167.

<sup>730</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymy or the Ancient Hidden Art of Archemie: Containing the right & perfectest meanes to make the PHILOSOPHERS STONE, Aurum potable, with other excellent Experiments. Divided into Twelve Gates*, Thomas Orwin, London, 1591.

<sup>731</sup> Stanton J. Linden, “The Ripley Scrolls and *The Compound of Alchymy*”, in Alison J. Adams and Stanton J. Linden (eds.), *Emblems and Alchemy*, Glasgow Emblem Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 1998,

and the two early printed copies of *The Compound of Alchymie* show that the treatise “was popular from the time it was written until well into the seventeenth century”<sup>732</sup>. Besides *The Compound of Alchymie*, other texts are ascribed to Ripley: *The Mistery of Alchymists*, the so-called ‘Ripley Scrolls’, a poem known as Ripley’s *Cantilena*, the treatise entitled *Medulla*, and a few other texts that are in the form of ‘visions’<sup>733</sup>.

Another authoritative fifteenth-century alchemical writer is Thomas Norton ‘of Bristol’. Norton is principally remembered for *The Ordinall of Alchimy* (1477), a treatise that was translated into Latin and thus given further visibility by the German Michael Maier, who included his version of Norton’s treatise in *Tripus Aureus* (1618)<sup>734</sup>. According to Debus, Maier came to England to translate Norton’s *Ordinall*, a detail which testifies to the importance that was bestowed upon the text<sup>735</sup>. Discussing about the numerous personalities who arrived to England to read and translate native alchemical texts, Ashmole remarks that “the first [...] came out of Germanie [Michael Maier], to live in England; purposely that he might so understand our English Tongue, as to Translate Norton’s *Ordinall* into Latin verse”<sup>736</sup>. It is worth noticing that *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, as much as other alchemical writings, was officially published only in the early seventeenth century, something that does not necessarily imply that the text was not already known. The ample circulation of treatises in manuscript form is often attested by other alchemists who, in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, mentioned those ‘old’ alchemical authors in their own texts. As a case in point, in a letter to Queen Elizabeth dating from 1565, Thomas Charnock mentions Norton, along with George Ripley and Roger Bacon, among those who

---

vol. 3, p. 75.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>733</sup> An English translation of Ripley’s *Cantilena* (MS. Ashmole 1445, VIII, pp. 2-12) is in Frank Sherwood Taylor, “George Ripley’s Song”, *Ambix*, vol. 2, 1946, pp. 177-81. Taylor reproduces an anonymous English translation of Ripley’s *Cantilena* dating from around the mid-sixteenth century (MS. Ashmole 1445, VIII, pp. 2-12). This version is of particular interest also because it bears annotations by Thomas Charnock. As documented by Taylor, Ripley’s *Cantilena* is reproduced in both Latin and English in several manuscripts. Latin versions of the text are in MSS. Ashmole 1394, 1445, and 1479. All the other works by Ripley that I have mentioned, the Scrolls excluded, are collected in Ashmole’s *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*: see *The Mistery of Alchymists*, TCB 380-88; *Medulla*, TCB 389-396; *The Vision of Sir George Ripley: Chanon of Bridlington*, TCB 374; *Verses Belonging to An Emblematicall Scrowle: Supposed to be invented by George Ripley*, TCB 375-79. I will provide more details about the *Ripley’s Scrolls* in section 4.3. “Alchemical Emblems and Allegories”.

<sup>734</sup> Maier’s *Tripus Aureus*, or *The Golden Tripod*, includes Basil Valentine’s *Twelve Keys*, Thomas Norton’s *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, and a “Testament” by Cremer: *Tripus aureus, hoc est, Tres tractatus chymici selectissimi, nempe I. Basili Valentini, Benedectini ordinis monachi, Germani, Practica una cum 12 clavibus et appendice, ex Germanico; II. Thomae Nortoni, Angli philosophi Crede mihi seu Ordinale, ante annos 140. ab authore scriptum, nunc ex anglicano manuscripto in latinum translatum, phrasi cuiusque authoris ut et sententia retenta; III. Cremeris cuiusdam Abbatis Westmonasteriensis Angli Testamentum, hactenus nondum publicatum, nunc in diversarum nationum gratiam editi, et figuris cupro affabre incisus ornatu opera et studio Michaelis Maieri Phil. et Med. D. Com. P. et c., Francofurti, ex chalcographia Pauli Iacobi, impensis Lucae Iennis, 1618.*

<sup>735</sup> Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, cit., pp. xxiii-xxv.

<sup>736</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena, TCB sig. A2v.

obtained the true philosopher's stone:

some have had him (the Stone) in the first degree, and some have had him in the second degree, but Roger Bacon, George Ripley, Thomas Daulton, Thomas Norton, and Thomas Charnock had him in the third degree. And so had that most prudent prince Henry VIII<sup>737</sup>.

Furthermore, a common practice among alchemical writers consisted precisely in recovering the works of previous alchemists and re-arranging them in new compendia. Several alchemical treatises are actually an assemblage of quotations from celebrated authors, further testifying to the habit of drawing on older sources: it is worth mentioning, among others, the tenth-century Islamic collection *Turba Philosophorum*<sup>738</sup>, the pseudo-Arnaldian *Rosarium philosophorum*<sup>739</sup>, Johannes Mylius's *Philosophia reformata*<sup>740</sup>, and Arthur Dee's *Fasciculus chemicus*<sup>741</sup>.

In the list of the most renowned and influential English alchemists is also John Dastin (c.1288-c.1334): as reported in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the high number of medieval manuscripts bearing his name in Britain suggests that he was a British alchemist<sup>742</sup>. Some of these texts, such as the *Epistola boni viri* and *Johannis Dastin super arte alcumistica* have been transcribed and translated from Latin into English by the scholar Wilfred Theissen<sup>743</sup>. The only work by Dastin that appears in Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* is *Dastin's Dreame*, an alchemical vision where the *opus*

---

<sup>737</sup> Thomas Charnock, *Alchemical Letter to Queen Elizabeth*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>738</sup> See *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1-137. As remarked by Holmyard: "The *Turba* first appears in Latin manuscripts of the thirteenth century, and the earliest printed edition was published at Basel in 1572. [...] The Latin version shows unmistakable signs of having been translated from the Arabic, and the content of the speeches make it equally clear that at least some of the material must have been derived from the Greek. [...] in 1931 Ruska published a monograph in which he definitely proved its Arabic origin and tried to fix its date by comparing it with other Arabic works. On this point, however, he could come to no definite decision, hesitating between the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries". According to Holmyard, "the *Turba* could not have been written much later than about 900". Eric John Holmyard, *Alchemy*, cit., pp. 82-3.

<sup>739</sup> See *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 204-384. Mino Gabriele points out that the pseudo-Arnaldian *Rosarium philosophorum* performed a key role in transmitting the knowledge of some of the most important alchemical medieval writings in subsequent epochs: "célèbre florilège qui contribua notablement à prolonger la diffusion des grands textes alchimiques médiévaux chez les alchimistes des temps modernes". Mino Gabriele, "La signification de la 'Porte magique' de Rome et la doctrine alchimique de Massimiliano Palombara", in Didier Kahn et Sylvain Matton (eds.), *Alchimie, art, histoire et mythes*, Actes du 1er colloque international de la Société d'Étude de l'Histoire de l'Alchimie, 14-15-16 mars 1991, S.É.H.A., Paris, 1995, p. 697.

<sup>740</sup> See Johannes Mylius, *Philosophia reformata*, Francofurti, Apud Lucam Iennis, 1622.

<sup>741</sup> See Arthur Dee, *Fasciculus Chemicus: or Chymical Collections, Expressing The Ingress, Progress, and Egress, of the Secret Hermetick Science, out of the choisest and most Famous Authors [...] Whereunto is added, The Arcanum or Grand Secret of Hermetick Philosophy*, Both made English by James Hasolle, Published in Latin at Basle, 1629, London, Printed by J. Flesher for Richard Mynne, 1650.

<sup>742</sup> J.M.M.H. Thijssen, "Dastin, John", ODNB 15: 230.

<sup>743</sup> See Wilfred R. Theissen, "John Dastin's Letter on the Philosopher's Stone", *Ambix*, vol. 33, Part 2/3, November 1986, pp. 78-87, and Id., "John Dastin: the Alchemist as Co-Creator", *Ambix*, vol. 38, Part 2, July 1991, pp. 73-8.

*alchymicum* is ‘humanised’: in Dastin’s parable human characters, who personify the role of metals, undergo a path of sacrifice, death, and rebirth<sup>744</sup>. The praxis of depicting the stages of the *opus alchymicum* in human terms began with the visions of the Greek philosopher Zosimos of Panopolis, in the third century AD. Linden points out that Zosimos evidently marked a new phase within the alchemical tradition: with him, alchemy “appears to have been transformed from what was essentially a metallurgical craft to a secret and mysterious hermetic art”<sup>745</sup>. Considering Ashmole’s intention to collect the most celebrated alchemical writings composed by “Famous Authors”<sup>746</sup> of England, the presence of *Dastin’s Dreame* in the collection is telling of its importance within the English alchemical canon. In particular, Dastin’s text is highly emblematic of the custom to depict the *opus alchymicum* as a journey whose protagonists are not metals, but, rather, people, most of the times kings and queens. On the whole, in these alchemical allegories, as will be considered below, the steps of the alchemical work are presented as a troublesome course through which the final reconciliation and rebirth, often symbolised by the ‘chemical wedding’ between a king and a queen, is achieved only by means of a process of suffering, expiation, and symbolical death.

As already said, alchemical treatises also appeared in extended collections, such as *Theatrum Chemicum*, first published by Zetzner in 1602 in four volumes. Given the huge success of the endeavour, the collection was published again with the addition of two more volumes: “a second edition, 1613-1622, included a fifth volume, and a sixth volume was added to the final edition of 1659-1661”<sup>747</sup>. A quick glance at the index of the treatises contained in *Theatrum Chemicum* reveals that the main alchemical authorities are present: from Hermes Trismegistus, Avicenna, Raymond Lull, Thomas Aquinas<sup>748</sup>, Arnald of

---

<sup>744</sup> For a thorough discussion on the significance of Dastin’s alchemical vision, see Michela Pereira, *Arcana sapienza*, cit., p. 179.

<sup>745</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., pp. 8-9.

<sup>746</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena, TCB sig. A2v. As remarked by Robert Halleux, from the fifteenth century onwards a great number of alchemical texts, translated from Latin or written in the different vernacular languages, started to circulate widely: “Nel complesso, la fine del XIV e il XV sec. videro una grande proliferazione di trattati alchemici, tra i quali figuravano anche commenti, dossografie e compilazioni; molti di questi testi furono redatti non in latino, ma nelle diverse lingue volgari, una circostanza che attesta una crescente tendenza alla volgarizzazione. L’alchimia non soltanto penetrò nella cultura generale del pubblico non specializzato, ma iniziò a essere praticata in ambienti molto diversi da quelli a cui era in origina destinata”. Robert Halleux, “L’Alchimia nel Medioevo Latino e Greco”, in *Storia della scienza*, cit., vol. IV, p. 549.

<sup>747</sup> Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, cit., p. xxix. See *Theatrum Chemicum: praecipuos selectorum auctorum tractatus de chemiae et lapidis philosophici*, Sumptibus Heredum Eberh. Zetzneri, Argentorati, 1659-1661, 6 vols. (first published, E. Zetzneri, Ursel, 1602, 4 vols.).

<sup>748</sup> Among the treatises attributed to Thomas Aquinas that are collected in *Theatrum Chemicum* are *Secreta Alchemiae Magnalia: de corporibus supercaelestibus, quod in rebus inferioribus inveniuntur, quoque modo extrahantur*; *De Lapide Minerali, animali et plantali, tractatus*; and *Thesaurus Alchemiae secretissimus ad fratrem Reinaldum*. See *Theatrum Chemicum*, vol. 3, pp. 267ff.

Villanova, Roger Bacon, to George Ripley, John Dee, and Lamspringk. Since Zetzner's anthology "freely granted the importance of English authors"<sup>749</sup>, Ashmole later decided to provide his fellow countrymen with the possibility to read the most important English treatises in their own language and, therefore, edited the celebrated *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, published in 1652<sup>750</sup>. Zetzner's *Theatrum* was not the first collection of alchemical treatises to appear in print, since a small anthology entitled *De alchemia* was published in 1541 in Nurnberg<sup>751</sup>. Among the texts figuring in *De alchemia* is, not surprisingly, Bacon's *Speculum alchemiae*, one of the cornerstones of alchemical literature, as already said. A second edition of *De alchemia* was issued in 1550, an imprint that included also *Rosarium philosophorum*. As documented by Abraham, Shakespeare and his contemporaries were acquainted with these alchemical compendia. The scholar observes that the dramatist could have read the *Rosarium* and see the woodcuts contained therein both in *De alchimia* (1550) and in *Artis auriferae* (1553)<sup>752</sup>. Judging by the number of volumes, Zetzner's *Theatrum Chemicum* is no doubt the first attempt to create a compendium that could contain the largest possible number of alchemical treatises and, indeed, it still functions as an invaluable source for scholars. Moreover, its date of publication, 1602, is a further evidence of the demand of alchemical texts that characterised the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. This interest in alchemical and Hermetic philosophy is also testified by the publication of some important alchemical dictionaries, composed in the same span of time. Although Martin Ruland's *Lexicon alchemiae* (1612)<sup>753</sup> is unquestionably the most renowned of alchemical glossaries, two other lexicons are worth mentioning: the Paracelsian vocabulary written by Gerhard Dorn in 1584, *Dictionarium Theophrasti Paracelsi*<sup>754</sup>, and Simon Forman's still unpublished dictionary of alchemy in two volumes<sup>755</sup>.

<sup>749</sup> Allen G. Debus, Introduction to Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, cit., p. xxix.

<sup>750</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, Printed by J. Grismond for Nathaniel Brooke, London, 1652.

<sup>751</sup> *In Hoc Volumine De Alchemia continentur haec. Gebri Arabis, Philosophi solertissimi, rerumque naturalium, praecipue metallicarum peritissimi, De investigatione perfectionis metallorum. [...] Speculum Alchemiae, doctissimi viri Rogerii Bachonis. Correctorium Alchemiae doctissimi viri Richardi Anglici. Rosarius minor, de Alchemia, Incerti auctoris. Liber Secretorum Alchemiae Calidis filium Jazichi Judaei. Tabula Smaragdina de Alchemia, Hermetis Trismegistis. Hortulani philosophi, super Tabulam Smaragdinam Hermetis, Commentarium, Norimbergae apud Joh. Petreium, 1541.*

<sup>752</sup> Lyndy Abraham, "'The Lovers and the Tomb': Alchemical Emblems in Shakespeare, Donne, and Marvell", *Emblematica* 5:2, 1991, p. 306.

<sup>753</sup> Martini Rulandi, *Lexicon alchemiae, sive Dictionarium alchemisticum Cum obscuriorum Verborum, et Rerum Hermeticarum, tum Theophrast-Paracelsicarum phrasium, planam explicationem continens*, Palthenus, Francofurti, 1612.

<sup>754</sup> Gerard Dorn, *Dictionarium Theophrasti Paracelsi, Continens obscuriorum vocabulorum, quibus in suis Scriptis passim utitur, Definitiones: a Gerardo Dorneo collectum, et plus dimidio auctum*, Francoforti, 1584.

<sup>755</sup> "Among Forman's papers are two alchemical dictionaries. The first is an enormous compendium of

The other valuable collections that are still essential tools for the study of the alchemical tradition are *Artis Auriferae*, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, and *The Hermetic Museum*. The collection *Artis Auriferae* was first published in 1572<sup>756</sup> and consists of two volumes containing alchemical texts mainly from the Middle Ages, as well as Latin translations of Arabic sources, such as the already mentioned *Testamentum Morieni*. *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa* was edited by Jean Jacques Manget and published in 1702<sup>757</sup> and, like *Artis Auriferae*, is arranged in two volumes. Unlike *Artis Auriferae* and *Bibliotheca Chemica*, *The Hermetic Museum*, edited by Arthur Waite and published in 1893, collects several English translations of the most significant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century alchemical writings<sup>758</sup>. The collection first appeared in Latin in 1625, with the title of *Musaeum Hermeticum*, and was later enlarged in 1678<sup>759</sup>, on which Waite's English version is based. Waite is also worth mentioning for his English translations of the complete alchemical and hermetic works by Paracelsus, published in two volumes in 1894<sup>760</sup>.

---

alphabetical entries in two large folios, [...]. The second [...] has only one volume [...], but it reaches 917 pages; [...] as well as an index of cross-references. Entitled *Principles of Philosophie, Gathered by S. Forman*, and dated 1597, this carefully written manuscript, with our poem as a verse preface, has all the marks of being prepared for the press". Robert M. Schuler (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry*, cit., p. 54.

<sup>756</sup> *Artis auriferae*, Excudebat Conr. Waldkirch, Expensis Claudij de Marne, Basileae, 1593, 2 vols.

<sup>757</sup> Jean-Jacques Manget, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, Chouet, G. De Tourne, Cramer, Perachon, Ritter & S. De Tourne, Genevae, 1702, 2 vols.

<sup>758</sup> *The Hermetic Museum. Restored and Enlarged: Most Faithfully Instructing All Disciples of the Sopho-Spagyric Art How That Greatest and Truest Medicine of The Philosopher's Stone May Be Found and Held*, now first done into English from the Latin original published at Frankfort in the year 1678, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, J. Elliot and Co., London, 1893.

<sup>759</sup> *Musaeum Hermeticum, Reformatum et Amplificatum*, Hermannum à Sande, Francofurti, 1678.

<sup>760</sup> Paracelsus, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus the Great*, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, James Elliott, London, 1894, 2 vols. A most recent English translation of some of Paracelsus's writings is Paracelsus, *Paracelsus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541: Essential Theoretical Writings*, edited and translated by Andrew Weeks, Brill, Leiden, 2008.

### 4.3. Alchemical Emblems and Allegories

Since, as remarked by Taylor, “the alchemy of this period”, i.e. of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, is conceived of “as the practical pursuit and mental cultivation of the analogy between chemical changes and the life of man”<sup>761</sup>, my reading of *The Winter’s Tale* rests not only on written evidence but also on the visual aspect of alchemical literature<sup>762</sup>. As a matter of fact, when dealing with texts on alchemy, it is fundamental to consider that a number of them are devised not only as technical instructions on the transmutation of metals but, rather, as complex allegories drawing on enigmatic imagery and metaphors. In this respect, Rossi and Parigi remark that alchemical language is composed of such a complex symbolism that the endeavour to translate it into the vocabulary of modern chemistry is almost always unsuccessful<sup>763</sup>. Alchemists actually believe that, by transmitting their knowledge through parables and allegories, they can preserve the secrecy and nobility of their art, as claimed, among others, by Petrus Bonus, who insists on the necessity to read alchemical texts allegorically:

What is said about this principle in the books of the Sages is without doubt figuratively spoken by means of type and allegory, and therefore it is mere presumption on the part of an outsider to attempt to formulate an argument against our Art out of anything that the Sages have said<sup>764</sup>.

The praxis of conveying their truths in highly arcane terms, comprehensible only to the initiates, is common among alchemical authors, as noticed by Dom Pernety in his *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*:

Les anciens Philosophes ont enseigné leur Philosophie naturelle et chymique sous des emblèmes, des figures hiéroglyphiques et des énigmes, afin que le vulgaire et même les savans, qui ne seraient pas initiés dans leurs mysteres, n’y comprissent rien<sup>765</sup>.

---

<sup>761</sup> Frank Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, cit., pp. 143-4.

<sup>762</sup> The visual aspect of alchemical literature has been studied by several scholars. See, among others, Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia e iconologia*, cit.; Id., *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente secondo le fonti manoscritte e a stampa*, cit.; Jacques Van Lennep, *Art et alchimie*, cit.; Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy. The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art*, Rosenkilde and Bagger, Copenhagen, 1976; Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game. Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988.

<sup>763</sup> Paolo Rossi and Silvia Parigi (eds.), *La magia naturale nel Rinascimento. Testi di Agrippa, Cardano, Fludd*, Utet, Torino, 1989, p. 12.

<sup>764</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, pp. 89-90. Latin text: “Principium autem hoc praecipue traditum est totum sub figura, et allegoria propter ultimam difficultatem eius et inuestigationem supra rationem. Ex cuius ignorantia praedicta principia nil prosunt, quia ueritatem sui et aliorum in experimento ostendit et sensu et in experimento patet ueritas principiorum haec de prima ratione”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., p. 21r.

<sup>765</sup> Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 118. As Mino Gabriele notices: “Il maestro e il

Alchemical literature developed a prodigious set of illustrations, metaphors, and allegories in which real characters, most of the times kings and queens, figure as the main protagonists of the alchemical journey of transformation, healing, and re-creation. This ‘theatrical’ trait of the alchemical literary production, deeply intertwined with the Renaissance passion for the visual power of emblems, amply contributed to make alchemical imagery familiar to the imaginative consciousness. More effectively than the written texts, often perceived as cryptic and obscure, alchemical emblems and engravings clearly convey a ‘humanised’ version of the alchemical work. Alchemical authors usually make use of emblems with the intent to both lighten and conceal their truths:

Alchemical representation, like the traditional emblem, is characteristically a fusion of the verbal and the visual, word and picture, and [...] alchemical authors and illustrators often [...] draw upon both of the sister arts to vivify, enrich, clarify, allegorize, mystify or even obfuscate their discourse<sup>766</sup>.

Solomon Trismosin’s *Splendor solis*, decorated with “wonderful allegorical pictures”<sup>767</sup>, well epitomises this custom. Halleux observes that alchemical iconography reached its apogee in the sixteenth century, thanks to some important illustrated manuscripts, such as Trismosin’s *Splendor solis*<sup>768</sup>. Following the ancient tradition of *ut pictura poesis*, in *Splendor solis* each parable is accompanied by an engraving. The presence of the written text and of the illustrations is aimed at displaying the twofold nature of alchemy, conceived of as the art of refining both physical matter and the human soul:

As a Guide to Physical and Spiritual Adeptship, SPLENDOR SOLIS stands both for GOLD SPLENDOR and SOUL SPLENDOR, and intends to convey the Secret of Physical Alchemy by the text, and of Spiritual Alchemy by the Allegorical pictures<sup>769</sup>.

Warned not to overlook “the allegorical importance of the figures”<sup>770</sup>, the reader is prompted to read the whole treatise as having “both a Physical-Alchemical, and a Spiritual-

---

discepolo sono uniti dalla conoscenza di un operare segreto e dalla conoscenza delle operazioni ‘occulte’ della Natura; nasce la tradizione occulta del sapere alchemico/ermetico. Un sapere che si trasmette da maestro a discepolo, attraverso un liguaggio fatto da simboli, metafore, allegorie ed immagini, a testimoniare l’irriducibilità del linguaggio alchemico al linguaggio della filosofia”. Mino Gabriele, *Commentario sul Mutus Liber*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>766</sup> Alison J. Adams and Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (eds.), *Emblems and Alchemy*, cit., p. v.

<sup>767</sup> J. K., Introduction to Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>768</sup> “l’alchimia illustrata conoscerà il suo apogeo nel XVI sec., grazie ad alcuni prestigiosi manoscritti, tra i quali l’*Aureum vellus* di Salomon Trismosin”. Robert Halleux, “L’alchimia nel Medioevo Latino e Greco”, in *Storia della scienza*, cit., vol. IV, p. 549.

<sup>769</sup> J. K., Introduction to Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>770</sup> *Ibid.*

Mystic meaning”<sup>771</sup>. Considering that the emblem traditionally represents the perfect marriage between ‘word-soul’ and ‘image-body’, it can be assumed that alchemists, constantly insisting on the necessity to reconcile opposing polarities, such as male and female, or soul and body, might have regarded the emblem book as the proper medium to convey their theories. In the preface to one of the most influencing books of devices, Paolo Giovio’s *Dialogo dell’imprese militari et amorose* – translated into English in 1585 by Samuel Daniel – the author laid the foundations for the principles that would be at the basis of European emblem literature. Giovio argues that the good *impresa* should be composed of a right proportion of ‘body’ and ‘soul’, i.e. ‘image’ and ‘word’: “l’inventione o vero impresa, s’ella debba avere del buono, bisogna c’habbia cinque conditioni; Prima giusta proportione d’anima & di corpo; [...] Quinta richiede il motto, che è l’anima del corpo”<sup>772</sup>. As Loretta Innocenti observes, the intellectual delight deriving from the ability to comprehend the complex imagery of emblems and devices represented an important component of the emblematic literature since the most gifted readers could feel part of a cultural universe that was different and detached from that of people of less refined minds<sup>773</sup>. Emblems and devices are actually construed as complex symbolical itineraries whose path is successfully covered only by the most brilliant readers, who can properly decipher the symbols and attain the end of the journey<sup>774</sup>. The elitist features of the emblematic genre perfectly suited alchemical writings, equally construed as a journey through a complex and obscure imagery and based on the idea that the knowledge of alchemy should be restricted to a few, enlightened individuals. Alchemists actually argue that a key is necessary to enter the “Rose Garden” of wisdom or the “Campe of Philosophy”. Maier employs the metaphor of the key necessary to enter the alchemical rose

---

<sup>771</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>772</sup> Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell’imprese militari et amorose*, Appresso Gviglielmo Roviglio, Lione, 1559, p. 9. Considering a passage in *Hymenaei* (1606), in which Ben Jonson reflects upon the relationships between the verbal and the visual modes in the genre of the masque, a discussion that is consequent upon the disputes between the poet, Jonson, and the artist-architect, Inigo Jones, Gordon points out that “the central body-soul figure”, employed by Jonson in *Hymenaei*, “comes from theoretical literature on *imprese* or emblems, where it has a sharp significance: the body is the visual image, the soul is the motto or legend accompanying it. Jonson is talking about the masque as a kind of emblem”. Donald James Gordon, *The Renaissance Imagination. Essays and Lectures by D. J. Gordon*, collected and edited by Stephen Orgel, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975, p. 20.

<sup>773</sup> “Anche se non evidente, il senso del testo emblematico doveva comunque essere comprensibile e alla edificazione, data dalla morale risultante, si aggiungeva la soddisfazione intellettuale – ancora più forte per l’impresa, data la sua maggiore concisione e sinteticità – di essere riusciti a percorrere il complesso itinerario logico che sottendeva la simbolizzazione. Per i testi culturalmente più articolati, quelli in cui i richiami dotti erano più numerosi, cioè per le imprese, questo piacere intellettuale era ancora una componente elitaria che permetteva di riconoscersi in un universo di collegamenti culturali, ignorati non solo all’ ‘ignara plebe’, ma anche ai ‘mezzani ingegni’”. Loretta Innocenti, *Vis eloquentiae. Emblematica e persuasione*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1983, pp. 31-2.

<sup>774</sup> *Ibid.*

garden in emblem XXVII of *Atalanta fugiens*, in its turn based on *Rosarium philosophorum*: “He who tries to penetrate into the Philosophical Rose Garden without a key, resembles a man who wants to walk without feet”<sup>775</sup>. The illustration accompanying emblem XXVII shows the alchemist before a huge door leading to a labyrinth (see plate 72).

*Splendor solis* is, of course, not the only example of this sort: other collections are based on the coexistence of the written and of the pictorial dimensions in order to lead the reader through a mystical journey. *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1602)<sup>776</sup> by the German Heinrich Khunrath is a marvellous book where circular plates form the main part of the work. Particularly significant is the engraving entitled “The First Stage of the Great Work” (see plate 88), showing the laboratory of the alchemist. Somehow echoing *Splendor Solis*, that displays both the practical and the spiritual aspects of the alchemical quest, the mentioned plate in Khunrath’s *Amphitheatrum* clearly illustrates the dual nature of alchemy, composed of “manual labour, on one hand, and prayer, meditation and study on the other”<sup>777</sup>. The alchemist’s workshop is actually depicted as a *laboratorium* and as an *oratorium*: if tools of every sort and musical instruments are scattered on the table occupying the centre of the picture, thus alluding to empirical and laboratory practice, in the right-hand corner the adept is depicted while piously worshipping God. It is worth noting that Khunrath and John Dee met in 1589 during the latter’s stay at the court of the emperor Rudolf II in Prague, as recorded in Ashmole’s *Theatrum Chemicum*: “Here that famous *Hermetique Philosopher*, [Doctor *Henric Kunrath* of *Hamburgh*] came to visit him [John Dee]”<sup>778</sup>. It is not surprising, then, that Khunrath’s treatise entitled *Quaestiones Tres Perutiles* (1607) is dedicated to John Dee, whom the former defines as “England’s Hermes”<sup>779</sup>. As already noticed, John Dee, praised for the inestimable richness of his library, was an important catalyst for the spread of the newest alchemical and Hermetic ideas that easily circulated among the most influential personalities of the time. Michael

---

<sup>775</sup> Michael Maier, Motto accompanying Emblem XXVII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 201. The text from *Rosarium philosophorum* reads as follows: “Quicumque vult intrare Rosarium nostrum, et ibi videre, et habere rosas tam albas quam rubeas absque illa re vili, cum qua nostrae reseraturae reserentur, ille assimilatur homini ambulare volenti absque pedibus; quia in illa re vili est clavis, ex qua septem portae metallicae aperiuntur”. *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 278-79.

<sup>776</sup> “Conflicting dates in this work have led to disagreements concerning the date of the original edition and the number of plates in the later one. [...] The Privilege given by Emperor Rudolph II is dated 1 June 1598, which indicates that the manuscript of the work in its original form had been completed at that time. It was not printed until 1602”. Stanislas Klossowski De Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 29. The frontispiece to the first edition actually specifies that the text was published “With a Privilege from His Imperial Majesty for ten years from the first day of printing”.

<sup>777</sup> Stanislas Klossowski De Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>778</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 483.

<sup>779</sup> See Peter J. Forshaw, “The Early Alchemical Reception of John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*”, *Ambix*, vol. 52, n. 3, Nov. 2005, p. 260.

Maier himself met Henrich Khunrath in 1600-1601, as it has recently been discovered, thus further testifying to the existence of a network among the most eminent authorities in the field of alchemical studies<sup>780</sup>.

Almost contemporary with *Splendor solis* and *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* are Basil Valentine's *Zwölff Schlüssel* (1599), later translated with the title *Twelve Keys*, and *De Lapide Philosophico*, a text by an unknown German alchemist known as 'Lambsprinck'. Valentine's treatise was first published in Germany in 1599, without woodcuts, and in 1602, with the celebrated illustrations that exemplify the twelve stages of the alchemical *opus*<sup>781</sup>. *De lapide philosophico* was first published in Latin in 1599 and rendered into English as *The Book of Lambspring*<sup>782</sup>. Even though the two latter treatises were not published in English until the seventeenth century, the classic European alchemical texts were familiar to Shakespeare's audience, as Nicholl remarks:

He [the Jacobean playgoer] is familiar with the English writings of George Ripley and Thomas Tymme, and with the classic European texts of the early seventeenth century – Valentine's *Twelve Keys*, Lambspringk's *De Lapide Philosophico* and Sendivogius' *Novum Lumen*<sup>783</sup>.

Sendivogius's *Novum Lumen Chemicum*, translated as *The New Chemical Light*, was first published in Prague in 1604. According to Nicholl, echoes of *The Dialogue Between Mercury, the Alchemist, and Nature*, included in Sendivogius's *The New Chemical Light*<sup>784</sup>, are to be found in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists*

---

<sup>780</sup> Nils Lenke, Nicolas Roudet, Hereward Tilton, "Michael Maier – Nine Newly Discovered Letters", in *Ambix*, vol. 61, n. 1, February 2014, p. 4.

<sup>781</sup> *Twelve Keys* was first published in Germany in 1599 (without illustrations) and in 1602 (with illustrations) in *Ein kurtz summarischer Tractat, von dem grossen Stein der Uralten*. A Latin translation of it was included in Michael Maier's *Tripus Aureus* (1618) and several editions in English, French, and German appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See "Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine" in *The Alchemy Website* (<http://www.levity.com/alchemy/twelvkey.html>). A Latin version of the treatise was included in the *Musaeum Hermeticum* (1625). An English translation of *Twelve Keys* is in Basil Valentine, *The Last Will and Testament of Basil Valentine*, Printed by S. G. and B. G. for Edward Brewster, London, 1671, pp. 232-276. In 1624, Valentine's treatise was also published in French, thus further attesting to its author's widespread reputation abroad: Basile Valentin, *Les douze clefs de philosophie de frere Basil Valentin, religieux de l'ordre Sainct Benois: traictant de la vraye medecine metallique: plus l'Azoth, ou, Le moyen de faire l'or caché des philosophes: traduction françoise*, Paris, Chez Ieremie et Cristophe Perier, 1624. It was published again in French in 1659. Throughout the present study, all quotations from the English translations of *Twelve Keys* and *The Book of Lambspring* are from *The Hermetic Museum* (1893) and the Latin quotations of the same treatises are from *Musaeum Hermeticum, Reformatum et Amplificatum* (1678).

<sup>782</sup> Lambsprinck's *De lapide philosophico* first appeared in Latin in *Triga Chemica, id est de Lapide Philosophico Tractatus tres editore et Commentatore Nicolao Bernaudo Delphinatæ*, Apud Christophorum Raphelengium, 1599.

<sup>783</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 153.

<sup>784</sup> See Michael Sendivogius, *A Dialogue Between Mercury, the Alchemist, and Nature*, HM 242-47. The Latin text, *Dialogus Mercurii, Alchemistae et Naturae*, is in MH 590-600.

at Court<sup>785</sup>. Several alchemical treatises appeared precisely between the 1590s and 1605: among these publications are, as already said, the treatises of Valentinus, Lambsprinck, Sendivogius, and the first edition of *Theatrum Chemicum* (1602), but also Quercetanus's *Ad Veritatem Hermeticae Medicinae* (1604)<sup>786</sup>, Thomas Tymme's translation of Chesne's *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke* (1605)<sup>787</sup>, and the revived works of Roger Bacon and George Ripley<sup>788</sup>.

Both *Twelve Keys* and *The Book of Lambspring*, like *Splendor solis*, are structured as allegorical journeys where illustrations come along every stage of the alchemical process. The version of *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550) attributed to the thirteenth-century Catalan thinker Arnald of Villanova and Johann Mylius's *Philosophia reformatata* (1622) are organised in a similar way, words and pictures guiding the reader through an allegorical process of transformation. Plates decorate also Petrus Bonus's *Pretiosa margarita novella*, published by the highly praised Aldine press in 1546 but composed in the early fourteenth century. As might be expected, several other alchemical collections that conflate the visual and the verbal modes could be mentioned, but the aim here has been to focus on some of the most renowned texts that appeared in the same span of time with the intent to highlight the existence of a common praxis shared by alchemists of different geographical areas. In all the mentioned works, the *opus alchymicum* is actually conceived of as a journey whose main protagonists are human characters. The 'chemical wedding', often described as the marriage between a king and his queen, is not surprisingly one of the central symbols of alchemy, denoting the last stage of the *opus*, when all the 'contraries' are harmoniously reconciled. The union between a king and his queen is one of the central motives of another influential work: Andreas Libavius's *Alchymia* (1606)<sup>789</sup>. Besides the 'chemical wedding' between the royal couple, the treatises mentioned above also draw on the parable of the death and rebirth of a king, the *rex chymicus* or 'chemical king', who functions as an emblem of the alchemical process leading to the achievement of gold, as will be considered in the following pages.

Marvellous pictures also decorate the so-called *Ripley Scrolls*, "a rich but

---

<sup>785</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., pp. 100-102.

<sup>786</sup> Quercetani Doct. Medicinqve Regii, *Ad Veritatem Hermeticae Medicinae*, Lvtetiae Parisiorvm, Apud Abrahamvm Savgrain, 1604. Quercetanus is, in fact, the French alchemist and physician Joseph Du Chesne.

<sup>787</sup> Joseph du Chesne, *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke, for the Preseruation of Health. Written in Latin by Iosephus Quersitanus, Doctor of Phisicke. And Translated into English, by Thomas Tymme*, Printed by Thomas Creede, London, 1605.

<sup>788</sup> See Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., pp. 89-90.

<sup>789</sup> Andreas Libavius, *Alchymia*, Excudebat Joannes Saurius, Impensis Petri Kopffii, Francofurti, 1606. Some of the plates from Libavius's *Alchymia*, showing the chemical wedding between the king and the queen, are reproduced in Stanislas Klossowski De Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., pp. 45-51.

undeniably bizarre construct of text and illustration that defies easy explanation and interpretation”<sup>790</sup>. The *Ripley Scrolls* are an evident example of “anthropomorphization”<sup>791</sup>. In one of the scrolls, the alchemist, possibly George Ripley himself or, according to some scholars, Hermes Trismegistus, is depicted while carrying in his hands a huge *vas* in which the phases of the *opus* are represented within eight roundels containing several characters who perform different actions. Each of the roundels, in its turn, contains an alembic within which the processes of the alchemical work are allegorically illustrated, in a manner similar to *Splendor solis*. As in Trismosin’s work, real people are depicted within the alembics, symbolising the different phases of the alchemical *opus*, i.e. the *coniunctio* of the couple male-female, the ‘dissolution’ of their union, the birth of the ‘philosophical child’, emblem of the stone, and the chemical wedding. All the roundels are then chained to a book in the centre of the bigger *vas* in which they are contained, thus indicating the close connection between the text and the illustrations. Even though the *Scrolls* may not have been composed by Ripley but only inspired by his *Compound of Alchymie*, they are an important exemplar of late medieval and Renaissance alchemical literature. Scholars generally agree in placing the composition of the *Scrolls* in-between the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century: in this case, only one of them would have been composed in George Ripley’s lifetime<sup>792</sup>. If the *Scrolls* actually date from the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, then they inevitably belong, like the other texts that have been mentioned so far, to that period that is generally considered as the apogee of alchemical literature. As a matter of fact, albeit alchemical allegorisations are “to be found in all periods of alchemical literature”<sup>793</sup>, they are particularly widespread in the treatises composed in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance<sup>794</sup>.

Even though outstripping this lapse of time in terms of dates of publication, the works of Michael Maier certainly represent the climax of alchemical iconography. Somehow following the notion of the alchemical *coniunctio*, according to which all opposing dimensions have to be reconciled in order to form a cohesive whole, Maier’s

---

<sup>790</sup> Stanton J. Linden, “The Ripley Scrolls and *The Compound of Alchymy*”, cit., p. 73. One of the difficulties in deciphering the meaning of the Scrolls is due to the existence of several manuscripts bearing different illustrations. As Linden notices, “Within the past ten years, scholars have begun investigation of the interplay between the visual and verbal in a few representatives of the Ripley manuscript family, particularly copies at the Huntington Library and Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh”. *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>792</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>793</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 138.

<sup>794</sup> It is especially from the fifteenth century onwards, as Crisciani and Pereira remark, that the allegorisations of the *opus alchymicum* became more and more widespread and that alchemical texts started to be conceived in different ways, not only as recipes for practical operations. See Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira, “L’Alchimia fra Medioevo e Rinascimento”, in *Storia della scienza*, cit., vol. IV, pp. 907-20.

collections epitomise the perfect marriage between word and image. *Atalanta fugiens* (1617), possibly the most praised of his writings, retraces the threefold structure of the emblem collection, with *inscriptio*, *pictura*, and *subscriptio*. The treatise is composed of fifty emblems and fugues, short pieces of music, thus masterfully blending the written, the visual, and the musical modes. Maier draws mostly on classical mythology, thus further dwelling on a tradition that had already been developed by Petrus Bonus of Ferrara in *Pretiosa margarita novella*, in which an alchemical reading of some of the most celebrated Ovidian myths is offered. The title itself, *Atalanta fugiens*, alludes to the Greek myth of Atalanta and Hippomenes, who outran the former in a race that was devised to assess who was the faster of the two. Atalanta decided to marry only that man who could beat her and Hippomenes, thanks to three golden apples which he received from the goddess Venus, managed to overtake his rival<sup>795</sup>. If read in alchemical terms, the myth is an allegory of the alchemical process: it is “a vivid picture of the mutually fighting and fleeing yet deeply united basic principles of male and female energies, light and dark, conscious and unconscious, heaven and earth, spirit and matter, etc.”<sup>796</sup>. Maier first dedicated himself to the alchemical interpretation of Egyptian and Greek mythology in *Arcana arcanissima* (1613-4), a work that, in Rola’s opinion, was published precisely in London in 1614<sup>797</sup>. As already said, the purpose of emblems was both to clarify and obscure the significance of the alchemical *opus*: straightforward to those who could properly read them, alchemical emblems were likewise incomprehensible to those who lack the right competence to decipher them. In a similar way to emblem XXVII of *Atalanta fugiens*, the alchemical allegory entitled *Blomfields Blossoms*, possibly dating from 1557 and collected in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, draws on the idea that a key is necessary to open the door leading to alchemical wisdom: when “Father Tyme”, who guides the alchemist throughout the *opus alchymicum*, brings the latter to the “Campe of Philosophy”, he also provides him with a key: “Therefore to me this Key he [Father Tyme] did dispose / The seacrets of this *Arte* to open and disclose”<sup>798</sup>. Equally indicative of the necessity to possess the ability to unlock the door revealing the truths of alchemy is the title of the treatise *Secrets Reveal’d; or, An Open Entrance to the Shutt Palace of the King*, published in 1669 and attributed to the alchemist known by the pseudonym of Eirenaeus Philalethes

---

<sup>795</sup> See Joscelyn Godwin, Introduction to Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>796</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 34.

<sup>797</sup> “After the Emperor’s death in 1612, Maier appears to have taken refuge for several years in England, where he learnt the language and translated Thomas Norton’s *Ordinall of Alchemy* into Latin. In London he published his first work, *Arcana arcanissima*, and he probably wrote several other works there as well”. Stanislas Klossowski De Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>798</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, TCB 307.

Cosmopolita<sup>799</sup>. The author presents himself as the one who will finally indicate to the willing adept the way to enter the “Shutt Palace of the King”, another symbolical image of the “Philosophical Rose Garden” or “Campe of Philosophy”, where the alchemist is initiated to the secrets of alchemical doctrine. Although published after Shakespeare’s lifetime, Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens* is an invaluable compendium of alchemical imagery, since the author constantly re-elaborated on already existing alchemical motives and concepts, thus amply contributing to throw light on them.

---

<sup>799</sup> As already said, recent scholarship has definitely demonstrated that Eirenaeus Philalethes was, in fact, George Starkey. See William R. Newman, “Starkey, George”, ODNB 52: 297.



## Chapter 5

### *'Tears shed there shall be my recreation'*. Leontes's Alchemical 'Re-Creation'

#### 5.1. The Alchemical Journey Towards the Renewal of the *Rex Chymicus*

Several of the alchemical treatises that appeared mainly in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance draw, as already said, on the blending of texts and illustrations in order to convey a highly symbolical representation of the cycle of the *opus alchymicum*. Considering the emblematic and allegorical features of much alchemical literature, it is not surprising that the role of metals, 'tortured' and 'tested' on the alchemical wheel, is often performed by human characters, most of the times kings and queens, as in the case of the lavishly decorated miniatures in *Splendor solis* (see plates from 1 to 17 and from 18 to 34). Eliade remarks that the alchemical symbolism of the 'torture' and 'death' of metals is also applicable to man: "Le symbolisme alchimique de la torture et de la mort est parfois equivoque: l'opération peut se comprendre comme se référant aussi bien à l'homme qu'à une substance minérale"<sup>800</sup>. A plate from *Buch von Vunderverken*<sup>801</sup>, that shows "a man symbolizing the matter to be converted being tortured on the [alchemical] wheel"<sup>802</sup>, is evidence of the close connection alchemists perceive between the transmutation of metals and the metamorphoses pertaining to the human dimension (see plate 47). The celebrated

---

<sup>800</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 129.

<sup>801</sup> As attested by Abraham, the *Buch von Vunderverken*, or *Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, is a seventeenth-century manuscript preserved at the University of Glasgow Library (Ferguson MS 4). Mino Gabriele notices that the *Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, translated in Italian as *Il Libro della Santa Trinità*, is one of the first and most exemplifying treatises in which the *opus alchymicum* is presented as a soteriological journey. According to Gabriele, the first composition of the text dates from the early fifteenth century. See Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., pp. 28-9. Crisciani and Pereira remark that the above-mentioned *Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, along with *Aurora consurgens*, represent the earliest examples of alchemical iconography. Both works depict the *opus alchymicum* as an allegorical and spiritual journey rather than as a series of practical operations on matter: "Nei manoscritti quattrocenteschi, inoltre, troviamo alcuni fra i primi esempi di iconografia alchemica, spesso connessi a testi di età precedente [...] ma contraddistinti soprattutto da un contenuto dottrinale o simbolico più che da istruzioni per la pratica. A questo proposito ci sembrano significativi e paradigmatici il *Libro della santissima Trinità* e l'*Aurora consurgens* (Aurora sorgente), che rappresentano l'emergere dell'allegoria alchemico-religiosa, testimoniando in tal modo la complessità dell'approccio alle dottrine della trasmutazione e la loro incipiente polivalenza culturale. In questi testi si rafforza la connessione fra parola e immagine, che diverrà un carattere distintivo dell'alchimia rinascimentale e barocca, soprattutto nei suoi sviluppi simbolici e occulti e che, a partire dal XVI sec., troverà espressione nella contaminazione fra arte e alchimia". Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira, "L'Alchimia fra Medioevo e Rinascimento", *Storia della Scienza* 4: 909.

<sup>802</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 138.

historian of religions notices that the alchemical transmutation is not only a laboratory practice since the alchemist has to be himself ‘transmuted’: “L’adepte doit se transformer lui-même en Pierre Philosophale. [...] On voit par-là qu’il ne s’agit pas uniquement d’opérations de laboratoire. L’alchimiste s’engage tout entire dans son oeuvre”<sup>803</sup>. Alchemical parables actually depict the *opus* not only as a practical operation of metalworking but also as an arduous journey of ‘renewal’. It is not a matter of chance that the “admirable Allegory of the Golden Fleece”<sup>804</sup> is considered as one of the parables best epitomising the alchemical *opus*. Queen Elizabeth’s alchemist, Giovanni Baptista Agnello, alludes to the Greek myth of the Argonauts to describe the *opus alchymicum* as a perilous expedition leading to the attainment of the great stone, or Golden Fleece: “The golden fleece in not given unto Iason, unlesse first he undergoe the sure and dangerous labours”<sup>805</sup>. Considering the complexity of the ordeals the alchemist has to face before attaining the final stage of the alchemical process, the quest of Jason in search of the gold parchment is frequently exploited by alchemical authors as a suitable metaphor for their operations<sup>806</sup>.

In *The Breviary of Philosophy*, the Elizabethan alchemist Thomas Charnock develops an alchemical parable that explicitly dwells upon the conception of the *opus alchymicum* as a challenging journey of renewal. The text actually recounts the story of two men who plead God to assist them in their sea expedition on which they will ‘purge’ their sins in order to be ‘exalted’ and ‘spiritualised’. Echoing George Ripley’s description of the *rota alchemica* in terms of the passage of the human soul from “Purgatory” to “paradyce”<sup>807</sup>, Charnock equally highlights the concept of ‘purgatory’ that, in alchemical language, corresponds to the moment “when the blackness of the nigredo is washed and purified into the whiteness of the albedo”<sup>808</sup>:

And we are now ready to the Sea prest,  
Where we must abide three moneths at the least;  
[...] But shortly we shall passe into another Clymate,  
Where we shall receive a more purer estate;  
For this our Sinns we make our Purgatory,

<sup>803</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., pp. 135-6.

<sup>804</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena, TCB sig. B3r.

<sup>805</sup> Giovanni Baptista Agnello, *The Revelation of the Secret Spirit*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>806</sup> “les aventures et les exploits des Argonautes sont donc mis en relation avec les ‘opérations’ successives du ‘magistère’, de même que Jason et Hercule sont considérés comme les modèles exemplaires du héros-alchimiste engagé dans les ‘travaux’ de l’*opus*”. Mino Gabriele, “La signification de la ‘Porte magique’ de Rome et la doctrine alchimique de Massimiliano Palombara”, cit., p. 705.

<sup>807</sup> “For lyke as sowles after paynes transytory, / Be brought into paradyce [...] / So shall our Stone after hys darknes in Purgatory / Be purged and joynyd in Elements wyhoutte stryfe, / [...] And passe fro darknes of Purgatory to lyght / Of paradyce”. George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 151.

<sup>808</sup> See ‘ablution’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 1.

For the which we shall receive a Spirituall body<sup>809</sup>.

As will be discussed in relation with *The Winter's Tale*, the symbolism of water, represented by alchemists as either sea, tears, dew, or flood, is of paramount importance in alchemical imagery since it denotes the phase of 'ablution', i.e. the cleansing of the 'old' and the restoration of the 'new'.

Mino Gabriele remarks that spiritual readings of the transmutation of metals have always existed within the alchemical-hermetic tradition: while embracing the more practical and proto-chemical aspects of the alchemists's enterprise, a considerable number of alchemical writers present the stages of the *opus* mainly in terms of the purification of the human soul<sup>810</sup>. As a matter of fact, if considered on a metaphysical scale, the alchemist's attempts to purify matter appear as an endeavour to "redeem his metals, humankind, and himself as well"<sup>811</sup>. Petrus Bonus, among others, explicitly argues that alchemy does not only deal with physical matter, but also and, above all, with a "Hidden Stone", that is "not sensuously apprehended, but only known intellectually, by revelation or inspiration"<sup>812</sup>. Therefore, the author continues, this "hidden Stone may be called the gift of God, and if it does not mingle with our Stone, the work of Alchemy is marred"<sup>813</sup>, thus suggesting that the *opus alchymicum* is also a process of spiritual, inner transformation. It is worth noting that even the physician, astronomer, botanist, and antiquarian Thomas Browne associates alchemical art with what he defines as "Divinity", specifically comparing the creation of the philosopher's stone to the liberation of the human soul from the fetters of its earthly existence, in the same way as metals are deprived of their corruption and turned into shining gold:

The smattering I have [in the knowledge] of the Philosopher's stone, (which is something more than the perfect exaltation of gold) hath taught me a great deale of Divinity, and instructed my beliefe, how that immortall spirit and incorruptible substance of my soule

---

<sup>809</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 292. As documented by Pritchard, Charnock's *The Breviary of Philosophy* was first written in 1557. See Allan Pritchard, "Thomas Charnock's Book Dedicated to Queen Elizabeth", cit., p. 56.

<sup>810</sup> "il existe un aspect de la tradition hermétique qui ne se rattache pas uniquement aux pratiques technologiques et protochimiques ou à des spéculations purement théoriques, mais qui, tout en les partageant et sans nécessairement les exclure, développe la gnose alchimique selon les valences sotériologiques du voyage de l'âme". Mino Gabriele, "La signification de la 'Porte magique' de Rome et la doctrine alchimique de Massimiliano Palombara", cit., p. 712. See also Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., pp. 27 ff.

<sup>811</sup> Bettina Knapp, *Theatre and Alchemy*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1980, p. 6.

<sup>812</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 124. Latin text: "et hoc fit per adiectionem lapidis occulti, qui sensu non comprehenditur, sed intellectu solum per inspirationem, vel revelationem divinam, aut per doctrinam scientis. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>813</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 124. Latin text: "et hic lapis occultus est qui proprie dicitur donum dei, et hic est lapis divinus occultus, sine cuius commixtione lapidi annihilatur alchimia, cum ipse sit ipsa alchimia, et perditur opus eadem hora". Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., p. 38.

may lye obscure, and sleepe a while within this house of flesh<sup>814</sup>.

The inner journey of the soul is usually reflected in the outer quest, or expedition, the practitioner has to undertake in order to attain the “precious jewell”, the “heavenly treasure”<sup>815</sup>, i.e. the ‘stone’, that indicates, in Lyndy Abraham’s words, the transformation of “the earthly man into an illumined philosopher”<sup>816</sup>. As the human soul passes from hell, to purgatory and, finally, to paradise, the alchemical course through the three stages of *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo* is perceived as a “dangerous ‘Pilgrimage’-like journey”<sup>817</sup>. In the already mentioned allegory entitled *The Hermet’s Tale*, one of the first examples of “allegorisation” of the alchemical work<sup>818</sup>, the theme of the *opus alchymicum* as a pilgrimage is explicitly expressed. The narrator is said to have gone on a “Pilgrimage” during which he meets a “Hermite”<sup>819</sup> who introduces the former to the secrets of alchemy in highly emblematic terms:

In Pilgrimage one onely thing I found  
Of worth in Lemnes nere to Vulcan’s shopp,  
A Christall founteine running under ground,

Between a Vally and a Mountaines topp.  
Pleas’d with this sight, I bid a Hermite tell  
The story of the place, who there did dwell<sup>820</sup>.

Considering that the god Vulcan is usually conceived of as an emblem of the alchemist himself, “Vulcan’s shopp” stands for the alchemical laboratory. In Ben Jonson’s *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, Mercury attacks Vulcan, embodying the art of alchemy, on the basis of the latter’s pretension to reproduce Nature’s creative action:

Art thou not ashamed, Vulcan, to offer in defence of thy fire and art, against the excellence of the sun and Nature, creatures more imperfect than the very flies and insects that are her trespasses and scapes?<sup>821</sup>.

George Ripley also draws on the metaphor of the *opus alchymicum* as a challenging path in which several obstacles have to be overcome when he presents his *Compound of*

---

<sup>814</sup> Thomas Browne, *Religio medici*, 1643, in Id., *Works*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, Faber & Faber, London, 1964, vol. I, p. 50.

<sup>815</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 313.

<sup>816</sup> See ‘philosopher’s stone’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>817</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>818</sup> Didier Kahn, “Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis, Part I”, *Ambix* 57: 3, 2010, p. 268.

<sup>819</sup> Anon., *The Hermet’s Tale*, cit., TCB 417.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 415.

<sup>821</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 138-40, p. 440.

*Alchymie* as an expedition into a castle, whose twelve gates are to be gradually unlocked by the adept. As if the alchemical course through suffering and affliction were a real ‘quest’, the hero-chemist has to get through manifold tests before attaining the “Infynyte treasure”<sup>822</sup> of alchemical wisdom:

At the *fyrst Gate*, now art thou in,  
Of the *Philosophers Castle* where they dwell;  
Procede wysely that thou may wyne  
In at mo Gates of that Castell,  
Whych Castle ys round as any Bell:  
And Gates hath Eleven yet mo,  
One ys conquered, now to the *Second go*<sup>823</sup>.

Gabriele discusses the alchemical significance of the ‘thresholds’, or ‘gates’, that the alchemist has to symbolically overcome in the course of the *opus alchymicum*, in relation with the marble door devised by the Italian alchemist and Rosicrucian philosopher Massimiliano Palombara and placed in Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, in Rome. According to the scholar, a perusal of the enigmatic symbols that decorate the door, along with a close reading of Palombara’s treatise *La Bugia*, would suggest that the door originally led to a secluded garden. In the alchemical language, the garden, like the castle, stands for the alembic in which transmutation occurs: “The whole *Work* is *Parabolicall*, and *Allusive*; yet truly *Philosophicall*: [...] the *Garden* is the *Vessell* or *Glasse*”<sup>824</sup>. Also known as the “Campe of Philosophy”<sup>825</sup>, the alchemical garden is, therefore, the place where the stone, also referred to as a plant or flower, grows. As documented by Gabriele, Palombara’s door was originally conceived of as the gate leading the visitor to a *hortus conclusus*<sup>826</sup>, the alchemical ‘garden’ in which the guest could be initiated to the secrets of the art.

Since alchemical writers usually employ their terms to designate different concepts, the ‘castle’, or ‘palace’, as in Philalethes’s *Secrets Reveal’d: Or, An Open Entrance to the Shutt Palace of the King*, refers both to the alchemical alembic where the elixir is created and to base matter, or metal, in which “the pure spirit or secret transforming arcanum is

---

<sup>822</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 118.

<sup>823</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 134.

<sup>824</sup> Anon., *Liber Patris Sapientiae*, TCB 467. See also ‘garden’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 83-4.

<sup>825</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields blossoms*, cit., TCB 307.

<sup>826</sup> Mino Gabriele, “La signification de la ‘Porte magique’ de Rome et la doctrine alchimique de Massimiliano Palombara”, cit., p. 715. See also Mino Gabriele, *La Porta Magica di Roma simbolo dell’alchimia occidentale*, Olschki, Firenze, 2015, p. 156: “Varcare una simile *Porta Magica* doveva probabilmente corrispondere ad una sorta di passaggio simbolico attraverso il micro e il macrocosmo alchemici, e a conoscerne iniziaticamente tutte quelle trasmutanti relazioni ‘metalliche’ e gli arcani influssi celesti”.

locked and from which it must be freed”<sup>827</sup>. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the set of several of the plates in Trimosin’s *Splendor solis* is a magnificent palace or royal court. In view of the fact that the castle stands for the place in which the alchemical stages unfold, in a number of alchemical texts the king is the very protagonist of the *opus alchymicum*. The so-called *rex chymicus* functions as a personification of the matter that has to be purified, so that his golden essence, at first hidden within his diseased and corrupt body, is released. As will be considered below, several alchemical parables depict the alchemical cycle of *solve et coagula* as the death and subsequent rebirth of the *rex chymicus* and as a process in which “fortune, health, life, and strength [are] restored to the King”<sup>828</sup> (see plates from 18 to 34). At a certain point in Petrus Bonus’s *Pretiosa margarita novella*, an alchemical allegory leads the reader into a royal palace: “Enter the Palace in which are fifteen mansions, where the king, his brow circled with the diadem, sits on a lofty throne, holding in his hand the sceptre of the whole world”<sup>829</sup>. The fifteen “mansions” unequivocally represent the steps of the *opus alchymicum*, whose number constantly varies in alchemical treatises, in line with the alchemists’s tendency to envelope their writings under the guise of allegory. Approaching the end of the process, the author explicitly reveals that the whole alchemical work is actually concerned with the renewal of the said king, who has died and is then restored to life: “In the eleventh mansion the servants pray God to restore their king. Henceforth the whole work is concerned with his restoration”<sup>830</sup> (see plates 28-34). The image of the castle as a metaphor for one’s inner, spiritual journey inevitably recalls *Las Moradas* or *El Castillo Interior* (1577) composed by the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Saint Therese of Avila. Saint Therese’s castle is divided into seven mansions that represent the steps that gradually lead to the final union with God in an upward, eschatological path leading to spiritual perfection: “I thought of the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions”<sup>831</sup>. *El Castillo*

---

<sup>827</sup> See ‘castle’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 31-2. On the alchemical significance attributed to the term ‘castle’, see also Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>828</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., HM 162. Latin text: “ac regi fortunam ac sanitatem tribuat”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum Duodecim Clavibus*, III Clavis, MH 398.

<sup>829</sup> Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 38. Latin version: “Palatium ingredies in quo quindecim sunt mansiones ubi Rex diademate coronatus in excelsa side sceptrum totius orbis in manu tenens erit”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., page unnumbered.

<sup>830</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 44. Latin text: “Undecimo loco famuli Deum precatur, ut Rex eis restituatur, in cuius restitutione totum opus dirigitur”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., [page unnumbered].

<sup>831</sup> Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*, Thomas Baker, London, 1921, pp. 38-9. (or. ed. Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Moradas del castillo interior*, 1588, in *Obras completas de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, Transcripción, introducciones y notas de Efrén de la Madre de Dios O.C.D. y Otger Steggink O. Carm., Madrid, La Editorial Católica, [1962] 1967, pp. 363-450).

*Interior*, translated into English as *The Interior Castle*, strongly influenced, along with Saint Therese's autobiography, Richard Crashaw's life and poetics and, in particular, the composition of *Steps to the Temple*, equally construed as a spiritual journey. Crashaw's collection is notoriously inspired by William Herbert's *The Temple*, presented as a visual tour within a church and, above all, within the poet's own soul, on the basis of a passage from the *New Testament*. In the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, man is said to be the temple within which God's spirit dwells: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you?"<sup>832</sup>.

In alchemical imagery, the term 'king' is usually applied to 'matter' at different stages of the alchemical process: further highlighting the circular nature of the *rota alchemica*, the king may indicate both the beginning and the end of the work. He stands for gold at its most refined level and, consequently, for the stone itself, but he also symbolises the so-called *prima materia*, i.e. the "raw matter for the Stone" that still has to be refined and ennobled<sup>833</sup>. In Solomon Trismosin's *Splendor solis* the *rex chymicus* is clearly employed with this double significance. In the "Third Parable", in particular, the king is presented as the personification of both impure matter that has to undergo transmutation and of the newly-created stone. In the plate accompanying the text, a sick and old king is depicted while drowning in the sea and calling for help before "night envelops all things"<sup>834</sup>, i.e. before experiencing the stage of *nigredo* (see plate 19). The day after, conversely, when "the Light of Day clear up the darkness" and, therefore, when the stage of *albedo* has succeeded the *nigredo*, the king is "released and renewed"<sup>835</sup>. The regenerated king, embodying the completion of the *opus alchymicum*, is described as wearing "three costly crowns, the one of Iron, the other of Silver, and the third of pure Gold"<sup>836</sup>. In the illustration, the dual aspect of the chemical king, as impure matter and refined gold at the same time, is visually rendered into the representation of two different kings: while an old king is depicted drowning in the sea in the background, a younger, "renewed" one stands in the foreground.

The *rex chymicus* is also a synonym of sulphur, i.e. the red, male seed of metals that has to be united in the 'chemical wedding' with its female, white counterpart, usually represented as a queen, as the moon, or as silver. Despite the manifold and seeming

---

<sup>832</sup> 1 *Corinthians* 3: 16.

<sup>833</sup> See 'king', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 110. On the alchemical symbolism of the king see also Mino Gabriele, *Il giardino di Hermes. Massimiliano Palombara alchimista e rosacroce nella Roma del Seicento*, Iannua, Roma, 1986, pp. 165-166n.

<sup>834</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>835</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>836</sup> *Ibid.*

contradictory meanings attributed to him, only one is, in fact, the latent significance of the king in alchemical writings: in line with the alchemical notion that nature always tends to achieve the highest possible degree of completion, the chemical king stands for the condition that every element aspires to reach, that is to say the perfect, ‘royal’ state of gold<sup>837</sup>. As Roger Bacon argues in *The Mirror of Alchimy*, the true purpose of nature is to reach the utmost perfection and, therefore, transform all metals into gold:

I must tel you, that nature alwaies intendeth and striveth to the perfection of Gold: but many accidents, comming between, change the mettalls, as it is evidently to be seene in divers of the Philosophers bookes<sup>838</sup>.

In like manner, the author of *Tractatus aureus*, or *The Golden Tract*, plainly reveals to the reader that gold is “the goal of all the metals, and the true intention of Nature”, since the latter “seeks and demands a gradual attainment of perfection, and a gradual approximation to the highest standard of purity and excellence”<sup>839</sup>. Claiming that “Evermore one Element desireth to be Kinge”<sup>840</sup>, the late medieval alchemist Thomas Norton emphasises the relation between the concepts of ‘king’ and ‘gold’, both representing the real objective of nature. As Norton continues, “This *Science* [alchemy] shall drawe towards the Kinge”<sup>841</sup>, i.e. towards ‘royal’, or ‘golden’ perfection. Since all metals are “potentially gold”<sup>842</sup>, the stone is considered to be “the aim and end of all things under heaven” and “the chief good of Nature”<sup>843</sup>. However, it is only at the end of the alchemical cycle of cleansing and regeneration, defined as the “Kingly Work”<sup>844</sup> of alchemists or as the *Opus Regale*<sup>845</sup>, that

---

<sup>837</sup> As Mino Gabriele observes: “Il termine ‘Re’ in alchimia viene usato con diverse accezioni [...], secondo le quali può significare ‘zolfo’, ‘materia prima’, ‘oro’, ‘divinità planetaria’, tuttavia uno solo è il senso delle varie denominazioni, cioè che l’aurea regalità è lo stato a cui aspira ogni ‘elemento’, la mèta da raggiungere”. Mino Gabriele, *Il Giardino di Hermes*, cit., pp. 165-6n. See also Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., pp. 31-2.

<sup>838</sup> Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchimy*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>839</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract, Concerning the Stone of the Philosophers, By an Anonymous German Philosopher*, HM 8. Latin version: “Haec omnia cum ita sint, quod nimirum, una unica et communis metallorum materia exstat, quae vi innati sui sulphuris aut confestim, aut postquam externum et malum reliquorum metallorum sulphur temporis successu per digestionem seposuit, in aurum abeat, quod metallorum finis, et vera naturae intentio est: fateri utique et dicere cogimur, naturam et in hoc genere aequae ac in vegetabili et animali regno secundum puritatem et subtilitatem subjecti emendationem et perfectionem suae naturae quaerere et deposcere”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus de Philosophorum Lapide*, MH 16-17.

<sup>840</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 67.

<sup>841</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 53.

<sup>842</sup> “All metallic seed is the seed of gold; for gold is the intention of Nature [...]. If the base metals are not gold, it is only through some accidental hindrance; they are all potentially gold”. *The Three Treatises of Philalethes*, HM 303. “In cunctis ergo Metallis imperfectis est semen Aureum ad perfectionem tendens, at in itinere suo per accidens impeditum”. Philalethae, *Tractatus Tres*, MH 764.

<sup>843</sup> *The Sophic Hydrolith or Water Stone of the Wise*, HM 46. The author of the text is the German Johann Ambrosius Siebmacher and the treatise was first published in Frankfurt in 1619.

<sup>844</sup> Jean D’Espagnet, *The Summary of Physics Restored (Enchyridion Physicae Restitutae)*, edited by Thomas Willard, Garland, New York and London, 1999, p. 99.

the hidden, golden sparkle is freed and, therefore, the king is revived and healed. It follows that, on the whole, the value attributed to the allegory of the ‘chemical king’ is that of a parable of alchemical soteriology:

la parabola del Re assume la validità di un vero e proprio teorema di soteriologia alchemica. In essa infatti il soggetto principale è la figura del Re, la quale nel lessico alchemico corrisponde allo stato perfetto, aureo, *regale* appunto, che è latente in tutta la materia: l’opera dell’alchimista consiste nel liberarlo dalle impurità con cui la generazione e la corruzione sublungare lo avvolgono, sia che si tratti di un metallo vile sia dell’anima umana, di natura divina, imprigionata nei vani limiti del corpo fisico<sup>846</sup>.

Michela Pereira notices that it is especially from the vision known as *Dastin’s Dreame*, composed by the fourteenth-century alchemical writer John Dastin, that the parable of the renewal of the chemical king started to recur more and more frequently in alchemical literature<sup>847</sup>. In a fifteenth-century manuscript of *Le Don de Dieu*<sup>848</sup>, there is a plate that clearly shows the king and the rose within the alembic as symbols of alchemical perfection (see plate 23).

The metaphor of the ‘transmutation’ of the *rex chymicus* is also revealing of how alchemists assign an “anthropomorphic significance” to the metamorphoses of metals<sup>849</sup>. The visions of Zosimos are a pertinent example of the connection existing between the ‘outer’ conversions occurring on physical matter during the alchemical stages and the ‘inner’ transformation experienced by the practitioner<sup>850</sup>. As might be expected, in such a period as the Renaissance, in which the analogy between microcosm and macrocosm, man and nature is central to the way reality is construed, inner, spiritual transformation is always reflected in some sort of outer transmutation. Alchemy, according to Giovanni Baptista Agnello, is the art that “cureth all things *inwardly* and *outwardly*” (italics mine)<sup>851</sup>. In one of Zosimos’s alchemical dreams, the author recounts the story of “a sacrificing priest” who, after descending “fifteen steps” into the darkness of the *nigredo*, ascends towards the light of the *albedo*, as much as matter is submitted to a process of ‘destruction’

---

<sup>845</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 309.

<sup>846</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., pp. 31-2. On the symbolism of the chemical king, see, in particular, Mino Gabriele, “La trasmutazione come viaggio dell’anima”, in *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., pp. 27-34. See also Johannes Fabricius, “The Resurrection of the King”, in *Alchemy*, cit., p. 133.

<sup>847</sup> Michela Pereira, *Arcana sapienza*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>848</sup> Mino Gabriele (ed.), *Le Precieux Don de Dieu* (Ms. N. 3 de la Collection Verginelli-Rota, Bibliothèque de l’Accademia dei Lincei, Rome), Bailly, Paris, 1988. As Gabriele remarks, the high number of extant manuscripts of the text, collected both in the British Library and in other libraries (in Paris and Rome), testifies that it had been widely circulating in Europe from the late fifteenth to the eighteenth century at least. Mino Gabriele, Introduction to *Le Precieux Don de Dieu*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>849</sup> Mino Gabriele (ed.), *Le Precieux Don de Dieu*, cit., p. 25n.

<sup>850</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>851</sup> Giovanni Baptista Agnello, *The Revelation of the Secret Spirit*, cit., p. 6.

and consequent ‘re-creation’:

I went to sleep, and I saw a sacrificing priest standing before me at the top of an altar in the form of a bowl. This altar had 15 steps leading up to it. Then the priest stood up and I heard a voice from above saying to me, ‘I have accomplished the descent of the 15 steps of darkness and the ascent of the steps of light and it is he who sacrifices, that renews me, casting away the coarseness of the body’<sup>852</sup>.

The “coarseness” which the priest refers to is the base and impure state of the matter at the beginning of the alchemical journey, also represented in some alchemical treatises as the ‘disease’ of the king who has to be healed. As will be considered below, the *rex chymicus* is usually described as affected by a form of sickness that is dispelled only at the end of the alchemical transformative process.

The ensuing pages are an attempt to offer a reading of Leontes’s path of atonement, self-growth, and transformation in the light of alchemical imagery and symbolism. In particular, I will consider those alchemical parables that, most probably familiar to Shakespeare and his public, revolve around the trope of the ‘chemical king’ submitted to a process of symbolical death and rebirth. As a matter of fact, Leontes’s journey of suffering, healing, and ‘re-creation’ may acquire extra value and significance if read through “alchemical spectacles”<sup>853</sup>, as Shakespeare’s audience might have done.

---

<sup>852</sup> The English translation of Zosimos’s vision is from Frank Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, cit., p. 61. The most authoritative edition of the complete works of Zosimos of Panopolis is Marcellin Berthelot (ed.), *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, avec la collaboration de Ch. Em. Ruelle, troisième partie, seconde livraison, Georges Steinheil, Paris, 1888. The text of the vision I quoted is in Berthelot, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, pp. 117-118: “En disant ces choses, je m’endormis; et je vis un sacrificateur qui se tenait debout devant moi, en haut d’un autel en forme de coupe. Cet autel avait quinze marches à monter. Le prêtre s’y tenait debout, et j’entendis une voix d’en haut qui me disait: ‘J’ai accompli l’action de descendre les quinze marches, en marchant vers l’obscurité, et l’action de monter les marches, en allant vers la lumière. C’est le sacrificateur qui me renouvelle, en rejetant la nature épaisse du corps’”.

<sup>853</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 9.

## 5.2. 'A sad tale's best for winter'.

### The Beginning of Leontes's Story of Death and Rebirth

Before reading Leontes's healing journey in the light of alchemical literature, it is worth recalling a few facts in the development of the events concerning the king of Sicily. The play begins with one of Shakespeare's so-called "window scenes"<sup>854</sup>, scenes where, as noticed by Garber, secondary characters discuss with each other and introduce key themes that will be of paramount importance for the interpretation of the following events. The characters in question are Camillo, lord at the court of Sicily, and Archidamus, lord at the court of Bohemia. The two discuss about the current stay of the king of Bohemia, Polixenes, in Sicily and the future visitation of Leontes to the court of his friend, in Bohemia: "I think this coming summer the King of Sicilia means to pay Bohemia the visitation which he justly owes him" (I, i, 5-6). In the second scene, the audience is told that Polixenes has been staying at the court of Sicily for nine months, a period of time that ominously corresponds to the pregnancy of queen Hermione: "Nine changes of the watery star hath been / The shepherd's note since we have left our throne / Without a burden" (I, ii, 1-3). Leontes's first spark of resentment arises when Hermione, unlike him, succeeds in convincing Polixenes to delay his departure, so that the latter resolves to be the queen's "guest" (I, ii, 56) and she, in her turn, defines herself as his "kind hostess" (I, ii, 60). Language is paramount in Leontes's inception of jealousy, as if his behaviour did not have any other consistent basis but his distorted way to interpret words<sup>855</sup>. As a matter of fact, the puns on the terms "satisfaction" and "entertainment" trigger the king's delusions. When Leontes questions Camillo on the reason why Polixenes has decided to stay more, the lord replies "To *satisfy* your highness, and the entreaties / Of our most gracious mistress" (I, ii, 230-1, italics mine). At this point, Leontes, who has already claimed that the relationship between his queen and his friend was a sort of "entertainment" he liked not<sup>856</sup>, definitely convinces himself that his wife is "slippery" (I, ii, 271): "Satisfy? / Th'entreaties of your mistress? Satisfy?/ Let that suffice" (I, ii, 231-3).

---

<sup>854</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 837.

<sup>855</sup> As Frye notices, "to a poisoned mind every syllable suggests a horrible leering innuendo, as well as an in-joke that Leontes is excluded from. [...] The wife of Greene's Pandosto does at least hang around her guest's bedchamber, but Leontes has nothing in the way of 'evidence' of that kind, and even the most perverse director couldn't give us a justified Leontes trapped by designing women". Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, cit., p. 162.

<sup>856</sup> Leontes: "This entertainment / May a free face put on, derive a liberty / From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom, / And well become the agent - 't may, I grant - / But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers, / As now they are, and making practised smiles / As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere / The mort o'th' deer - O, that is entertainment / My bosom likes not, nor my brows" (I, ii, 111-9).

It has been noticed that time flows particularly fast at the beginning of the play, and that Leontes, obsessed by his phantoms, does not let it “ripen”:

he [Leontes] goes, as it were, against time and is therefore blind to truth; for time, when not allowed to ripen, can only *make*, not *unfold*, error. From now on, speech-patterns, as well as the structure of individual scenes and their combination, are so devised as to bring out the unnatural haste of Leontes’s thoughts and acts<sup>857</sup>.

Time is central also in alchemical symbolism, as will be discussed. Alchemists believe that time has to be allowed to ripen if matter is to be brought to its fullest degree of perfection and if the redemptive cycle of the *opus alchymicum* is to succeed, haste being the alchemist’s worst enemy:

If the fruit of a tree be plucked before it is ripe, it is unfit for use; [...]. In the same way you must exercise considerable patience in preparing our Elixir, if it is to become all that you wish to become. No fruit can grow from a flower that has been plucked before the time. He who is in too great a hurry, can bring nothing to perfection, but is almost sure to spoil that which he has in hand<sup>858</sup>.

In like manner, in *The Winter’s Tale*, truth and goodness are restored only after a “wide gap of time”, during which the main characters are first “dissevered”, i.e. separated, before they are finally reconciled, as Leontes himself remarks at the very end of the play:

Good Paulina,  
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely  
Each one demand and answer to his part  
Performed in this wide gap of time since first  
We were dissevered.  
(V, iii, 151-5)

In accord with the idea of *temporis filia veritas*, a theme Elizabethans and Jacobean were highly familiar with, the passing of time reveals truth, as attested also by Francis Bacon: “Let me so give every man his due, as I give Time his due, which is to discover truth”<sup>859</sup>. To alchemists, time is the guide of the adept throughout the alchemical journey leading to

---

<sup>857</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank, “The Triumph of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Maurice Hunt (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale: Critical Essays*, Garland Publishing, New York and London, 1995, p. 142.

<sup>858</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., HM 174. Latin text: “Omnes arborei fructus si antem maturationem decerpantur, inutiles sunt et praecoces, nec iis commode utilicet: [...] Ita et circa nostrum Elixir respiciendum et diligenter considerandum est, quo justum ipsi tempus tribuatur, nec ante illud ipsius bonitati quid detrahatur, ne falsitatis nomine incusari, ac pro indigno aestimari possit: Nam si flores decerpantur facile innotescit, nullum fructum hinc crescere posse: Idcirco festinatio non convenit magisterio: Nam qui nimis festinat, raro quicquam boni in hac arte praestat, sed festinando plus corrumpitur, quam perficitur”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, X Clavis, MH 419.

<sup>859</sup> Francis Bacon, “Mr. Bacon in Praise of Knowledge”, in *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, cit., vol. I, p. 125.

perfection, as testified by the parable *Blomfields Blossoms*, in which the alchemist explicitly remarks: “From thence forth I went (*Tyme* being my guide,) / [...] Till we came to a field pleasant large and wide / Which he said was called *The Campe of Philosophy*”<sup>860</sup>. In hastening time, Leontes behaves in an “unnatural”<sup>861</sup> way, preventing truth from coming to light. The succession of events in the first half of *The Winter’s Tale* is evidently very rapid: the span of time between Polixenes’s first manifestation of his desire to leave and Leontes’s conviction that his wife’s child is not his is very short. Leontes’s lunacy does not seem to be sustained by any proper reason because there does not seem to be enough time, at least for the audience, to breed any conceivable doubt about Hermione’s and Polixenes’s honesty. The king of Sicily soon becomes a victim of his deluded imagination, as he himself unconsciously confesses to Hermione: “Your actions are my dreams. / You had a bastard by Polixenes, / And I but dreamed it” (III, ii, 80-2). First “sick”<sup>862</sup> and “unsettled”<sup>863</sup>, Leontes subsequently decides to condemn Hermione to prison, order lord Camillo to kill Polixenes, and eventually abandon his new-born daughter, later named Perdita, whom he believes to be a “bastard”<sup>864</sup>. Not even the pleading of good Paulina, wife to the lord of Sicily Antigonus, and of lord Camillo are sufficient to heal Leontes’s “diseased opinion” (I, ii, 295). Apollo’s oracle, that ratifies Hermione’s, Polixenes’s, and Camillo’s innocence in the third act, is scorned by the king of Sicily, who dismisses it arguing that “There is no truth at all i’th’ oracle” and that “this is mere falsehood” (III, ii, 136-7). After Leontes’s burst of rage against Apollo’s verdict, the king is informed of the sudden death of his son Mamilius, immediately followed by that of Queen Hermione, who seemingly dies because of the loss of her eldest child and because she has been deprived of her newborn daughter. Suddenly recovered from the ‘sickness’ that has caused the deaths

---

<sup>860</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, TCB 310. As recorded by Schuler, *Blomfields Blossoms* was very likely written, or rewritten, in 1557. The scholar also adds that “[t]his work, which circulated widely in manuscript, certainly contributed to Blomfield’s reputation among the adepts”. Robert M. Schuler, “William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist”, cit., p. 80.

<sup>861</sup> Paulina defines Leontes as “a most unworthy and unnatural lord” (II, iii, 111).

<sup>862</sup> As Camillo reports to Polixenes, in the attempt to warn him that Leontes has decided to take revenge on him, “There is a *sickness* / Which puts some of us in distemper; but / I cannot name the *disease*, and it is caught / Of you that yet are well” (I, ii, 380-3, italics mine).

<sup>863</sup> Leontes: “Make that thy question, and go rot! / Dost think I am so muddy, so unsettled” (I, ii, 322-3). The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the meaning of “Not peaceful, tranquil, and orderly” for ‘unsettled’ (see ‘unsettled’, OED entry 1a). Hermione herself says of her husband: “He something seems unsettled” (I, ii, 148). As will be discussed below, the references to sickness and disease are numerous in the first half of the play.

<sup>864</sup> Leontes considers Perdita, his newborn daughter, to be the fruit of Hermione’s adultery. Convinced that the child is, in fact, Polixenes’s, the king of Sicily orders lord Antigonus to abandon the girl in faraway Bohemia. Leontes: “We enjoin thee, / As thou art liegeman to us, that thou carry / This female bastard hence, and that thou bear it / To some remote and desert place, quite out / Of our dominions; and that there thou leave it, / Without more mercy, to it own protection / And favour of the climate” (II, iii, 171-77).

of his loved ones, Leontes repents and acknowledges his faults. Talking about repentance for the first time, he announces his “recreation” and his vow to daily honour the grave of his queen and son:

Prithee bring me  
To the dead bodies of my queen and son.  
One grave shall be for both.  
[...] Once a day I'll visit  
The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there  
Shall be my *recreation*. So long as nature  
Will bear up with this exercise, so long  
I daily vow to use it. Come, and lead me  
To these sorrows.  
(III, ii, 231-40, italics mine)

From the third act onwards, the king experiences an inner, purgatorial process that will last sixteen years. At the end of this enlightening journey of suffering and expiation, Leontes finally recovers what he had previously lost and denied, thus highlighting the play's circular and redemptive structure: not only will he be reunited with his wife Hermione and his daughter Perdita, but he will learn and grow wiser.

The first step in all the alchemical parables based on the metaphor of the renewal of the *rex chymicus* is the symbolical ‘death’ of the protagonist. The death of the king corresponds to the alchemical stage of dissolution in the cycle of *solve et coagula*, a stage in which the old, diseased, and impure state of matter at the beginning of the *opus alchymicum* is dissolved in order to be created anew: “Soe shall the *King* by his *new-byrth*, / Be *ten times stronger just*”<sup>865</sup>, as argued by the anonymous author of the alchemical parable entitled *The Magistery*, collected in Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. The eradication of the old form of matter, metal, or human soul is perceived by alchemists as a *conditio sine qua non* for the attainment of a higher and purer state. In *Testamentum Morieni*, Morienus reveals to King Khalid that the alchemical process is successful only if passing through the stages of “decay” and “change”:

nor was anything ever born or endowed with spirit or growth except after putrefaction and change of appearance. Thus it is that an authority has said that this operation [alchemy] avails nothing until after decay<sup>866</sup>.

In the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the main reference text for alchemists, death is said to have been established by God not as an ending in itself but, rather, as a form of renewal, as a

---

<sup>865</sup> Anon., *The Magistery*, TCB 343.

<sup>866</sup> Morienus, *A Testament of Alchemy*, cit., p. 31. Latin text: “Vnde ait sapiens, quod tota fortitude huius magisterij non est nisi post putredinem. Ait enim, si putridum non fuerit, fundi aut solui non poterit: et si solutum hoc non fuerit, ad nihilum reuertetur”. *Liber de compositione alchemiae*, AA 2: 39.

way to contrast evil and corruption:

Death is not the destruction of things that have been combined but the dissolution of their union. [...] when I say that the cosmos and the things said to be dissolved in this manner are changed because each day a part of cosmos becomes unseen, [but] they are by no means dissolved. These are the passions of the cosmos, swirlings and concealments. The swirling is {a return} and the concealment a renewal<sup>867</sup>.

Before Asclepius's perplexity concerning the existence of evil within the earthly dimension, Hermes replies that, though not created by God, wickedness is inevitably part of the generated world. The master argues that mutability and change have been established by the Creator precisely as tools of purification:

There is nothing evil or shameful about the maker himself; such conditions are immediate consequences of generation, like corrosion on bronze or dirt on the body. The bronzesmith did not make the corrosion; the parents did not make the dirt; nor did god make evil. But the persistence of generation makes evil bloom like a sore, which is why god has made change, to repurify generation<sup>868</sup>.

In this action of 'repurification' of the cosmos, man inevitably plays a central role, because he had been placed by God in a "middle status"<sup>869</sup> that gives him the prerogative, in Hermes's words, of "tending earthly beings and governing them"<sup>870</sup>. According to alchemical writers, it is thanks to alchemy that man actively "collaborates in the perfecting of nature and matter"<sup>871</sup>. Moving from the theories of the Hermetic *Corpus*, then, in the alchemical language 'death' becomes a necessary step for the attainment of new life: it represents the dissolution of the 'old' and the creation of the 'new'. Echoing the words attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, Paracelsus plainly emphasises the alchemical conception according to which putrefaction and death imply change and renovation: "putrefaction is the change and death of all things, and destruction of the first essence of all Naturall things; whence there ariseth a regeneration, and new generation a thousand times better"<sup>872</sup>. Most importantly, alchemists conceive of death as a form of both material

---

<sup>867</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, "Mind to Hermes", X: 15, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit p. 40.

<sup>868</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, "From Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius, Health of Mind", XIV: 7, *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>869</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, *Ibidem*, pp. 69-70. Latin text: "sic ergo feliciore loco medietatis est positus". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 300.

<sup>870</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*: 8, *Ibidem*, p. 71. Latin text: "itaque hominem conformat ex animi atque corporis id est ex aeterna atque mortali natura, ut animal ita conformatum utraeque origini suae satisfacere possit, et mirari atque adorare caelestia et incolere atque gubernare terrena". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 306.

<sup>871</sup> Chiara Crisciani, "Opus and sermo: The Relationship between Alchemy and Prophecy (12<sup>th</sup>- 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries)", in *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 13, n. 1, 2008, pag. 23.

<sup>872</sup> Paracelsus, *Of the Nature of Things*, Book I, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 152.

and spiritual renewal, as Fabricius rightfully remarks: “In alchemy ‘putrefaction’ applies not only to the material but also to the spiritual world. Just as material death is necessary for the material rebirth of things, so spiritual death is necessary for the spiritual rebirth of man”<sup>873</sup>. It should be pointed out, as also Abraham and Nicholl do, that the theme of death and rebirth is not exclusive to alchemy, but is proper to a number of other philosophical and religious systems. However, throughout the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, alchemical-Hermetic philosophy was often employed in this sense, since “the searching mind of c. 1610 found the language in alchemy”<sup>874</sup>. The death and rebirth of Christ, for instance, was often interpreted in alchemical terms, as testified by the already quoted excerpt by Martin Luther, a passage in which resurrection is explicitly associated with alchemy<sup>875</sup>.

As “things newborn” are the source of “things dying” (III, iii, 110-11)<sup>876</sup>, so life and death are closely connected in Leontes’s story from the very beginning of the play, as suggested by the lines pronounced by the young Prince Mamilius. At his mother’s request to tell her a tale, the prince begins his narrative in the following, almost prophetic manner: “There was a man” (II, i, 28), he says, “Dwelt by a churchyard” (II, i, 30). All of a sudden, the story is interrupted by the entrance of Mamilius’s father, Leontes, thus prompting the audience to associate the prince’s tale with the very life of the king of Sicily, a life made “of mysterious deaths, lingering beside graves and reanimations”<sup>877</sup>, as the public will presently discover. Mamilius’s words foreshadow Leontes’s daily pilgrimage to the grave of his son and wife, the starting-point of the king’s path towards rebirth. It is also worth noting that before beginning his story, the young prince opts for what he calls a “sad tale”, claiming that “A sad tale’s best for winter” (II, i, 25). In alchemical imagery, winter denotes precisely the beginning of the *opus alchymicum*, i.e. the deathly stage of *nigredo*:

As to the (length of) time required for the preparation, you must begin it in the winter, which is moist, and extract the moisture until the spring, when all things become green, and when our substance, too, should exhibit a variety of colo[u]rs. In the

---

<sup>873</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>874</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 130. See also Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 70.

<sup>875</sup> See the section 3.2. “Queen Elizabeth as a Symbol of Alchemical Art”.

<sup>876</sup> A Bohemian Shepherd and his son, the Clown, find Perdita on the coast of Bohemia, immediately after she was abandoned by lord Antigonus at the behest of King Leontes. When Antigonus arrives in Bohemia with the newborn child, he is savagely killed by a bear and the whole crew die in a shipwreck. The Clown and the Shepherd, then, witness a scene of both death and new life: the violent deaths of Antigonus and the members of the crew is in sharp contrast with the recovery of the child, miraculously saved. If the clown sees the “most piteous cry of the poor souls” (III, iii, 88) vanished beneath the sea, his father, conversely, finds the bundle in which Perdita is wrapped and says to his son: “thou met’st with things dying, / I with things newborn” (III, iii, 110-11).

<sup>877</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), Introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare. The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 189

summer the substance should be reduced to powder by means of a powerful fire. The autumn, the season of ripeness, should witness its maturity, or final redness<sup>878</sup>.

Considering that winter indicates, in Dom Pernety's words, "le commencement de l'oeuvre, ou le temps qui précède la putréfaction"<sup>879</sup>, the outset of Leontes's story of 're-creation' in what alchemists consider to be the season of the alchemical *nigredo*, the source of the subsequent regeneration, or *albedo*, turns out to be highly significant for the alchemical reading of the play. Indeed, "Philosophers [alchemists] in handling their Philosophical work, begin their yeare in Winter"<sup>880</sup>. As will be discussed in the following pages, the *nigredo* is precisely a phase of "suffering, despair and melancholia"<sup>881</sup>. It follows that the "sad tale of winter" that alludes to Leontes's own story, at least in the first half of the drama, might also be read in alchemical terms, sadness, melancholy, and winter being exactly some of the features applied by alchemists to the phase of *nigredo*, that represents the beginning of the alchemical journey of renewal.

Because of its evident purgatorial features, *The Winter's Tale* has been compared to the "three-fold scheme of Dante's *Divine Comedy*"<sup>882</sup> and has been interpreted as evidence of Shakespeare's hidden conversion to Catholicism. Considering that purgatory is not usually contemplated by Protestant religions, this reading would entangle complex questions concerning Shakespeare's crypto-Catholicism<sup>883</sup>. However, the language of Christianity was not the only available one in Shakespeare's time to read Leontes's 'purgatorial' ascent: alchemical imagery, equally diffused in Elizabethan and Jacobean England as much as the biblical one and deeply intertwined with it, might provide a useful key to interpret Leontes's course of atonement. In her study on the influences of alchemical symbolism on Andrew Marvell's poetic production, Lyndy Abraham quotes the words of the scholar Musgrove concerning the possibility of interpreting a literary text in

---

<sup>878</sup> Anon., *A Very Brief Tract Concerning the Philosophical Stone. Written by and Unknown German Sage*, HM 131. "Scias tempus laboris, et, quum annus quatuor partes divisus siet, opus hoc in hyeme inchoandum est, quae humida est: et tum humiditatem extrahamus usque ad Ver, quod virescit, ut tunc nobis etiam colores leni quodam in igne sub labore adpareant. Dein ad aestatem progredimur, et tunc opus forti igne pulverisandum est: Ultimo ad autumnum accedimus, et tunc, fructibus maturescentibus, ad nobilem operis rubedinem pervenimus". *De Lapide Philosophico Per breve Opusculum, Quod Ab Ignoto Aliquo Germanico Philosopho*, MH 334.

<sup>879</sup> Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 159.

<sup>880</sup> Jean D'Espagnet, *The Summary of Physics Restored*, cit., p. 182.

<sup>881</sup> See 'nigredo', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 135.

<sup>882</sup> Richard Pilgrim, *You Precious Winners All. A Study of The Winter's Tale*, Becket Publications, Oxford, 1983, p. 23.

<sup>883</sup> On the connections between Catholicism and Shakespeare's romances see Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *Shakespeare, Catholicism, and Romance*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2015. See also Milena Romero Allué, "What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter's Tale*", cit., p. 50. On the relationships between Shakespeare and Catholic religion see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001.

the light of alchemical philosophy:

To find an alchemical ‘meaning’ in a poem is not to deny the presence of other ‘meanings’ human or literary. The poetical substance is extended and enriched, the statements compatible when perfectly expressed. There is thus no reason to question the classical and biblical reference noted by editors. These remain, a necessary part of the rich complexity<sup>884</sup>.

The above-quoted passage, that Abraham employs to further defend her reading (as scholars often feel the need to do when applying an alchemical interpretation to a literary work of art), is particularly relevant to the present study, especially considering the large variety of interpretations *The Winter’s Tale* has been the object of. In order to determine the role of alchemical language and symbolism in the play, I believe it is worth starting from the lines Paulina addresses to Leontes immediately after Queen Hermione seems to die, in the third act of the play.

### 5.3. ‘If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within’. Leontes as *Rex Chymicus*

Preparing the audience for the queen’s final ‘resurrection’, Paulina convinces Leontes that Hermione is truly dead: “I say she’s dead – I’ll swear’t” (III, ii, 200). After persuading the king and all the bystanders of the actual death of the queen of Sicily, Paulina adds a few, enigmatic lines that are highly evocative of alchemical vocabulary:

If you can bring  
Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye,  
Heat outwardly or breath within, I’ll serve you  
As I would do the gods  
(III, ii, 201-4).

In the literature of alchemy, the term ‘tincture’ denotes the philosopher’s stone, or elixir, that has allegedly the power to transmute, change, and heal matter, purging it of its imperfections and, therefore, leading it to the perfect state of ‘gold’, i.e. to a condition of total health and incorruptibility<sup>885</sup>. Alchemists believe that the alchemical “Medicine”

---

<sup>884</sup> S. Musgrove, “Herrick’s Alchemical Vocabulary”, *AUMLA*, 46, 1976, pp. 240-1, quoted by Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>885</sup> See ‘tincture’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 200.

possesses such a nature that is “so highly Vigorous and strong” that “*Body* of a base and corrupt *Mettal* [it can] *Tinge* and *Convert* [...] into so high a degree as perfect *Gold*”<sup>886</sup>. The tincture “has virtue to change, tinge, and cure every imperfect body”<sup>887</sup>. Paracelsus highlights the perfecting virtues of the tincture, by defining it as “the seventh and last degree, which concludes the whole worke of our mystery for Transmutation, making all imperfect things perfect and transmuting them into a most excellent essence”<sup>888</sup>. By using the term “Tincture”, therefore, Paulina is alluding to a sort of alchemical process of healing, by means of which Hermione, seemingly dead, will be restored to life. As already said in chapter IV, Shakespeare himself was familiar with this kind of imagery, which recurs, for instance, in *Antony and Cleopatra*<sup>889</sup>. Mark Antony’s ‘tincting medicine’ inevitably recalls the “med’cinable eye” of “the glorious planet Sol” by means of which the sun “Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil”<sup>890</sup>, as Ulysses says in his praised speech from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. Alchemists actually believe that by means of a process known as ‘projection’, the tincture can be thrown over impure and sick matter and, therefore, heal and transmute it, as much as the sun, with its “heavenly alchemy”, gilds “the meadows green”<sup>891</sup>, or as Mark Antony figuratively projects his ‘golden’ qualities on others (see plate 27). When alluding to the alchemical concept of ‘tincture’ in *Antony and Cleopatra*, or to the “heavenly alchemy” of the sun in sonnet 33, Shakespeare is not referring to a practical, ‘chemical’ process of transmutation but he is drawing on the more emblematic and philosophical implications of alchemical art. That Shakespeare was aware of alchemy as a form of positive, inner kind of metamorphosis is further attested by the lines uttered by Casca in *Julius Caesar*. Casca acclaims Brutus’s virtuous nature in unequivocally alchemical terms:

O, he sits high in all the people’s hearts,  
 And that which would appear offence in us  
 His countenance, like richest alchemy,  
 Will change to virtue and to worthiness.  
 (I, iii, 157-60)

<sup>886</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses, Upon Some part of the preceding Worke*, TCB 447.

<sup>887</sup> Johann Ambrosius Siebmacher, *The Sophic Hydrolith or, Water Stone of the Wise*, HM 38. Latin text: “cujus tinctura dein omnia imperfecta corpora immutat, tingit, sanatque”. *Hydrolithus Sophicus seu Aquarium Sapientum*, MH 92.

<sup>888</sup> Paracelsus, *Of the Transmutation of Naturall Things*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 159.

<sup>889</sup> Cleopatra: “How much unlike art thou Mark Antony! / Yet, coming from him, that great med’cine hath / With his tinct gilded thee” (I, v, 34-6). See section 4.1. “Alchemy in Shakespeare’s Plays”.

<sup>890</sup> Ulysses: “And therefore is the glorious planet Sol / In noble eminence enthroned and sphered / Amidst the other, whose med’cinable eye / Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil” (*Troilus and Cressida*, I, iii, 89-92).

<sup>891</sup> “Full many a glorious morning have I seen, / Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye, / Kissing with golden face the meadows green, / Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy” (Sonnet 33, ll. 1-4).

Frank Kermode acknowledges that, being “essentially a set of transformative techniques”<sup>892</sup>, alchemy was an invaluable source of tropes, metaphors, and allegories:

It is easy to see how it [alchemical symbolism] might appeal to poets, whether they used it as an image of perpetual disappointment or even fraud on the one hand, or of mysterious natural and spiritual transformations on the other<sup>893</sup>.

As I would like to demonstrate throughout this study, it is exactly as a metaphor of spiritual transformation that alchemical imagery and language are employed in *The Winter’s Tale*.

Unlike Mark Antony, Leontes does not have any ‘tingeing’ virtue within himself because he is still ‘sick’ and ‘corrupt’, he is totally “in rebellion with himself” (I, ii, 352). Unable to apprehend any form of goodness and truth, the king of Sicily is persuaded to be in the right position, even though he is evidently deceiving himself: “How blest am I / In my just censure, in my true opinion!” (II, i, 36-7). A few lines below, the ongoing battle between truth and falsehood that is occurring within Leontes becomes manifest in the following lines: “how *accursed* / In being so *blest*” (II, i, 38-9, italics mine). Leontes’s blindness is the very blindness that affects also King Lear, to whom the loyal Kent suggests: “See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye” (I, i, 150-1). The paths of Lear and Leontes, the two Shakespearean kings that experience a process of symbolical ‘re-creation’, albeit with two different outcomes, come closely together. Charles Nicholl’s reading of *King Lear* in the light of alchemy has opened up important perspectives for the relationship between alchemical imagery and Shakespearean drama. Whether accepting Nicholl’s interpretation or not, it cannot be denied that his study proves that alchemical symbolism was part of the everyday language of early modern England: “alchemy was part of the air they breathed, and like everything else they breathed, it found its way into the great and inclusive world of their drama”<sup>894</sup>. Taking into account that a revised version of Lear’s tragedy was performed precisely in 1610, in the period of Shakespeare’s romances and in the year in which *The Winter’s Tale* was composed, it can be assumed that the connections between the two kings, Lear and Leontes, might have been apparent to the audience. As colourfully remarked by McMullan in his attempt to demonstrate the importance to rethink the relationships between Shakespeare’s romances and the dramatist’s whole production, “the presence in this chronology [of the last plays]

---

<sup>892</sup> Frank Kermode, Foreword to Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. ix.

<sup>893</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>894</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 7.

of a version of *King Lear* as a 1610 play throws a particularly fat cat among the late-play pigeons”<sup>895</sup>. Gary Taylor himself places the Folio-version of *Lear* within the group of the romances, suggesting that some parallels link the tragedy with two in particular of the late plays, namely *The Winter’s Tale* and *Cymbeline*<sup>896</sup>. That *King Lear* bears important similarities, both thematic and linguistic, with Shakespeare’s last phase had been already acknowledged even before scholars attested that a version of the tragedy was re-played at the end of Shakespeare’s dramatic career: “*Lear* is not Shakespeare’s last word, but it is the overture to his last act”<sup>897</sup>. Within the alchemical symbolism identified by Nicholl in *Lear* is the allegory of the chemical king, whose related imagery represents, in the scholar’s opinion, an essential perspective from which to read the king’s cathartic path. If embracing Nicholl’s interpretation of the tragedy, then, the proximity, in terms of both time and contents, of the dramas of *Lear* and *Leontes* further suggests that the alchemical symbolism of *King Lear* was familiar to the public of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*.

At this point, it is worth mentioning an alchemical parable by George Ripley known as *Cantilena*. The poem, composed of thirty-eight stanzas of four lines each, was originally written in Latin, in Ripley’s lifetime, and translated into English by an anonymous “earlier than 1581”<sup>898</sup>. The text recounts the story of a king who, first “Barren” and “Infoecund”<sup>899</sup>, experiences a process of death and rebirth in order to restore health to both himself and to his own realm:

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<sup>900</sup>.

A few lines below, the king acknowledges his inability to produce any kind of tincture because of his sterility: “my Nature is so much Restraine’d, / No Tincture from my Body can be gain’d: / And therefore it is Infoecund”<sup>901</sup>. Since alchemy is “such a work” that

---

<sup>895</sup> Gordon McMullan, “What is a ‘late play’?”, cit., p. 11.

<sup>896</sup> See Gary Taylor, “*King Lear*: The Date and Authorship of the Folio Version”, in Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (eds.), *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare’s Two Versions of King Lear*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, pp. 351-468.

<sup>897</sup> Robert Speaight, *Nature in Shakespearean Tragedy*, Hollis and Carter, London, 1955, p. 89, quoted by Gordon McMullan, “What is a ‘late play’?”, cit., p. 12.

<sup>898</sup> Frank Sherwood Taylor, “George Ripley’s Song”, *Ambix* 2, 1946, p. 177. As already noticed, this English translation of Ripley’s *Cantilena* is particularly significant since it contains notes by the alchemist Thomas Charnock, thus suggesting that it was circulating in Elizabethan England.

<sup>899</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, in Frank Sherwood Taylor, “George Ripley’s Song”, cit., pp. 177-178.

<sup>900</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 177.

<sup>901</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

“restoreth the defects of Nature, and brings Health again”<sup>902</sup>, the king’s sickness has to be discharged before he is turned into ‘tingeing gold’, that is to say, before the king’s inner, golden essence is freed. As already pointed out, the alchemist’s task is to deprive the king’s body and soul from the ‘corruption’ proper of the sublunary world, thus mirroring the action of refining base metals in order to extract the so-called *tinctura rubea*<sup>903</sup>. The alchemical tincture can be acquired only by means of a process of ‘dissolution’ and consequent ‘solution’: “And I say to thee of a truth that of this *Corruption* is a new Generation that bringeth forth this *blessed tincture*”<sup>904</sup>. It is, therefore, not surprising that the king in Ripley’s *Cantilena* first ‘dies’ in order to be successfully ‘revived’:

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<sup>905</sup>.

As the king of Ripley’s text, and as the king of other alchemical allegories, Leontes’s ‘disease’ is the cause of the barrenness, both real and metaphorical, that surrounds him. Since Leontes refuses his newborn daughter, Perdita, whom he decides to abandon in Bohemia, and indirectly causes the deaths of his son Mamilius and of his wife Hermione, his reign, like his mind, has been made sterile, as he himself realises:

I cannot forget (V, i, 7)  
[...]  
The wrong I did myself, which was so much  
That *heirless it hath made my kingdom*, and  
Destroyed the sweet’st companion that e’er man  
Bred his hopes out of (V, i, 9-12, italics mine).

In like manner, Macbeth’s illness is reflected in the disease of his land. As a matter of fact, in the final act of the tragedy, Macbeth presses the Doctor to cure his land, that functions as a metaphor for the protagonist’s own disease: “If thou couldst, doctor, cast / The water of my land, find her disease, / And purge it to a sound and pristine health” (V, iii, 52-4). Leontes acknowledges to be culpable of the loss of his son, daughter, and wife, thus electing himself as the only responsible for the barrenness and destruction of his life. His

---

<sup>902</sup> William Salmon, *Polygraphices. Liber Septimus. Of Alchymie*, Printed for A. and J. Churchill, at the Black Swan in Paternoster-Row and J. Nicholson at the King’s-Arms in Little-Britain, London, 1702, p. 514.

<sup>903</sup> H.M.E. De Jong, Commentary to Emblem XLVIII, in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 300.

<sup>904</sup> Francis Anthony, Eirenaeus Philalethes, George Ripley et al., *Collectanea chymica: A Collection of Ten Several Treatises in Chymistry*, Printed for William Cooper at the Pelican in Little Britain, London, 1684, p. 38.

<sup>905</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 178.

‘barren’ and ‘infoecund’ condition is further heightened a few lines below, when the king of Sicily describes himself as “issueless”: “I have done sin, / For which the heavens, taking angry note / Have left me issueless” (V, i, 171-3). “Heirless” and “issueless”, as Ripley’s *rex chymicus*, Leontes is still incapable of producing that “Tincture” to which Paulina alludes and that, as enigmatically suggested by the lady, would be the only way to recover Hermione: “If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / [...] I’ll serve you / As I would do the gods! (III, ii, 201-4). In alchemical literature the term tincture does not only refer to the physical stone or, more in general, to the substance that tinges and transmutes impure metals, but also to an inner kind of stone. As suggested by Petrus Bonus, the true tincture sought for by alchemists is not material but, rather, spiritual: “*the same hidden Stone is the heart and tincture of gold sought by the Sages*. In this way, Alchemy is supernatural and Divine, and in this Stone consists the whole difficulty of the Art” (italics mine)<sup>906</sup>. Metaphorically speaking, then, the alchemical tincture is that kind of inner gift, or virtue, that Mark Antony is said to possess and that alchemists attempt to attain by means of a process of internal transmutation. Marie-Louise von Franz argues that it is exactly because alchemists consider their work also as a process of inner enlightenment that the author of the *Aurora consurgens* “makes Wisdom not only the guide but also the goal of the alchemical *opus*”<sup>907</sup>. As far as Leontes’s journey is concerned, it can be assumed that the “Tincture” of which Paulina speaks stands for the final step of the king’s renewal, the goal of the process of ‘re-creation’ and inner growth that Leontes accomplishes and that is reflected in the actual transformation of Hermione from stone to living woman. As it has been claimed, “the play is also a representation of the king’s search for that special wisdom of which Paulina speaks, but which Hermione and Perdita seem already to possess”<sup>908</sup>.

As the king in Ripley’s *Cantilena*, who is defined as “Restrained” and “Infoecund”, Leontes has to be cured of his barren condition so that inner and outer health is restored. The “issueless” state of the king of Sicily, reflected in the setting of the first two acts of the drama in winter, culminates in the protagonist’s reflection on the idea of ‘nothingness’. As remarked by Garber, “Leontes has reduced all the world outside himself to nothing”, to a sort of “wasteland”<sup>909</sup>:

---

<sup>906</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 124. Latin text: “Et hic lapis divinus est cor et tinctura auri quaesita à philosophis. [...] Et hoc modo alchimia est supra naturam, et est divina, [...] et in hoc lapide est tota difficultas istius artis”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., pp. 38v-39r.

<sup>907</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz (ed.), *Aurora consurgens*, cit., p. 160.

<sup>908</sup> Scott Colley, “Leontes’s search for wisdom in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 48, n. 1, Jan. 1983, p. 43.

<sup>909</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., pp. 837 and 834.

Is this nothing?  
Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,  
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,  
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,  
If this be nothing.  
(I, ii, 290-4)

The conception of “nothingness” is central in the alchemical language, because it is believed that the matter within the alembic has first to be deprived of its impurities and reduced to ‘nothing’, as suggested by the following lines from the tenth-century Islamic text known as *Turba philosophorum*: “Nature is ruled by Nature, which destroys it, turns it into dust, *reduces to nothing*, and finally herself renews it” (italics mine)<sup>910</sup>. In the course of the *opus alchymicum*, then, the alchemical practitioner has to “reduce it [matter] [...] Till filth originall be clesed from his Seat”<sup>911</sup>. Abraham rightfully points out that the main concern of alchemists is precisely to dissolve “the old corrupt form so that a new and purified form could be created”<sup>912</sup>. At the outset of the alchemical work, therefore, the *rota alchemica* has to be turned back to the origins of Creation: “Into their owne first matter [the elements] kindly retrogadate”<sup>913</sup>. This retrograde movement is known as the *opus contra naturam*, since, in a paradoxical way, the alchemist has to go against nature in order to start again: he has to destroy in order to rebuild<sup>914</sup>. Northrop Frye defines the speech on nothingness of the king of Sicily as “the parody [...] of Leontes’s jealousy making something out of nothing, a demonic reversal of the divine creation”<sup>915</sup>. Interestingly enough, alchemy itself, in its initial, destructive movement towards total dissolution, is a sort of “reversal of divine creation”. This reversal, however, turns out to be a renewal, since the *opus alchymicum* is “the work which must go against nature in order to progress”<sup>916</sup>. Paracelsus notices that “[i]n order that you may understand this Art more thoroughly it is necessary to repeat, first of all, that God made all things out of nothing. Out of nothing, I repeat, he made something”<sup>917</sup>. In his study of *King Lear*, Nicholl argues that Lear and his personal world are first debased to nothing before they are renewed, a

---

<sup>910</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, George Redway, London, 1896, pp. 32-3. Latin text: “Natura enim regitur, et modo, quo cecidit, releuatur, et dum diruitur, vertitur in puluerem, et in nihilum reducitur: deinde regeneratur, et renouatur”. *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 76.

<sup>911</sup> George Ripley, “Epistle to King Edward the Fourth”, in Id., *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 112.

<sup>912</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 64.

<sup>913</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 135.

<sup>914</sup> See ‘opus contra naturam’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 139.

<sup>915</sup> Northrop Frye, “Shakespeare’s Romances: *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 13.

<sup>916</sup> See ‘inversion’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>917</sup> Paracelsus, *The Labyrinthus Medicorum*, HAWP 2: 165.

pattern that, in the scholar's opinion, might be read in the light of the alchemical cycle of *solve et coagula*, destroy in order to re-create: "It is only when madness and the storm have reduced Lear to nothing that he can be redeemed. [...] Lear himself will grow out of nothing"<sup>918</sup>. In the same way as Lear "will grow out of nothing", in an alchemical way, Leontes himself is reduced to 'nothing' in order to be reborn, since alchemists claim that "Putrefaccion is the Way / [that] Doth give us a happy birth day"<sup>919</sup>. The idea of 'nothingness', so strongly expressed by Leontes, is particularly significant because it highlights the condition of complete 'barrenness' that, mirroring the king's own disease, precedes his regeneration. As will be discussed, the symbolical 'dissolution' of Leontes's own self is mirrored in the outside, namely in the depiction of a "world destroyed" and of one "ransomed". Almost at the end of the play, one of the gentlemen, recounting the moment when the Shepherd and the Clown tell Leontes and Camillo about the shipwreck, the death of Antigonus and the recovery of Perdita, exclaims: "There was speech in their dumbness, language / in their very gesture. They looked as they had heard / of a world ransomed, or one destroyed" (V, ii, 13-5).

As is the case of Ripley's *Cantilena*, whose king acknowledges to be unable to "generate"<sup>920</sup>, alchemical parables usually depict an initial state of sterility in which nothing prospers<sup>921</sup>. The most evident example of this is no doubt the alchemical allegory of the *rex marinus*, also known as *Visio Arislei*, ascribed to the alchemist and philosopher Arisleus and collected in *Turba philosophorum*<sup>922</sup>. Jung suggests that Arisleus is a corrupted form of Archelaos, who was very likely a Byzantine alchemist from the eighth or ninth century<sup>923</sup>. In his vision, Arisleus recounts his meeting with the *rex marinus*, or king of the sea, whose reign is completely barren because only beings of the same sex are conjoined, so that no procreation occurs: "vidi me et quosdam ex Turba equitantes ad

<sup>918</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 145. Nicholl refers to the lines pronounced by Cordelia and Lear. When prompted by her father to deliver a speech showing her love for him in order to gain "A third more opulent" (I, i, 86) than her sisters', Cordelia replies: "Nothing, my lord" (I, i, 87). The dialogue between Lear and Cordelia proceeds in the following manner: Lear: "Nothing?"; Cordelia: "Nothing."; Lear: "How? Nothing will come of nothing. Speak" (I, i, 88-90).

<sup>919</sup> Jean de la Fontaine, *The Pleasant Founteine of Knowledge*, ll. 737-8, AP 102. The text was first written in French in 1413 by Jean de La Founteine and was translated into English in 1644 by William Backhouse.

<sup>920</sup> "I cannot generate: my Blood growes cold: / I am amazed to think I am so Old". George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>921</sup> The Italian alchemist Antonio Allegretti dwells on the concept of the barrenness of the earth: "Al corpo infermo / La medicina, arte celeste, porge / Gli aiuti suoi che le perdute forze / Ritornar fanno al pristino vigore; / Non niega haver la terra oblige a l'arte, / Quando di dura e sterile diviene / Fertile" (Antonio Allegretti, *De la trasmutatione de metalli. Poema d'alchimia del XVI secolo*, a cura di Mino Gabriele, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma, 1981, ll. 180-6, p. 73).

<sup>922</sup> See AA 1: 146-154. Some scholars have suggested that the text of the vision also circulated separately. See Miguel Pérez Lopéz, Didier Kahn, Mar Rey Bueno (eds.), *Chymia: Science and Nature in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle, 2010, pp. 90-2.

<sup>923</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Routledge, London, 1968<sup>2</sup>, p. 327.

maris littora, et ecce habitatores maris secuminuicem concubantes, et nihil eis gignebatur: et arbores plantantes, non tamen fructificantes: et feminantes nec quicquam nasci”<sup>924</sup>. The text draws on one of the central concepts of alchemy, i.e. the *coniunctio oppositorum*, usually represented as a marriage between male and female, king and queen, Sol and Luna. According to alchemists, it is only by means of the reconciliation between the opposites, or ‘chemical wedding’, that regeneration is possible:

The male without the female is looked upon as only half a body, nor can the female without the male be regarded as more complete. For neither can bring forth fruit so long as it remains alone. But if the two be conjugally united, there is a perfect body, and their seed is placed in a condition in which it can yield increase<sup>925</sup>.

As will be further considered, the alchemical notion of the *coniunctio*, that is the subject of the fourth “Gate” of Ripley’s *Compound of Alchymie*, following that of “Separacion”, evidently bears a certain relevance to *The Winter’s Tale*: somehow following the alchemical rhythm of *solve et coagula*, Leontes and Hermione are first separated, “dissevered” (V, iii, 155), before they are reconciled. If in the *Visio Arislei* the state of barrenness afflicting the king’s reign is due to the absence of the *coniunctio oppositorum*, so, in the light of alchemical beliefs, the condition of ‘sterility’ characterising the first half of *The Winter’s Tale* might be considered as consequent upon the separation, or “divorce”<sup>926</sup>, of the royal couple, i.e. Leontes and Hermione.

Arisleus’s vision also testifies to the early use of the allegory of the king as a metaphor for the alchemical process of transmutation. When the *rex marinus* enquires about the virtues of alchemical art, Arisleus promptly replies that alchemy would allow the regeneration of the king’s arid reign and, moreover, it will make all its inhabitants immortal, turning them into ‘kings’, i.e. into ‘perfect’ beings:

Qui res nouit et illi: Quid prodest eius scientia. et ego: Si in vobis Philosophus esset, filij

---

<sup>924</sup> *Visio Arislei*, AA 1: 146. As noticed by Abraham with regards to the allegory of Arisleus, “The kingdom must be liberated from its barren condition, or evil enchantment, by the arrival of the philosopher who can make possible the ‘marriage’ that will endure the crucial generation of new life”. Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 79.

<sup>925</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, HM 167. Latin version: “Mas absque faemina pro dimidiato habetur corpore, et faemina absque viro similiter dimidii corporis vicem obtinet: nam singuli per se nullum fructum edere possunt: Cum vero conjugali foedere conjuncti vivunt, corpus perfectum est, et per semen eorum augmentatio sequi potest”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, VI Clavis, MH 405.

<sup>926</sup> Alchemists employ the term “divorce” to indicate the separation of man and woman during the alchemical *solve et coagula*: “[...] the same as dissolution, division, separation. The purification of the matter of the Stone is accomplished by a reiterated cycle of solve et coagula (dissolve and coagulate), also known as separation and union, division and conjunction”. See ‘divorce’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 56.

vestri multiplicarentur, et nascerentur vobis arbores, et non morerentur, et fructus non extinguerentur, et essetis reges, omnes inimicos vestros superantes<sup>927</sup>.

As remarked by Jung, the sterility that affects the king's realm or the sickness afflicting the *rex chymicus*, either in the *Visio Arislei* or in other alchemical parables, usually indicate "that the hidden state is one of latency and potentiality"<sup>928</sup>. As gold has to be deprived of its impurities before it is turned into tingeing gold, so the chemical king has to be healed in order to "resume[s] a Kingly State"<sup>929</sup> and release his tincture. The alchemical "Philosophers stone or tincture is nothing else but Gold digested to the highest degree"<sup>930</sup> and, therefore, it represents the attainment of a condition of supreme health and excellency. According to alchemists, nothing better than the imagery of royalty epitomises the alchemical tincture, or quintessence, being the highest state of perfection that can possibly be achieved within the earthly dimension. In Nicholas Flamel's *Exposition of the Hieroglyphicall Figures*, the *rex chymicus*, defined as the "most puissant King", is explicitly associated with the "admirable quintessence", or tincture, of alchemists: "thou hast two natures reconciled, which [...] can forme an *Embrion* [...] and afterwards bring forth a most puissant *King*, invincible and incorruptible, because it will bee an admirable *quintessence*"<sup>931</sup>. In like manner, in the text *Compound of Compounds*, attributed to Albertus Magnus, the author denominates the "glorious Stone" as the "King that transmutes and *tinges* Mercury and all imperfect bodies"<sup>932</sup> (italics mine). However, it is only when the *rex chymicus*, being gold *in potentia*, is properly healed that he can acquire his tingeing virtue. The association between the attainment of the alchemical tincture and the restoration to health and strength of the chemical king is also evident in figure IX of *The Book of Lambspring* (see plate 21). The plate actually represents a king who, sit on his throne, embodies the acquirement of the alchemical tincture and says: "Thus you may know that the Tincture has truly attained the first degree"<sup>933</sup>.

It is interesting to note that, once 'reborn', the *rex chymicus* is also said to be able to restore life to the dead, as suggested in the already mentioned parable *The Magistery*:

---

<sup>927</sup> *Visio Arislei*, AA 1: 147.

<sup>928</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, cit., p. 329.

<sup>929</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>930</sup> Michael Sendivogius, "The Tenth Treatise. Of the Supernaturall Generation of the Son of the Sun", *A New Light of Alchymie*, in Stanton J. Liden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>931</sup> Nicolas Flamel, *His Exposition of the Hieroglyphicall Figures (1624)*, edited by Laurinda Dixon, Garland, New York, 1994, p. 33.

<sup>932</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Compound of Compounds*, translated by Luc Villeneuve, Adam McLean, Glasgow, 2003, p. 27. (Alberti Magni, *Compositum de compositis*, in *Theatrum Chemicum*, Argentorati, Sumptibus Heredum Eberh. Zetzneri, 1659, vol. 4, pp. 825-841).

<sup>933</sup> *The Book of Lambspring*, fig. IX, HM 143. "Intellige primum Gradum Tincturae vere apparuisse". Lamspringk, *De Lapide Philosophico*, "Nona Figura", MH 359.

Soe shall the *King* by his *new-byrth*,  
 Be *ten times stronger* just.  
 [...] The dead he [the king] will revive  
*Oh happy man that understands*  
*This Medicen to atchieve!*<sup>934</sup>.

The metaphor of the renewed king who restores life stands for the ultimate phase of the *opus alchymicum*, when matter, after been submitted to several cycles of *solve et coagula*, is ‘revivified’, that is to say transmuted. As already said, before Leontes’s request to apply “some remedies for life” (III, ii, 149) to the dead body of his queen, Paulina cryptically suggests that Hermione will be revived only if he will bring “Tincture” to her. Moreover, the woman also adds, “Heat outwardly or breath within” (III, ii, 203). The alchemical “Tincture”, or stone, is produced out of a process, known as ‘fixation’, that presupposes the reintegration of the volatile spirit within the purified body by means of external fire: “so that there be Fixacion, / With temperate hetes of the fyer”<sup>935</sup>. Alchemists believe that the “Spirit of lyfe”<sup>936</sup> flies from the body during the stage of *nigredo*, and descends again at the end of the alchemical process. When there is ‘spiritualisation’ of the dead body, life is restored and the stone is created: “by receiving this Aetheriall Medicine consisting of heavenly virtues [...] [the body] is delivered from all Impediments and [...] consequently life Prorogued”<sup>937</sup>. The external fire that is employed by alchemists to ‘fix’ the spirit that ‘breathes’ life within the dead body is also the “universal fire” by means of which nature operates; it is the divine breath which vivifies all bodies, as suggested by Paracelsus:

[Nature] is not visible, though it operates visibly; for it is simply a volatile spirit, fulfilling its office in bodies, and animated by the universal spirit – the divine breath, the central and universal fire, which vivifies all things<sup>938</sup>.

It is, therefore, by means of “the Application of things *inward* and *outward*” (italics mine) that “the Spirit hath been renewed, the Body strenghtened [...], et Life enlarged”<sup>939</sup>. Mino Gabriele argues that among the definitions given by alchemists to the quintessence, or tincture, are those of *aqua vitae*, universal balm, and word’s soul, because it is that spirit which vivifies both human and metallic bodies<sup>940</sup>. Paulina’s cryptic lines about the tincture

<sup>934</sup> *The Magistery*, cit., TCB 343.

<sup>935</sup> John Gower, *Concerning the Philosophers Stone*, TCB 370.

<sup>936</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin’s Dreame*, TCB 258.

<sup>937</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses, upon Some part of the preceding Worke*, TCB 448.

<sup>938</sup> Paracelsus, *A Short Catechism of Alchemy*, HAWP 1: 289.

<sup>939</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses, upon Some part of the preceding Worke*, TCB 448.

<sup>940</sup> “La ‘quintessenza-materia prima’ si trova ovunque essendo la sostanza più diffusa nell’universo, [...] è acqua di vita, elisir e medicina universale che dà vita ai corpi umani e metallici”. Mino Gabriele,

that could heal Hermione are, therefore, highly significant if considered in an alchemical context and are even more meaningful and prophetic if interpreted in the light of the statue-scene, that displays the restoration of the ‘spirit of life’ within the queen’s body, as will be discussed.

It is only after Leontes has been recovered that he can ‘transmute’ his queen, ‘tingeing’ and, therefore, reviving her, so that his inner ‘re-creation’ is reflected in the outer ‘re-creation’ of Hermione and in the healing of all divisions. Interestingly enough, in the alchemical text *The Golden Tract*, the final *coniunctio* is described precisely as the moment when the male tinges his female counterpart, thus testifying to the successful accomplishment of the alchemical cycle: “our prepared material is also called male and female [...]. The male rejoices when the female is brought to it, and the female receives from the male a tingeing seed, and is colored thereby”<sup>941</sup>. If read in this context, Paulina’s enigmatic lines, seemingly devoid of any specific alchemical meaning, foreshadow the future ‘conjunction’ between Leontes and Hermione, consequent upon Leontes’s spiritual rebirth. Even more eloquent is another passage from *The Golden Tract* in which the author describes the way the queen is ‘resurrected’ when she is reconciled with her king: “so they [spirit and soul] were at length compelled to return to the clarified body of the Queen, which (to my great joy) was straightaway restored to life”<sup>942</sup>. Even though *The Golden Tract*, or *Tractatus aureus*, dates from 1625, “it is still absolutely typical of the type of alchemical literature that flowered in the years immediately after 1600”<sup>943</sup>. The parable that concludes the treatise actually begins by depicting the *opus alchymicum* in metaphorical terms as a journey “upon a rough, untrodden, and impracticable path, which was beset with briars”<sup>944</sup>. When the protagonist tries to go backwards, he is caught in a violent storm but eventually reaches a beautiful orchard, the so-called “Meadow of Happiness”:

---

*Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>941</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 5. “Hoc etiam modo materia nostra praeparata vocatur mas et foemina [...]. Masculus gaudet suscepta foemina et iuvatur ab ea, et foemina suscipit a masculo sperma tingens, et coloratur ex eo”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, MH 12.

<sup>942</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 23. Latin text: “in aere nudo sudoque spiritus et anima ulterius sese continere haud potis essent, sed in clarificatum plurissimumque reginae corpus regredi cogentur quae, quam primum hoc sentiret, in momento quasi vitam recipiebat”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, MH 50.

<sup>943</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 140. Nicholl reports that the work first appeared in German in Hermannus Condeesyanus, *Dyas Chymica Tripartita*, Lucas Jennis, Frankfurt, 1625. Heerman Condeesyanus is a pseudonym for Johannes Grasshoff. See Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 266n.

<sup>944</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 19. Latin text: “in devium ita progrediendo incidi, et in semitam aliquam asperam, insolitam et inviam, plurimisque vepribus obsitam, ut facile conjectari liceret illam raro frequentari, deveni. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus aureus*, MH 41.

Then I was afraid, and strove to retrace my steps. But it was not in my power to do so; for so violent a tempest blew upon me from behind that it was easier to take ten steps forward than to take one backward. So I had to hurry forward, and follow the rugged path up and down hill. After a while, I reached a beautiful meadow, surrounded with heavy-laden fruit trees, which the inhabitants of the place called the Meadow of Happiness<sup>945</sup>.

The events recounted in *The Golden Tract* recall the sixteenth-century alchemical allegory known as *Blomfields Blossoms*. In Blomfield's text, as already noticed, the protagonist is led to the Campe of Philosophy, "a field pleasant large and wide", by "Tyme"<sup>946</sup>. As in *Blomfields Blossoms* and *The Compound of Alchymie*, the alchemist in *The Golden Tract* reaches the *hortus conclusus* only after passing through several gates:

After passing this gate, I came upon other bolted gates [...]. So I entered the garden, and found in the middle of it a small square garden, which was surrounded with a rose hedge covered with beautiful roses<sup>947</sup>.

In addition to the recurring theme of the *opus* as a hard journey through suffering and renewal and the imagery of the alchemical garden where white and red roses grow<sup>948</sup>, the parable in *The Golden Tract* also concerns a death and a marriage, the chemical wedding between the king and queen: the bride and bridegroom first die in order to be reborn<sup>949</sup>. Since the alchemical quest towards re-creation always presupposes a stage of death and expiation, a winter-like phase preceding the rebirth, Leontes himself has to experience the stage of *nigredo* before being reunited with his wife and thus retrieving his 'tingeing'

---

<sup>945</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 19. Latin text: "Hoc cum animadvertissem, horrore percitus, lubens pedem retraxissem, si in meis fuisset viribus; sed ventus vehementior ita me sequebatur, ut facilius decem gradus illorsum, quam unum retrorsum ferre possem. Quapropter mihi properandum, semitaeque asperitas susque deque facienda erat. Quum itaque aliquantisper processissem, in pratum denuo peramoenum promovi, quod in modum circi arboribus frugiferis quasi circumseptum ac decoratum, ab incolisque loci felicitatis pratum nominatum erat". J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus aureus*, MH 41-42.

<sup>946</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, TCB 310.

<sup>947</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., MH 21. Latin text: "Etiam si vero reliquae portae adhuc oclusae erant, per eas tamen aequae, ac si apertae fuissent, in hortum introspicere poteram. Numine igitur divino annuente, in hortum ingrediebar, in cuius medio reperiebam hortulum alium quadratum, et sex perticas comprehendebam, qui roseis arbustis circumseptus erat, rosaeque egregiae florebant". J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus aureus*, cit., MH 45.

<sup>948</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 20-21: "Now when I had advanced a little further, I put away all thought of danger, and forgot all about the wall and the battlement. Then lighting upon a certain place, I found white and red roses. [...] When I reached the gate of the garden some looked askance at me, and I was afraid they would prevent me from carrying out my purpose. Others murmured, and said: 'Look, this fellow presumes to approach the gate of the garden, and we who have spent so many years in these horticultural labors, have never gained admittance!'" Latin text: "et cum paulo ulterius progressus essem, de nullo amplius periculo mihi constabat, quidve de muro, aut lorica factum esset, me fugiebat. Quum igitur in eum locum devenissem, reperi rosas albas et rubeas. [...] cum portae horti appropinquarem, nonnulli obtorto vultu me intuebantur, ut etiam vererentur, ne in meo me proposito impedirent; alii vero murmurantes dicebant: En iste bonus vir horti januae appropinquare praesumit, et nos, qui tot annos in hortaceis hisce laboribus insumpsimus, nunquam in illum intromissi sumus". J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus aureus*, MH 45.

<sup>949</sup> See Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 140.

virtue.

#### 5.4 ‘Therefore betake thee / To nothing but despair’.

##### Leontes’s *nigredo*

Leontes’s story, as already said, begins in winter, the season of sterility, when, as the alchemist Basil Valentine claims, “the multitude suppose everything to be dead, because the earth is bound in the chains of frost, so that nothing is allowed to sprout forth”<sup>950</sup>. Alchemists believe that the alternation of seasons perfectly epitomises the alchemical cycle of *solve et coagula* since, as argued by Thomas Norton, “Every Circulation hath her proper season”<sup>951</sup>. Pernety testifies that by using the term ‘seasons’ alchemical authors intend the different phases of the alchemical work: “Ils [les philosophes] entendent par *saisons* les divers états successifs où se trouve la matiere de l’Art pendant le cours des opérations”<sup>952</sup>. The stages of death and rebirth constantly alternate during the *opus alchymicum* as much as “winter and summer relieve each other”<sup>953</sup> in the natural world. In the same way as the regeneration of nature in springtime succeeds the barrenness of winter, so, alchemists affirm, “Putrefaccion is the very Gate / Of gendring workes in every kinde of State”<sup>954</sup>. Putrefaction, or *nigredo*, is such a fundamental stage in the course of the *rota alchemica* that it is conceived of as the basic operation of the whole work: “herein [in the putrefaction] lyeth the mistery / Which all our deed doth testefye”<sup>955</sup>. As remarked by Ripley in *The Compound of Alchymie*, the alchemical wheel, or *rota alchemica*<sup>956</sup>, must necessarily pass through the state of *nigredo*, or ‘death’, before the final “Rednes”, or *rubedo*, is attained:

Ageyne then must thow turne thy Whele,  
Fyrst Blacknesse abydyng ys thow wylt do well,

---

<sup>950</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., HM 169. “In hyeme vulgus omnia mortua esse existimat, quia frigus terram constrinxit, ne quid inde excrescere queat”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, VII Clavis, MH 408.

<sup>951</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 84.

<sup>952</sup> See ‘Saisons’, in Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 323.

<sup>953</sup> John A. Mehung, *A Demonstration of Nature, Made to the Erring Alchemists, and Complaining of the Sophists and Other False Teachers*, HM 59. “Per jam modo dictum diversumque cursum aestas et hyems exoriuntur, mutationes itidem elementorum et in terris rerum generationes”. Joannem A. Mehung, *Demonstratio Naturae*, MH 148.

<sup>954</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher’s Stone*, cit., ll. 333-4, AP 21.

<sup>955</sup> Jean de la Fontaine, *The Pleasant Founteine*, cit., ll. 739-40, AP 102-3.

<sup>956</sup> See ‘opus circulatorium’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 137-9.

Then into Whytenes congele yt up [...]  
And by Rednes [...]  
Then hast thou brought thy Base unto an end<sup>957</sup>.

Even though the beginnings of the *opus alchymicum* are troublesome and gloomy, the descent is always the prelude to the ascent since the alchemical work is an upward journey, as suggested in the description accompanying plate IX of the *Book of Lambspring*. In Lambspring's text, the chemical king notices that he has been raised from his "ignoble birth" to a higher state (see plate 21): "Yet at first I was of ignoble birth, Till I was set in a high place. [...] Thence from the meanest I became the highest"<sup>958</sup>. In like manner, Blomfield underlines the upward course of the *opus alchymicum* by employing the concepts of heaven and hell in order to describe the alchemical pattern of descent and ascent: "Bring them [the elements] first to Hell, and afterwards to Heaven"<sup>959</sup>.

The phase of *nigredo* is sometimes indicated with the term 'rust', a word that refers to "the 'infection' or imperfection of the base metal before purification, i.e. before the transforming medicine or philosopher's stone is applied to it"<sup>960</sup>. In *Turba philosophorum*, the reader is told that matter first "falls into sickness, and dies by rust and putrefaction"<sup>961</sup>. The appearance of rust is, therefore, a sign that the dissolution of the metal's initial form has been achieved and a new creation follows. As a matter of fact, the alchemist is usually prompted to dissolve matter "until the said copper", that stands for the base metal that has to be transmuted, "shall put on rust, which is the foundation of our work"<sup>962</sup>. When, in the third act of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes acknowledges his faults and decides to repent, he seems to compare himself to a base metal that has to submit to purification: "How he [Camillo] *glisters* / Through my *rust*! And how his piety / Does my deeds make the *blacker*!" (III, 2, 167-9, italics mine). Leontes becomes aware of his inner 'blackness', previously invisible to him, and realises that Camillo's goodness glistens to his 'black' self as gold does if compared to a rusty metal. Rather than being a negative sign, the appearance of the colour black during the *opus alchymicum* is regarded by alchemists as "the key of the work"<sup>963</sup>, as a prelude to the phase of *albedo*, since it is only when matter is

---

<sup>957</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 168.

<sup>958</sup> *The Book of Lambspring*, cit., HM 143. "Inprimis enim eram genere ignobili, / Antequam tam sublimi loco natus et constitutus essem. Et quod ad tantum fastigium devenerim. Hoc mihi Dei et naturae beneficium datum est". Lambsprinck, *De Lapide Philosophico*, "Nona Figura", MH 358.

<sup>959</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 315.

<sup>960</sup> See 'rust' in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 175.

<sup>961</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, cit., p. 113. Latin text: "Nigredo vero si apparet, est ex egritudine, et in putrefactione moritur, et fit rubigo". *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 104-105.

<sup>962</sup> *Turba philosophorum, or Assembly of the Sages*, p. 132. Latin text: "donec acquirat rubiginem, quae est operis fundamentum". *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 111.

<sup>963</sup> *Turba philosophorum, or Assembly of the Sages*, p. 198: "this does not come to pass without blackness, I

reduced to ‘nothing’ that it can be created anew.

It is not surprising that in the third act, usually functioning as a turning point, Leontes becomes aware of his diseased self, acknowledging that it needs to be ‘re-created’. As remarked by Edward Kelly, ‘black’ reveals that the matter within the alembic is ready to be transmuted: “For Blacknes had thow needest not be afraid, / It wilbe white”<sup>964</sup>. ‘Black’ actually implies that regeneration, or *albedo*, is forthcoming, as one can read in *Turba philosophorum*: “When ye see that the matter is entirely black, know that whiteness has been hidden in the belly of that blackness”<sup>965</sup>. Kelly highlights the centrality of the phase of *nigredo* by arguing that “[t]he blackness must precede whiteness. [...] Our whole magistry, then, is based on putrefaction; for it can come to nothing, unless it is putrefied”<sup>966</sup>. Gold itself, Kelly continues, cannot be deprived of its impurities and, therefore, turned into tingeing gold, unless it is first ‘dissolved’: “Nature develops what is good into what is better by the way of alteration. Gold which has not passed through alteration or physical solution has not been educed into something better”<sup>967</sup>. It goes without saying that, being an emblem of alchemical gold, the *rex chymicus* cannot be reborn unless he first ‘dies’. In the 1676-edition of Kelly’s alchemical writings, the different stages of the *opus alchymicum* are depicted precisely in terms of the metamorphoses of a king. Employing both the written and the visual mediums, Kelly portrays the phase of *albedo*, or *albificatio*, as the moment when “A white King sits on the throne, having at his feet the Moon, and the five planets”<sup>968</sup> (see plate 26). At the end of the alchemical cycle, when the perfect red elixir has been attained and whiteness has been turned into redness, “A King, like a Pontiff, in a purple robe, sits on the throne, and at his feet kneel the Sun and Moon, with the five planets”<sup>969</sup> (see plate 25).

Somehow following the alchemical precept according to which “by the Gate of Blacknes thou must cum in / To lyght of Paradyce”<sup>970</sup>, Paulina condemns Leontes to “winter in storm perpetual”, to “nothing but despair”, thus paving the way for the king’s imminent ‘rebirth’:

---

have testified to be the key of the work”. Latin text: “et licet postea non denigret, non fit tamen de nigredine illa tinctura, sed clavem esse vobis intimaui”. *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 136.

<sup>964</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle’s Worke*, cit., TCB 330.

<sup>965</sup> *Turba philosophorum, or Assembly of the Sages*, pp. 195-6. Latin text: “Cum videritis ipsum iam nigrum totum, scitote quod in illius nigredinis ventre albedo occulta est, et tunc oportet albedinem illam extrahi a sua nigredine”. *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 135.

<sup>966</sup> Edward Kelly, *The Alchemical Writings*, cit., p. 138.

<sup>967</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>968</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>969</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

<sup>970</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 150.

[...] betake thee  
 To nothing but despair. A thousand knees,  
 Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting,  
 Upon a barren mountain, and still winter  
 In storm perpetual, could not move the gods  
 To look that way thou wert.  
 (III, ii, 206-11)

Paulina's lines call to mind a plate from Daniel Stolcius's *Viridarium chymicum* that clearly shows the alchemist completely alone during the phase of *nigredo*, in a dark, desolate, rocky, and wintry landscape (see plate 48). 'Winter' is only one of the several epithets given by alchemists to the melancholic stage of *nigredo*, that, as pointed out by Ripley, is usually exemplified by everything that is linked to 'black': "hyt [*nigredo*] hath Names [...] / after each thyng that Blacke ys to syght"<sup>971</sup>. If the seamen of the already mentioned *Breviary of Philosophy* by Thomas Charnock purge themselves by becoming "as black as men of *Inde*"<sup>972</sup>, so the priest protagonist of one of Zosimos's visions performs a *descensus ad inferos*, plunging into the darkness of the *nigredo* and then ascending in a purer condition: "I have accomplished the descent of the 15 steps of darkness and the ascent of the steps of light"<sup>973</sup>. Since the *nigredo* is the stage in which the "horrible darkneses of our mind"<sup>974</sup> are purged, as suggested in *Aurora consurgens*, it is always depicted as a phase of profound suffering. As Lyndy Abraham points out, once the old, diseased, state of matter or of the human soul has been revealed, the alchemist experiences "a *nox profunda*, a state of deep blackness from which it is almost impossible to imagine emerging"<sup>975</sup>. In this respect, the alchemist George Starkey, also known as Eirenaeus Philalethes, argues that matter "Must pass the darkness of the night, and then / Renewed shall be"<sup>976</sup>. There seems to be a relation between the alchemical *nox profunda* and Leontes's expiation "Upon a barren mountain", with "winter in storm perpetual" (III, ii, 209-10), a phase that is nonetheless followed by the king's spiritual rebirth, in the same way as the alchemists's night is succeeded by the dawning of the sun, i.e. by the *albedo*<sup>977</sup>.

Considering that the *nigredo* is symbolised by everything related to the idea of 'blackness', of all of the four humours, melancholy is the one specifically representing the first stage of the *opus alchymicum*: as Brann remarks, "corresponding to external

<sup>971</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 134.

<sup>972</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 292.

<sup>973</sup> The translation of Zosimos's vision is from Frank Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>974</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz (ed.), *Aurora consurgens*, cit., p. 91. Latin text: "Horridas nostrae mentis purga tenebras". *Ibidem*, p. 90.

<sup>975</sup> See 'melancholia', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>976</sup> George Starkey, *The Marrow of Alchemy*, Printed by A.M. for Edw. Brewster, London, 1654, p. 55.

<sup>977</sup> See the plates in *Splendor solis* showing the 'dark sun', or *sol niger*, and the rising sun. The two illustrations represent, respectively, a phase of dissolution, or putrefaction, and one of regeneration (see plates 73 and 74).

putrefaction is internal melancholy”<sup>978</sup>. Melancholy, or black bile, is traditionally associated with the colour black and with the planet Saturn that, as will be further discussed, is central in alchemical imagery:

Just as a melancholy ‘death’ could be viewed by mystics in general as but a prelude to ‘resurrection’ and eternal life in the hereafter, so could the melancholy ‘death’ of the alchemical mystics, signifying in their vocabulary the operation of putrefaction, be viewed as the starting point of a three-stage journey to eternal bliss<sup>979</sup>.

It is throughout his melancholic, ‘dark’, and seemingly endless journey of “despair” (III, ii, 207) that Leontes will find the true source of his renewal since, as claimed by the alchemist John Dastin, “he that is not sad will not be marry. Nor is he worth an empire that will not fight for it”<sup>980</sup>. In the same way as “a melancholy death” is, to alchemists, “the starting point of a three-stage journey to eternal bliss”, Leontes’s suffering is unequivocally the starting point of a process of re-creation, as he himself announces soon after Paulina condemns him to a long phase of affliction: “Once a day I’ll visit / The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there / Shall be my *recreation*” (III, iii, 235-7, italics mine). Surprisingly enough, in his sorrowful path to rebirth the king of Sicily resolves to be led by Paulina, the same woman whom he had previously defined as an “audacious lady” (II, iii, 41), deciding to banish her from his sight because he considered her as a “mankind witch” (II, iii, 66)<sup>981</sup>:

So long as nature  
Will bear up with this exercise, so long  
I daily vow to use it. Come, and lead me  
To these sorrows  
(III, iii, 237-40).

Formerly against time in his unnatural haste to take revenge, Leontes is now accepting to

---

<sup>978</sup> Noel Brann, “Alchemy and Melancholy in Medieval and Renaissance Thought: A Query into the Mystical Basis of their Relationship”, *Ambix*, vol. 32, part 3, November 1985 p. 136.

<sup>979</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>980</sup> John Dastin, *Visio*, quoted and translated by Wilfred Theisen, “John Dastin’s Alchemical Vision”, *Ambix* 46, part 2, 1999, p. 70. Latin text: “qui non tristatur non laetatur. Nec est dignus imperio qui negligit certare pro eo”. As documented by Theisen, Dastin’s *Visio* survives in both Latin and English in a number of manuscripts in Cambridge, London, and Oxford. English translations of the text circulated in manuscript form throughout the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. See Wilfred Theisen, “John Dastin’s Alchemical Vision”, cit., pp. 65-66. A longer version of Dastin’s vision in English is also in TCB 257-68.

<sup>981</sup> Hartwig discusses the roles of Paulina and Leontes, defining the two characters as a “shrew” and a “tyrant” respectively: “Paulina plays the ‘shrew’ to Leontes’ ‘tyrant’ in the first half of the play; in the last half, she plays ‘confessor’ to Leontes’ humble ‘penitent’”. There are other roles through which they engage each other’s natures in defining actions, but these two are primary and they control the other subsidiary roles”. Joan Hartwig, “The Tragicomic Perspective of *The Winter’s Tale*”, *ELH*, n. 1 (March 1970), vol. 37, p. 13.

follow his process of ‘ripening’ “so long as nature / Will bear up with this exercise”. Indeed, as already said, in the first half of the play, Leontes, a victim of his frenzy, hastens the natural course of time. Time, finally allowed to beget truth as in the allegory of *temporis filia veritas*, will therefore guide the king of Sicily to his final rebirth. Led by both Paulina and time, Leontes willingly undertakes his journey of re-creation, that will last sixteen years. As already said, in the alchemical parable entitled *Blomfields Blossoms*, the alchemist is guided precisely by “Tyme”, whose footsteps the adept is suggested to follow constantly:

I am, said he, *Tyme, The Producer of all thing*:  
 [...] My intent is to bring thee to *the Campe of Philosophy*.  
 If thou wilt enter this *Campe of Philosophy*  
 With thee take *Tyme* to guide thee in the way<sup>982</sup>.

As far as the alchemical conception of melancholy is concerned, it is worth mentioning the so-called “allegory of king Duenech”, a brief text collected in *Theatrum Chemicum* and the subject of emblem XXVIII in Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens*<sup>983</sup>. The parable recounts the story of a king, named Duenech, who is described as “melancholy”, “atrabilious”, and “tortured by a Saturnal sombreness”<sup>984</sup>. “Despised [...] on account of his deep melancholy”, the king commands the physician Pharut to cure him. Interestingly enough, the latter suggests that the king’s healing treatment should begin when “Saturn is in opposition to the sun”<sup>985</sup>. As reported by Abraham, Saturn is actually “the name of the Stone’s matter during its putrefaction”, since, the scholar argues, “Saturn’s discipline and melancholia govern the grim beginnings of the opus alchymicum”<sup>986</sup>. Pernety himself attests that the term Saturn is applied to several alchemical subjects, among which is the beginning of the work, a stage of seeming endless blackness and death: “Les Philosophes Hermétiques donnent le nom de Saturne à plusieurs choses. La premiere est la couleur

---

<sup>982</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 305-8.

<sup>983</sup> The allegory of King Duenech is collected in *Theatrum Chemicum: praecipuos selectorum auctorum tractatus de chemiae et lapidis philosophici*, Sumptibus Heredum Eberh. Zetzneri, Argentorati, 1659-1661, vol. III, pp. 756-7. *Theatrum Chemicum* was first published in Ursel, 1602, in four volumes.

<sup>984</sup> Michael Maier, Discourse accompanying Emblem XXVIII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 207. The Latin text of the allegory of King Duenech reads as follows: “Dux quidam senex Duenech vocatus, cum in conventu magnatum se sperni cerneret, et profundum melancholicum infimae auctoritatis, et nullius respectus esse, cum quibusdam fidelioribus amicis suis consilium inquit, quomodo ab hoc artrabiliario temperamento se cavere, et sanguinem reliquis temperamentis praestantis induere possit”. *Theatrum Chemicum*, cit., vol. 3, p. 756.

<sup>985</sup> H.M.E. De Jong, Commentary to Maier’s emblem XXVIII, in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 211. The Latin text of the Duenech allegory reads as follows: “cum aspectus Saturni esset ex opposito Solis”. *Theatrum Chemicum*, cit., vol. 3, p. 756.

<sup>986</sup> See ‘Saturn’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 178.

noire, ou la matiere parvenue à cette couleur par la dissolution et la putréfaction”<sup>987</sup>. Albeit ambiguous, Pharut’s assertion becomes straightforward if considered in the right alchemical context: it suggests that, in the same way as King Duenech’s healing process must begin when Saturn opposes the sun, the alchemical work always starts from the painful and obscure phase of *nigredo*, symbolised by “melancholy, or Saturn, or lead, or the putrefaction”<sup>988</sup>. Alchemists clearly exploit the dualism inherent in the figure of the ancient god Saturn, traditionally characterised by contradictory features, as remarked by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl in their celebrated study *Saturn and Melancholy*. As they point out, the first Arabic sources that testify to the early association between Saturn and melancholy – an association that was transmitted to Western culture – already presented the god as having ambiguous characteristics. The high number of sources and traditions that have gradually merged has undoubtedly contributed to heighten the confusion concerning the true nature of Saturn:

Even in the sources from which the Arabic astrological notion of Saturn had arisen, the characteristics of the primeval Latin god of crops Saturn had been merged with those of Kronos, [...] as well as with Chronos the god of time [...]; to say nothing of ancient oriental influences, whose significance we can only hardly estimate<sup>989</sup>.

The Greek god Kronos, to which Saturn came to be identified, was “distinguished by a marked internal contradiction or ambivalence”<sup>990</sup>. He was “the father of gods and men”, but also “the devourer of children” and his symbol, the sickle, “was both an instrument of the most horrible outrage and at the same time of harvesting”<sup>991</sup>. As might be expected, the contradictions traditionally associated with Kronos-Saturn, defined by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl as the “god of opposites”<sup>992</sup>, perfectly suited alchemical symbolism, constantly dwelling on ambiguity and paradox. Saturn, the alchemical symbol of lead, the basest of the metals, and of the *nigredo* is, nonetheless, the key leading to philosophical

---

<sup>987</sup> See ‘Saturne’ in Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 326.

<sup>988</sup> H.M.E. De Jong, Commentary to Emblem XXVIII, in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 213. As Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl remark, the association between melancholy and the planet Saturn was already present in Arabic treatises about astrology. In particular, it is first recorded in the ninth-century Arabic text *Introduction to Astrology*, in which the author inveighs against the theory, supported by a number of astrologers, according to which the humours are related to the planets. As far as the Western conception of Saturn is concerned, the most influencing text seems to have been the Latin translation of *Introductorum maius*, a text by the Arab author known to the Latins as Alcabitius. In the latter’s treatise “we find a connection traced between the humours and Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and the moon respectively”. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, Thomas Nelson et Sons, Cambridge, 1964, p. 127 and p. 130.

<sup>989</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, cit., p. 133.

<sup>990</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>991</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>992</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

gold, as Pernety himself attests:

[les alchimistes] appellent *regne de Saturne* le temps que dure la noirceur, parce qu'ils nomment Saturne cette même noirceur; [...]. Cette noirceur étant aussi, comme ils le disent, l'entrée, la porte et la clef de l'oeuvre<sup>993</sup>.

In like manner, the author of the alchemical text entitled *Polygraphices* remarks that “Saturn is a cold, gross, dull and heavy Body, replete with much Impurity, yet full of a Golden Mercury”<sup>994</sup>. As Saturn is the source of the quintessence, so melancholy, a symbol of the *nigredo*, is the starting point of the alchemical journey of re-creation.

As already said, the allegory of King Duenech is employed in emblem XXVIII of Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*. Maier's plate shows a king while, naked and sitting in a steam-bath, is purged of his melancholy (see plate 35): “The king is bathed, sitting in a steam-bath, and he is freed from the black bile by Pharut”<sup>995</sup>. Nakedness, as well as the removal of one's garments, traditionally implies a condition of total purification: according to Neoplatonic theories, the removal of one's garments is a metaphor for the soul's ascent to the divine dimension, after it is deprived of its earthly ‘garments’<sup>996</sup>, i.e. of the filth of physical existence. A related image of symbolical cleansing is usually expressed by means of the immersion into water. To cite an instance, during the Greek Eleusinian rites, deeply imbued with Neoplatonic philosophy, the initiates had to immerse themselves into water before being introduced to the so-called ‘Great Mysteries’, consequent upon the ‘Minor Mysteries’: “the second was the day of purification, called also *aladé mystai*, from the proclamation: ‘to the sea, initiated ones!’”<sup>997</sup>. Being itself a kind of initiation ritual, as documented, among others, by Eliade<sup>998</sup>, the *opus alchymicum* equally presupposes a cathartic stage of cleansing, the so-called phase of ‘ablution’, that, in Calid's words, “is

---

<sup>993</sup> Dom Pernety, *Les Fables Égyptiennes et Grecques*, cit., vol. I, p. 569.

<sup>994</sup> William Salmon, *Polygraphices. Liber Septimus. Of Alchymie*, cit., p. 479.

<sup>995</sup> Michael Maier, Motto accompanying Emblem XXVIII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 206.

<sup>996</sup> Porphyry argues that when the soul descends into the world of generation, it assumes the ‘garment’ of the body: “the body is a garment with which the soul is invested [...]. Thus according to Orpheus, Proserpine, who presides over every thing generated from seed, is represented weaving a web”. Porphyry, *De Antro nympharum*, 14, translated by Thomas Taylor, *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs: a Translation of Porphyry's De antro nympharum from The Commentaries of Proclus, 1788-1789*, in George Mills Harper and Kathleen Raine (eds.), *Thomas Taylor the Platonist. Selected Writings*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1969, p. 305. Porphyry's works were rediscovered in the fifteenth century thanks to Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. As documented by Simonini, the first edition of *De Antro Nympharum* was published in Rome in 1518 and usually circulated along with other Greek Platonic works, such as the treatises of Orpheus, Pythagoras, Zoroaster, and Hermes Trismegistus. Laura Simonini, Introduction to Porfirio, *L'antro delle Ninfe*, Adelphi, Milano, 2006, p. 17.

<sup>997</sup> Thomas Taylor, *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries. A Dissertation*, J.W. Bouton, New York, 1891, p. 14.

<sup>998</sup> See Mircea Eliade, “Alchimie et initiation”, in Id., *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., pp. 119-29.

very necessary to this secret mastery”<sup>999</sup>. In Maier’s emblem XXVIII, King Duenech is depicted as naked, as is also the case with another illustration in *Atalanta fugiens*, the one appearing in emblem XXXI, that shows a king, evidently the *rex chymicus* of the Third Parable of *Splendor solis*, while drowning in the sea and waiting to be saved (see plate 36). The motto accompanying Maier’s emblem XXXI clearly evokes the text of *Splendor solis*: “The king, swimming in the sea, calling in a loud voice: He who saves me will get a tremendous reward”<sup>1000</sup>. A naked king awaiting his transmutation also appears in a plate of *Splendor solis*: the engraving, that illustrates the Seventh Parable of the collection, shows an old man immersed in a cleansing bath (see plate 37). The old man is the mythical Aeson, who, according to the Ovidian myth, asked Medea to be rejuvenated<sup>1001</sup>. As already said, the myth of Aeson and Medea regularly recurs in alchemical literature as an allegorical representation of the transmutation of metals. In the illustration of *Splendor solis*, then, Aeson stands for the “aged, diseased king (or metal) who is killed in order to be transmuted, rejuvenated and resurrected”<sup>1002</sup> and his bath alludes to the process of cleansing of the *rex chymicus*. Upon the head of the king is a white bird, possibly a dove, symbol of the ‘whiteness’ of the *albedo*, that succeeds “the corruption, putrefaction and sublimation of the black matter”<sup>1003</sup> and opposes “the Blackness of Dissolution”<sup>1004</sup>, usually symbolised by the crow.

Mino Gabriele attests that the expiation, or cleansing, of the king in alchemical literature is emblematic of the soul’s ascent to the heavenly sphere. The scholar argues that the removal of the soul’s garments, recurring in Hermetic texts as a metaphor for the

---

<sup>999</sup> Calid, *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie, Composed by Galid the Sonne of Jazich, Translated out of Hebrew into Arabick, and out of Arabick into Latine, and out of Latin into English*, in Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchemy*, cit., p. 38. *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie* is an Arabic alchemical treatise that was included in Roger Bacon’s *The Mirror of Alchimie*, published in London in 1597. Calid’s *Liber Secretorum Alchemiae* was published in Latin along with Bacon’s *Speculum Alchemiae* in *In Hoc Volumine De Alchemia continentur haec. Gebri Arabis, Philosophi solertissimi, rerumque naturalium, praecipue metallicarum peritissimi, De investigatione perfectionis metallorum. [...] Speculum Alchemiae, doctissimi viri Rogerii Bachonis. Correctorium Alchemiae doctissimi viri Richardi Anglici. Rosarius minor, de Alchemia, Incerti authoris. Liber Secretorum Alchemiae Calidis filium Jazichi Judaei. Tabula Smaragdina de Alchemia, Hermetis Trismegistis. Hortulani philosophi, super Tabulam Smaragdinam Hermetis, Commentarium*, Norimbergae apud Joh. Petreium, 1541.

<sup>1000</sup> Michael Maier, Motto accompanying Emblem XXXI, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 221. The text of the Third Parable of *Splendor solis* reads as follows: “They further saw the King of the Earth sink, and heard him cry out with eager voice: ‘Whoever saves me shall live and reign with me for ever in my brightness on my royal throne,’ and Night enveloped all things”. Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>1001</sup> “Ovid the old Roman wrote to the same end, when he mentioned an ancient Sage who desired to rejuvenate himself was told: he should allow himself to be cut to pieces and decoct to a perfect decoction, and then [...] again be renewed in plenty of strength”. Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>1002</sup> See ‘Aeson’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>1003</sup> See ‘dove’, *Ibidem.*, p. 58.

<sup>1004</sup> “Saturn’s action reflects the Night or Blackness of Dissolution, the Raven’s Head or *Caput Corvi*: the Crow which is the Crown of the Work, since there can be no Generation without Putrefaction”. Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 239.

eschatological journey of the human soul, is sometimes rendered by alchemists in terms of the cleansing of the “king’s skin”:

Le ‘vêtement’ de l’âme est également dénommé ‘la peau du Roi’ et contient, au début du processus purificateur [...] des fragments ou des étincelles d’or qui indiquent l’état latent de perfection dorée et d’immortalité [...] obtenu à l’aboutissement du voyage<sup>1005</sup>.

The scholar refers specifically to some plates belonging to *La Bugia*, a work by the seventeenth-century alchemist Massimiliano Palombara. The illustrations show the alchemist, or philosopher, while washing a naked king in a river<sup>1006</sup> (see plate 39), thus further drawing on a theme that, as already pointed out, recurs also in Trismosin’s and Maier’s works. As the divine nature of the human soul is revealed when the latter is deprived of its filthy ‘garments’, so the king’s royal, golden, and healthy essence is released when he is properly ‘purged’ and ‘cleansed’ of his ‘blackness’ and ‘corruption’. Again, it is evident that the alchemical parable of the *rex chymicus* is endowed with a soteriological significance: the washing of the king is not only a metaphor for the outer purification of physical matter, but also indicates an inner process of renewal, i.e. the attainment of that “hidden Stone”, or tincture, of which Petrus Bonus speaks<sup>1007</sup>.

Mino Gabriele observes that Palombara’s allegory dwells on certain common themes of Renaissance alchemical literature: “Nel suo complesso la ‘parabola’ di Massimiliano ripropone contenuti comuni alla cultura alchemica tanto seicentesca che precedente”<sup>1008</sup>. The allegory of the purification of the king by means of water also appears in two Italian treatises dating from the sixteenth century: *Della Tramutatione Metallica Sogni Tre* by Giovan Battista Nazari and *De la Trasmutatione de Metalli* by Antonio Allegretti, the latter being a re-elaboration of the former. Although the two texts do not belong to the English tradition, they are worth mentioning since they testify to the wide employment of the parable of the transmutation of the *rex chymicus* in the alchemical literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Both writings, as remarked by Gabriele, dwell upon the same kind of imagery: during the phase of ablution, a king disrobes himself

---

<sup>1005</sup> Mino Gabriele, “La signification de la ‘Porte magique’ de Rome”, cit., p. 713.

<sup>1006</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 714.

<sup>1007</sup> “The hidden Stone may be called the Gift of God, and if it does not mingle with our Stone, the work of Alchemy is marred. Now, the same hidden Stone is the heart and tincture of gold sought by the Sages”. Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 124. Latin text: “hic lapis occultus est qui proprie dicitur donum dei, et hic est lapis divinus occultus, sine cuius commixtione lapidi annihilator alchimia, cum ipse sit ipsa alchimia, et perditur opus eadem hora. Et hic lapis divinus est cor et tinctura auri quaesita a philosophis”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., p. 38v.

<sup>1008</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Il Giardino di Hermes*, cit., p. 41.

and, naked, bathes in a warm spring<sup>1009</sup>. The king symbolically dies within the fountain in order to be restored to life and strength by that same water, as it is recounted in the allegory that closes Allegretti's treatise:

Sola l'uccide la fontana, e sola  
Lo risuscita poi, e quand'egli entra  
Ne la fontana, pria si spoglia quella  
Vesta di drappo d'oro, e la concede  
Al suo primo Baron Saturno detto<sup>1010</sup>.

A few lines above, Allegretti dwells precisely upon the image of the removal of the garments as a metaphor for the soteriological aspect of alchemical art:

L'arte non sol cerca di render fisso,  
E restringere in massa il vivo argento,  
Ma tal dargli virtù, che spogliar possa  
La prima forma imperfetta, e vestire  
D'una più pura i corpi, e più perfetta<sup>1011</sup>.

The same image of the removal and consequent re-acquisition of the garments recurs also in *Splendor solis*, in the plate that accompanies the Fourth Parable of the treatise (see plate 38). The illustration shows a naked black man who, functioning as a personification of the *nigredo*, is depicted while coming out of slime and encountering a lady, possibly an embodiment of alchemical wisdom<sup>1012</sup>. The woman offers him a red dress, that represents the imminent coming of the *rubedo*, whose source, as already said, is to be found in the blackness of the *nigredo*.

In condemning Leontes to absolute despair, Paulina explicitly stresses that the king will expiate his faults as “naked”, while “fasting / Upon a barren mountain” (III, ii, 208-9)<sup>1013</sup>. As already said, the nudity of the chemical king, deprived of his ‘earthly’ garments,

---

<sup>1009</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., pp. 29-31.

<sup>1010</sup> Antonio Allegretti, *De la trasmutatione de metalli*, cit., ll. 467-71, p. 93.

<sup>1011</sup> *Ibidem*, ll. 54-8, p. 70.

<sup>1012</sup> In alchemical literature, wisdom, or *sapientia*, is sometimes depicted in the form of a lady. See ‘sapientia’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 178. To cite an instance, the text *Aurora consurgens*, attributed to Thomas Aquinas, begins with a description of *sapientia* as a lady: “All good things came to me together with her, that Wisdom of the south”. Thomas Aquinas (attributed to), *Aurora consurgens*, cit., p. 71. A lady appears also in emblem XXVI of Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*, an illustration that shows “Crowned Lady Sapientia, standing in a landscape with a tree”. See Michael Maier, Emblem XXVI, in *Id.*, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 195.

<sup>1013</sup> Paulina's condemnation of Leontes “Upon a barren mountain” inevitably calls to mind the myth of Prometheus, doomed to expiate his fault tied to a rock and with an eagle devouring his liver. It is interesting to note that Prometheus is considered by alchemists as one of the first masters of alchemical art, as suggested by Mino Gabriele: “Le figure di Minerva, dea di ogni sapere, e di Prometeo, che insegnò agli uomini le arti e l'uso del fuoco, vennero considerate nel linguaggio mito-ermetico come quelle dei

signals a stage of cleansing, a gradual transition from the blackness of the *nigredo* to the whiteness of the *albedo* and, at a final stage, to the redness of the *rubedo*. Immersed in a steam-bath, as in Maier's emblem XXVIII (see plate 35), or drowning in water, as in plate VII of *Splendor solis* (see plate 19) and in emblem 31 of *Atalanta fugiens* (see plate 36), the chemical king experiences a purgatorial journey that leads to his final healing. Alchemical philosophers depict the stage of ablution also in terms of tears, or dew, as in Maier's emblem illustrating the allegory of King Duenech, cured of his black bile precisely by means of dew: "The latter [Pharut] promises him [Duenech] health and has a steam-bath prepared, / Herein he bathes and bathes again, under the glass arch, / Till, *by the wet dew, he is freed from all bile*" (italics mines)<sup>1014</sup>. In like manner, tears function as the alchemical water that cleanses 'black' matter of its impurities, thus regenerating and reviving it: "Tears' are literally the drops of moisture that condense at the top of the still and rain down upon the blackened body lying at the bottom of the alembic, cleansing it of its impurities"<sup>1015</sup>. Moving from Thomas Norton's theory according to which alchemical ablution is the stage in which "Water clenseth" and "things mortified causeth to revive"<sup>1016</sup>, Leontes's re-creation by means of the purifying power of tears can be assimilated to the alchemical concepts of cleansing and rebirth. Alone and naked, the king of Sicily is ready to undertake his path of regeneration that begins, not surprisingly, with a phase of profound torment and "despair" (III, ii, 207) that recalls the alchemical *nigredo*, and with his 'dissolution' into tears. The term 're-creation', employed by Leontes when saying that "tears shed there / Shall be my recreation" (III, iii, 236-7), suggests a pattern of death and rebirth, of annihilation and consequent re-construction, of *solve et coagula*. Pitcher points out that "recreation", besides signifying "mental or spiritual consolation"<sup>1017</sup>, also "means remaking, re-creating (his penitent spirit)"<sup>1018</sup>. 'Remaking' is exactly what alchemists do: they destroy, they reduce matter to a formless mass, and they create it anew. In like manner, the king of alchemists has to die before being regenerated: "In the early stages of the opus, the king [...] suffers death and putrefaction as he is dissolved into the original matter of creation [...]. This was the death that necessarily preceded the rebirth"<sup>1019</sup>. The *opus alchymicum* is conceived of as a new creation that cannot occur unless there has first been a dissolution: it is, in Abraham's words, a work of

---

primi maestri di crisopoea". Mino Gabriele (ed.), *De la trasmutatione de metalli*, cit., p. 57n.

<sup>1014</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem XXVIII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 206.

<sup>1015</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>1016</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 59.

<sup>1017</sup> See 'recreation', OED, entry 2b.

<sup>1018</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 235n.

<sup>1019</sup> See 'king', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 111.

“reconstruction”<sup>1020</sup> from the ashes of the previous form, as the phoenix, one of the major alchemical symbols, constantly renews itself from its ashes. Also the metaphor of the *regressus ad uterum* of the *rex chymicus* suggests that the king ‘dies’ and is ‘created’ anew, as matter is dissolved, by means of a retrograde movement, and is re-created<sup>1021</sup>. Philalethes highlights the paradoxical rhythm of the *opus alchymicum*, a process that is destructive and regenerative at the same time:

For all our Art is but to ope and shut,  
To loose, and after that to recongeal,  
To Volatize, and then to fix, to put  
To death, and after to revive and heal;  
To Putrifie, and after it to cleanse<sup>1022</sup>.

“Based on the presumption that everything can be dissolved, [...] erased and rewritten”<sup>1023</sup>, the alchemical work is actually conceived of as a process in which matter is regenerated only when it has been completely dissolved, thus revealing its corruption, or blackness, as suggested by John Dastin: “Where corruption is, amendment doth appear”<sup>1024</sup>.

The word ‘re-creation’ is particularly evocative of alchemical vocabulary especially if considering that alchemists intend the *opus alchymicum* as a microcosmic reproduction of God’s Creation. In one of the plates from Andreas Libavius’s *Alchymia*, a pyramid made of seven steps, at whose top are the king and queen united in the chemical wedding, represents the different stages of the Great Work (see plate 16): the “steps correspond to the days of Creation, since *alchemy is a microcosmic re-Creation*” (italics mine)<sup>1025</sup>. In the same way as God moulded the world from a shapeless mass, the so-called *prima materia* or primordial chaos, alchemists reproduce the condition of chaotic confusion that was at the outset of the cosmos in order to begin their microcosmic work of ‘re-creation’. “Putrefaction”, as Dobbs argues, “was considered to be essential at an early stage”, precisely because it “produced a chaotic, dark, unformed matter – a chaos such as had

---

<sup>1020</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>1021</sup> The metaphor of the *regressus ad uterum* of the *rex chymicus* recurs in George Ripley’s *Cantilena*, in the alchemical allegory entitled *The Magistery*, and in the text of John Dastin’s vision. See George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 178: “By other meanes I cannot enter Heaven: / And therefore (that I may be Borne agen) / I’le Humbled be into my Mother’s Breast / Dissolve to what I was. And therein rest”. See *The Magistery*, TCB 343: “Into his *Virgin-Mothers* wombe, / Againe he *enter* must; / Soe shall the *King* by his *new-byrth*, / Be *ten times stronger* just”. See Wilfred Theisen, “John Dastin’s Alchemical Vision”, cit., p. 70: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can a man enter into his mother’s womb again and be born again and be born anew, because thou sayest I must be born again? [...] It behooveth me to pass through fire and water and again be born”.

<sup>1022</sup> George Starkey, *A True Light of Alchymy, Containing A Correct Edition of The Marrow of Alchymy*, Printed by I. Dawks for the author, London, 1709, pp. 85ff.

<sup>1023</sup> Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006, p. 113.

<sup>1024</sup> John Dastin, *Visio*, cit., p. 70.

<sup>1025</sup> Stanislas Klossowski De Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 51.

existed at the beginning of the world”<sup>1026</sup>. Taking into account the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, as expressed in the *tabula smaragdina*<sup>1027</sup>, it is not a matter of chance that soon after Leontes announces his dissolution into tears, the scene shifts to the coast of Bohemia, showing a world gradually being destroyed in order to be rebuilt. In *The Winter’s Tale*, events are construed in such a way that the re-creation of the king of Sicily is reflected in the macrocosmic process of *solve et coagula* of the outer world, a pattern that is clearly evoked in the climactic expression “thou met’st with things / dying, I with things newborn” (III, iii, 110-11). As will be considered, Leontes’s purifying tears are mirrored in the water of both life and death that kills the crew responsible for Perdita’s abandonment and, conversely, saves the girl, so that death becomes unquestionably a source of a new life and a new order.

### 5.5. ‘It is a gallant child; one that, indeed, physicks the subject, makes old hearts fresh’. The Alchemical Parable of the *Senex-Puer*

As already said, Leontes’s “rust” might be read as the outer symbol of his inner ‘blackness’ that, if considered in alchemical terms, signals the coming rebirth, as suggested in *Blomfields Blossoms*: “For first it turnes to Black, / This Collour betokens the right Putrefaction, / This is the beginning of perfect Conception”<sup>1028</sup>. The king’s process of inward knowledge begins when he is given evidence of his diseased self, so that what was first hidden to him is finally revealed. Interestingly enough, the symbolical death of Leontes’s corrupt self corresponds to the actual death of his son, Mamilius, a “gentleman of the greatest promise” (I, i, 35), whose death functions as the external sign that his father’s impure and sick part has to be eradicated in order to be created anew. This movement from the ‘visible’ to the ‘invisible’ and from the ‘outer’ to the ‘inner’ is also at the basis of the alchemical philosophy, according to which the corporeal and external

<sup>1026</sup> Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *Alchemical Death and Resurrection. The Significance of Alchemy in the Age of Newton*, Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Washington, 1990, p. 15.

<sup>1027</sup> “True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing” . An English translation of the *tabula smaragdina* is in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>1028</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 321.

“always signal the path [that] permits one to arrive at the incorporeal, the internal, the invisible, to obtain abstruse knowledge”<sup>1029</sup>. In *Turba philosophorum*, the reader is suggested to “reduce” matter, to dissolve it, “until the hidden nature appear[s]”, so that “it [the hidden nature] is manifested externally”<sup>1030</sup>.

The healing virtues of Mamilius are highlighted from the very beginning of the play: as a matter of fact, the practice of introducing some of the central issues of the drama in the opening scenes is a typically Shakespearean device. Discussing with Archidamus about Leontes’s son, Camillo defines the young prince as “a gallant child; one that, indeed, physics the subject” and “makes old hearts fresh” (I, i, 38-9). It is not difficult to perceive a link between the character of Mamilius and Prince Henry Stuart, the eldest son of King James I, at the time also the patron of Shakespeare’s theatre company, the King’s Men. Prince Henry’s premature death, that occurred in 1612, was lamented by a high number of intellectuals, poets, and artists, who praised the prince’s refined tastes and excellent personality<sup>1031</sup>. As Parry remarks, “one has to look back to Sir Philip Sidney’s death for a comparable moment in literature”<sup>1032</sup>. In one particular commemorative text, Prince Henry is remembered as one whose presence would “repair old ruins”, thus highlighting his restorative virtues:

To plant and build he had a great delight,  
Old ruins his sole presence did repair;  
Orchards and gardens forthwith at his sight  
Began to sprout and spring, to flourish fair<sup>1033</sup>.

As recorded by Aikin, “[t]he creation of the prince of Wales, performed with pomp and ceremony scarcely inferior to a coronation, occupied the court in the summer of 1610”<sup>1034</sup>. Although the actual death of Henry postdated *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare was at least very prophetic in depicting “a hopeful prince” (III, ii, 39), Mamilius, whose personality recalls that of Henry Stuart, usually defined as “the peoples darling and the delight of

---

<sup>1029</sup> Massimo L. Bianchi, “The Visible and the Invisible. From Alchemy to Paracelsus”, in Piyo Rattansi and Antonio Clericuzio (eds.), *Alchemy and Chemistry in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>1030</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, cit., p. 35. Latin text: “donec appareat natura abscondita: et cum videritis hoc [...]”. *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 9.

<sup>1031</sup> As recalled by Strong, the artistic programme supported by Prince Henry was outstanding: “The artistic programme, as revealed through his accounts, embraced engravers, musicians, painters, architects, engineers and equestrian experts. It included collecting Italian Renaissance pictures, antique coins and medals, establishing a riding academy and excelling in all chivalrous feats of arms and in the courtly compliment of the masque”. Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, p. 97.

<sup>1032</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 88.

<sup>1033</sup> I. Maxwell, *The Laudable Life and Deplorable Death of our late peerlesse Prince Henry*, London, 1612, sig. B2v-B3v, quoted by Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 97.

<sup>1034</sup> Lucy Aikin, *Memoirs of the Court of King James the First*, Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, London, 1822, vol. I, pp. 355-56.

Mankind”<sup>1035</sup>. Interestingly enough, Mamilius prematurely dies, as the Stuart prince would do more than a year after the first performance of *The Winter’s Tale*. Marjorie Garber notices that “a post facto knowledge of these historical details does imbue the play with an uncanny topicality”<sup>1036</sup>. As already said, the Prince of Wales, as his sister Elizabeth Stuart, was connected with the world of Renaissance alchemy and Hermeticism, a detail that further supports an alchemical reading of *The Winter’s Tale*, a play in which Shakespeare celebrates the values and the kind of studies fostered by Queen Elizabeth-Astraea<sup>1037</sup> and supported by the two Stuart heirs.

The main literary source of *The Winter’s Tale* is *Pandosto. The Triumph of Time* (1588), a prose romance by Robert Greene. However, unlike King Pandosto, who immediately accepts the verdict of Apollo’s oracle, Leontes, still morally and spiritually ill, rejects the truth of the prophecy arguing that “There is no truth at all i’ th’ oracle” (III, ii, 137). The perusal of the alterations made by Shakespeare to his sources is usually of great importance in order to identify scenes, actions, and characters whose peculiarity the dramatist possibly wanted to emphasise. In *The Winter’s Tale* it is only by means of his son’s death that Leontes suddenly acknowledges the offences he has committed. It is “the first actual death to happen in the play which stops the mad onrush”<sup>1038</sup> of the king of Sicily. Soon after the Servant reports to Leontes the unexpected death of Mamilius<sup>1039</sup>, the king exclaims “Apollo’s angry, and the heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice” (III, ii, 143-4) and, a few lines below, adds “Apollo, pardon / My great profaneness ‘gainst thine oracle” (III, ii, 150-1). Northrop Frye states that in Shakespearean comedies and romances ‘recognition’ usually takes different forms. There is either a sort of “social” recognition, when two or more characters meet and recognise themselves after many years, as in the case of Perdita and Leontes, and a “singular” or “individual” kind of recognition<sup>1040</sup>. As far as this latter category is concerned, Frye asserts that it occurs when a character “comes to know himself in a way he did not before”: it is, therefore, a form of

---

<sup>1035</sup> This is a comment made by Anthony Wood when Prince Henry entered Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1605, quoted by Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>1036</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 828.

<sup>1037</sup> Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 77: “[Il Principe Henry and la Principessa Elisabetta Stuart] sono percepiti dai nostalgici come gli eredi, i ‘figli’ e i continuatori morali del mito di Astrea”. On the connections between Princess Elizabeth Stuart and Queen Elizabeth, see also Nadine Akkerman, “*Semper Eadem: Elizabeth Stuart and the Legacy of Queen Elizabeth I*”, in Sara Smart and Mara R. Wade (eds.), *The Palatine Wedding of 1613*, cit., pp. 145-168.

<sup>1038</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank, “The Triumph of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Maurice Hunt (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale: Critical Essays*, cit., p. 144.

<sup>1039</sup> Servant: “O sir, I shall be hated to report it. / The prince your son, with mere conceit and fear / Of the queen’s speed, is gone”. Leontes: “How, ‘gone’?”. Servant: “Is dead” (III, ii, 140-4).

<sup>1040</sup> Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, cit., p. 78

“self-knowledge”<sup>1041</sup>. In *The Winter’s Tale*, it is precisely the moment Leontes is told of Mamilius’s decease that he immediately comes to know himself, thus becoming aware of his inner, ‘black’ essence. Suddenly enlightened by truth, Leontes undertakes a tormented path of penance, as Hermione herself had foreshadowed: “How will this grieve you / When you shall come to clearer knowledge” (II, i, 96-7).

Marcello Pagnini notices that Shakespeare usually highlights the key themes of his works by means of ‘parallelisms’, i.e. the constant repetition of specific semantic unities and patterns that, placed in relation of synonymity or antonymy, recur throughout a given play or poetic work. Since this “iterative procedure”, as Pagnini terms it, besides being characteristic of the Renaissance ideal of the work of art as a mirror of natural proportions, is typically Shakespearean, the study of the semantic and structural parallelisms, or repetitions, in the dramatist’s works is fundamental for a fuller understanding of them<sup>1042</sup>. Moving from Pagnini’s suggestions, one can easily note that the disease of Leontes has become also the disease of his own son, since “Shakespeare made the boy’s symptoms resemble Leontes’s condition”<sup>1043</sup>. As a matter of fact, Leontes’s sleeplessness is reflected in his son’s absence of sleep: “[Mamilius] Threw off his spirit, his appetite, his sleep” (II, iii, 15). A few lines above, the king of Sicily has just lamented his lack of sleep: “Nor night nor day, no rest” (II, iii, 1). As Garber remarks, “Leontes (in company with Brutus, Macbeth, Richard III, and others) suffers from the Shakespearean symptom of a diseased conscience, sleeplessness”<sup>1044</sup>. In Murray’s opinion, when Macbeth describes sleep as “Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course” (II, ii, 37), he identifies it “with Paracelsus’s general balsam of nature”<sup>1045</sup>. According to Paracelsian theories, the balm, or balsam, is “an all-healing, animating life-principle both internal and external to man, which preserves bodies from disease, decay and putrefaction”<sup>1046</sup>. In the treatise *The Treasure of Treasures for Alchemists*, Paracelsus claims that this is the “true and genuine Balsam, the Balsam of the Heavenly Stars, suffering no body to decay”<sup>1047</sup>. Since metaphors related to disease and healing permeate the tragedy of *Macbeth*, it is not surprising that Shakespeare might have found in the writings of Paracelsus a rich set of medical images. As already said, Paracelsian conceptions were particularly widespread at the time and provided the dramatist with a language his public was highly familiar with.

---

<sup>1041</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 78-9.

<sup>1042</sup> Marcello Pagnini, *Shakespeare e il paradigma della specularità*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>1043</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 207n.

<sup>1044</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 836.

<sup>1045</sup> W.A. Murray, “Why was Duncan’s blood golden?”, cit., p. 40.

<sup>1046</sup> See ‘balm, balsam, balsome’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>1047</sup> Paracelsus, *The Treasure of Treasures for Alchemists*, HAWP 1: 38.

As recorded in the Arden *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, Paracelsian arguments are to be found throughout the Shakespearean canon<sup>1048</sup>. Murray also remarks that in “the most overtly medical speech of Macbeth”, the one where the protagonist asks the Doctor to cure his land, a metaphor for the protagonist’s diseased imagination, Macbeth “uses Paracelsian images of purgation, not Galenist images of correction and balance”<sup>1049</sup>:

If thou could'st, doctor, cast  
The water of my land, find her disease,  
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,  
I would applaud thee to the very echo,  
That should applaud again. – Pull't off, I say –  
What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug,  
Would scour these English hence?  
(V, iii, 52-8)

The same imagery of purgation that is found in Macbeth’s speech recurs in the lines Paulina addresses to Leontes’s attendants, who are responsible, in the lady’s opinion, to nourish the cause of the king’s awakening. Paulina presents herself as a physician and, in the attempt to bring some sleep to Leontes, draws on the idea of sleep as a form of healing:

[...] such as you  
Nourish the cause of his awakening. I  
Do come with words as medicinal as true  
Honest as either, to purge him of that humour  
That presses him from sleep.  
(II, iii, 34-8)

As if Mamilus took his father’s disease upon himself, he “straight declined, drooped, took it deeply, / Fastened and fixed the shame on’t in himself, / [...] And downright languished” (II, iii, 13-4 and 16). The physical death of the young prince corresponds to the symbolical death of Leontes’s old and corrupt self, since, as already noticed, it is only after the king is told of the decease of his son that he suddenly recovers from his “diseased opinion” (I, ii, 295). The fact that Mamilus’s death appears as the source of Leontes’s healing prompts the audience to recall the lines pronounced at the beginning of the drama by Camillo, who prophetically describes the prince as one whose presence physics the subject and renews old hearts: “It is a gallant child; one that, indeed, physics the / subject, makes old hearts fresh” (I, i, 38-9). The beneficial effects children bring to their fathers is a topic that is further developed in a dialogue between Leontes and

---

<sup>1048</sup> See Sujata Iyengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language: A Dictionary*, cit., p. 5: “Paracelsian homeopathy and chemical treatments likewise appear in Shakespeare”.

<sup>1049</sup> W.A. Murray, “Why was Duncan’s blood golden?”, cit., p. 40.

Polixenes:

LEONTES: Are you so fond of your young prince as we  
Do seem to be of ours?

POLIXENES: If at home, sir,  
He's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter;  
Now my sworn friend, and then mine enemy;  
My parasite, my soldier, statesman, all.  
He make a July's day short as December,  
And with his varying childness cures in me  
Thoughts that would thicken my blood.  
(I, ii, 161-69)

The renewal of the father by means of the son, also known as the parable of the *senex-puer*, even though not exclusive to alchemy, is a central motif in alchemical symbolism. As remarked by Mino Gabriele, alchemists employ the allegory of the Father-King and of the Son-King, also typical of the medieval allegorical tales, as a proper metaphor for the *opus circulatorium*<sup>1050</sup>. An excerpt from *Turba philosophorum* focuses on this kind of imagery: “Know, O ye seekers after this doctrine, that man does not proceed except from a man; [...] for Nature is truly not improved by Nature, save with her own nature, seeing that thou thyself art not improved except in thy son”<sup>1051</sup>. In *Visio Arislei*, the son of the *rex marinus*, Thabritius, dies and is then revived: “Behold, your son who had been doomed to death lives”<sup>1052</sup>. Thabritius has died during the incestuous union, or *coniunctio*, with his sister, Beya: as a matter of fact, the philosopher Arisleus, witnessing the complete sterility of the reign, suggests that the king's two children should be united in a chemical wedding. At the death of his son, however, the king resolves to imprison Arisleus and his companions at the bottom of the sea “in a triple glass house together with the corpse of the King's Son”<sup>1053</sup>. As the conjunction between brother and sister is one of the several variations on the theme of the *coniunctio oppositorum*<sup>1054</sup>, so Arisleus's captivity represents the phase of *nigredo*: “Here we suffered the darkness of the waves [...] and the storms of the sea”<sup>1055</sup>. It is only when the torments of the *nigredo* end that the king's son is revived and the whole realm of

<sup>1050</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Il giardino di Hermes*, cit., pp. 165-6.

<sup>1051</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, cit., pp. 94-5. Latin text: “Scitote, viri. Sapientes, quod ex homine non nascitur nisi homo, [...] atque ob id dico, naturam non emendari nisi sua natura, quemadmodum homo non nisi ab homine emendatur”. *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 24-5.

<sup>1052</sup> The English translation of the *Visio Arislei* is from Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 113. Latin text: “Quod filius tuus viuit, qui morti fuerat deputatus”. *Visio Arislei*, AA 1: 149.

<sup>1053</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, cit., p. 333.

<sup>1054</sup> As Jung notices, the alchemical theme of the *coniunctio oppositorum* has several variations: “dry-moist, hot-cold, male-female, sun-moon, gold-silver, mercury-sulphur, round-square, water-fire, volatile-solid, physical-spiritual, and so on”. Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, cit., p. 330.

<sup>1055</sup> *Visio Arislei*, in Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 113. Latin text: “mansit nobiscum in carcere 80. diebus, et mansibus in tenebris vndarum [...] ac maris perturbationem”. *Visio Arislei*, AA 1: 148.

the *rex marinus* is regenerated and healed. Since alchemical death is always conceived of as a source of renewal, the death of the king's son stands, as Jung suggests, for the complete descent into the darkness of matter or of one's self, a stage that is always preliminary to the consequent 'ascent'<sup>1056</sup>. It is not a matter of chance that in the text of the *Visio*, the alchemist Arisleus is imprisoned under the sea with the body of dead Thabritius, thus equalling the *descensus* into the *nigredo* with the decease of the king's son.

The "symbolic sacrifice"<sup>1057</sup> of Mamilius, as Garber defines the death of the prince of Sicily, allows Leontes to 'awake' and plunge into the darkness of his own self. Mamilius's death signals for his father that individual kind of recognition, or 'self-knowledge', of which Frye discusses<sup>1058</sup>. A form of death, or sacrifice, is always necessary in the alchemical journey of renewal, as the priest in one of Zosimos's visions suggests: "and *it is he who sacrifices*, that renews me" (italics mine)<sup>1059</sup>. Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, celebrated for her works about Isaac Newton's alchemical studies, suggests that the alchemical conception of 'sacrifice' is deeply rooted in Christian doctrine, as the majority of alchemical theories are: "alchemy was often at least a semi-religious pursuit and shared many symbols with the dominant Christian religion – especially symbols of the sacrificial death that promotes life"<sup>1060</sup>. Alchemists actually believe that the death of the 'old' and 'sick' aspect of matter, metal, or human soul is a prelude to some sort of regeneration: it is, in Paracelsus's words, "an abolishing of the former nature and generation of a new, and another nature"<sup>1061</sup>. In the alchemical vision by John Dastin, a king, emblem of gold, is compelled to sacrifice himself in order to heal his brothers, i.e. the other metals, from their "Infeccion"<sup>1062</sup>:

A good Shephard must dye for his Sheepe,  
Without grudging to speake in words plaine,  
And semblable take hereof good keepe,  
Your Brother must dye and newe be borne againe,  
Though he be old, be hereof well certaine;  
To youth againe he must be renewd<sup>1063</sup>.

<sup>1056</sup> Discussing about the theme of "The King and the King's Son" in alchemy and, specifically referring to the death of Thabritius in Arisleus's vision, Jung remarks that death "represents the completion of the spirit's descent into matter" and "a descending into the unconscious". Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, cit., pp. 331 and 333.

<sup>1057</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 838.

<sup>1058</sup> As discussed above, Northrop Frye argues that in Shakespearean comedy that are two kinds of recognition: a "social" recognition and a "singular" or "individual" recognition, or "self-knowledge". Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, cit., pp. 78-9.

<sup>1059</sup> The English translation of Zosimos's vision is from Frank Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>1060</sup> Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *Alchemical Death and Resurrection*, cit., pp. 24-5.

<sup>1061</sup> Paracelsus, *Of The Life of Naturall Things*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>1062</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin's Dreame*, cit., TCB 261.

<sup>1063</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 264.

The chemical king in Dastin's vision accepts his death, willing to save his brethren: since "he thought the redempcion / Of his brethren, might not be fulfilled, / Without his death nor their Salvation", "For them to suffer he was right willed"<sup>1064</sup>. It is, therefore, by means of a form of outer death or sacrifice that alchemists usually portray the removal of the disease from base matter, so that "the weakness being taken away, that matter will be made strong, and after corruption will be improved"<sup>1065</sup>. Since alchemy is a process of both "inward and outward" healing<sup>1066</sup>, alchemical philosophers presuppose the existence of a correlation between inner metamorphosis and outer transmutation. As pointed out by Mino Gabriele, the anthropomorphic value alchemists attribute to their operations, particularly evident in all those allegories in which the protagonists of the alchemical process are human beings, testifies to the symbiosis between spiritual metamorphosis and the transformations the alchemist sees occurring on physical matter<sup>1067</sup>.

In *The Winter's Tale*, the "coarseness" of Leontes's self is purged thanks to his son's actual death. The necessary sacrifice that usually indicates the beginning of the alchemical *opus*, sometimes represented in terms of the death, either real or symbolical, of the *rex chymicus*, can also take the form of the decease of the king's son, the *regius filius*<sup>1068</sup>. In the *Book of Lambspring*, for instance, the son is devoured by his own father, the chemical king, as attested by both the text and the correspondent illustration (see plate 22): "when the Son entered the Father's house, The Father took him to his heart, And swallowed him out of excessive joy, And that with his own mouth"<sup>1069</sup>. Immediately after the sacrifice of the *regius filius*, a phase of expiation for the king, the father, begins. He is compelled to lie in bed and purge his sickness before he gives birth to his son, so that the rebirth of the latter corresponds to the healing and restoration of the chemical king: "There is now a glorified and beautiful Father, And he brings forth a new Son"<sup>1070</sup>. In *The Winter's Tale*, the renewal of Leontes's self is epitomised by the recovery of Perdita, the seemingly 'lost' one, reunited with her father only after the king has performed a "saint-like sorrow" (V, i, 2) for

<sup>1064</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1065</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, cit., p. 101. Latin text: "et omni infirmitate ablata, confortata est natura nostra et emendata". *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 26.

<sup>1066</sup> As noticed above, the Elizabethan alchemist Giovanni Baptista Lambi, who worked for Queen Elizabeth, defines alchemy as the art that "cureth all things inwardly and outwardly". Giovanni Baptista Lambi, *The Revelation of the Secret Spirit*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>1067</sup> Mino Gabriele (ed.), *Le Precieux Don de Dieu*, p. 25n.

<sup>1068</sup> See Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, cit., p. 330.

<sup>1069</sup> *The Book of Lambspring*, cit., HM 146, fig. XIII. Latin version: "Cum vero dumum patris ingrederetur filius, / Hunc Pater manibus amplexatur, / Prae nimioque gaudio hunc deglutivit, / Idque proprio sui ipsius ore". Lambsprinck, *De Lapide Philosophico*, MH 366.

<sup>1070</sup> *The Book of Lambspring*, fig. XV, HM 148. Latin text: "Simulque novus Pater fortis et pulcher / Quique facit novum Filium". Lambsprinck, *De Lapide Philosophico*, Decimaquinta Figura, MH 370.

sixteen years: to the audience's eyes, Perdita's 'rebirth' evidently corresponds to the inner 'rebirth' of her father, in the same way as the dissolution of Leontes's diseased self is reflected in the actual death of Mamilius, somehow recalling a quotation from *Splendor solis*, according to which "the Destruction of one thing is the birth of another"<sup>1071</sup>. These words appear precisely in the Third Parable of the treatise, an allegory that draws on the renewal of the *rex chymicus*, as already noticed. In particular, the parable recounts the death of an old king described as dying and calling for help: "Whoever saves me shall live and reign with me for ever in my brightness on my royal throne"<sup>1072</sup>. In the plate illustrating the text the renewed form of the king appears in the foreground in the shape of the king's son (see plate 19), indicating that "Herewith was completed the time when the king of the Earth was released and renewed"<sup>1073</sup>. The rebirth of the *rex chymicus* is, therefore, visually represented in the figure of the *regius filius*, personifying "the rejuvenated form of the Father-King"<sup>1074</sup> and the latent state of perfection hidden within the father's diseased body. As already said, Maier dwells upon the same imagery that recurs in the Third Parable of *Splendor Solis* in emblem XXXI of *Atalanta fugiens*, whose motto reads as follows: "The king, swimming in the sea, calling in a loud voice: He who saves me will get a tremendous reward"<sup>1075</sup>. As noticed by Jong, one of the sources of Maier's emblem is the following excerpt from *Rosarium philosophorum*: "Because our stone calls, saying, son help me, and I'll help you"<sup>1076</sup>. In *Symbola aureae mensae*, Maier argues that "The true antimony of the philosophers is hidden in the deep sea just like that sunken royal son"<sup>1077</sup>. Maier explicitly associates the recovery of the "royal son", seemingly lost in the depths of the sea, with the "true antimony" that, in the words of the author of *Blomfields Blossoms*, is that "Jewell so abundant and excellent, / That one graine will endure ever to be permanent"<sup>1078</sup>. The same allegory of the rebirth of the king's son recurs also in the alchemical treatise *Donum dei*, whose earliest manuscripts date from the fifteenth century. The text is decorated by colourful illustrations in which the phases of the alchemical work are personified by human characters dressed in royal garments and

---

<sup>1071</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>1072</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>1073</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>1074</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, cit., pp. 330-31.

<sup>1075</sup> Michael Maier, Motto accompanying Emblem XXXI, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 221.

<sup>1076</sup> The English translation of *Rosarium philosophorum* is from H.M.E. De Jong (ed.), *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 224. Latin text: "Quia lapis noster clamat, dicens, fili adiuva me, et ego adiuvabo te". *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 270.

<sup>1077</sup> Michael Maier, *Symbola aureae mensae*, quoted by H.M.E. de Jong in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 224. Latin text: "Verum philosophorum antimonium in mari profundo, ut regius ille filius demersum delitescit". Michaele Maiero, *Symbola avrae mensae*, Francofvrti, Typis Antonij Hummij, Impensis Lucae Iennis, 1617, p. 380.

<sup>1078</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 312.

represented within the alchemical alembic (see plates 23 and 24). In the version of *Donum dei* edited by Mino Gabriele and collected in the Bibliothèque de l'Accademia dei Lincei, in Rome, the king's son is said to come back to life at the end of the alchemical process, thus standing as an emblem of the tincture: "Nostre filz qui est mort viendra en vie e sortira ung roy hors du feu et se resiouira avec son espouse, et les chose qui ont esté invysible se apparaoistront"<sup>1079</sup>. Again, the recovery of the 'dead' son is evidence of the constant circulation of the alchemical wheel, a process in which what is initially lost is finally recovered.

Since the *opus alchymicum* is an "intrinsic"<sup>1080</sup> process of regeneration, it is not surprising that the 'transmutation' of the king is reflected in the rebirth of a son. Leontes, deprived of a son in the first half of the play and given a daughter back in the second half of the drama, is restored to what he had lost. His two children, Mamilius and Perdita, might be considered as the projection of his own self, that has to 'die' in order to 'be reborn'. As Trismosin remarks in the Third Parable of *Splendor solis*, it is only when the "destructive" force is removed that there is a renewal: "Deprive the thing of its Destructive Moisture, and renew it with its own Essential one which will become its perfection and life"<sup>1081</sup>. As the destructive core of the king of Sicily is removed by means of Mamilius's death, so his renovation is reflected in the character of Leontes's other child, Perdita. Considering that Mamilius and Perdita are associated with winter and spring respectively, the possibility that they personify a stage of destruction and one of re-creation is even more plausible. Mamilius, as already said, introduces Leontes's 'winter's tale', a story of sorrow and death, whereas Perdita is the harbinger of a new phase of regeneration. Besides being associated with the goddesses Flora and Proserpina<sup>1082</sup>, the girl is even more explicitly linked to spring when, at the end of the play, she is welcomed by her father as "the spring to th' earth" (V, i, 151). As spring follows winter, and alchemical renewal always succeeds the phase of putrefaction, so Perdita's symbolical rebirth is consequent upon Mamilius's death, because, as Paracelsus writes, "putrefaction produceth great matters"<sup>1083</sup>. In his study of *The Winter's Tale*, Pilgrim actually remarks that when Perdita arrives with Florizel, her lover and son of Polixenes, to Leontes's court in the very end of the play, she represents "spiritual health restored" and "the complete restoration of

<sup>1079</sup> Anon., *Le Precieux Don de Dieu*, cit., p. 31.

<sup>1080</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 164.

<sup>1081</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>1082</sup> It is Prince Florizel who compares Perdita to Flora: "These your unusual weeds, to each part of you / Do give a life: no shepherdess, but Flora / Peering in April's front" (IV, iv, 1-3). A few lines below, Perdita explicitly invokes Proserpina: "O Proserpina, / For the flowers now that, frighted, thou let'st fall / From Dis's waggon!" (IV, iv, 116-18).

<sup>1083</sup> Paracelsus, *Of the Nature of Things*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 152.

Leontes”<sup>1084</sup>.

Alchemists usually liken the creation of the philosopher’s stone to the birth of an infant. If considered in this light, the identification of Perdita with the spiritual rebirth of her father and, as suggested in this study, with the reconciliation, or ‘chemical wedding’, between the king of Sicily and his wife Hermione, acquires extra value. The philosophical child is described by alchemists as the fruit of the *coniunctio* between the royal couple, the final product of the *opus alchymicum* and a symbol of harmony restored:

Ripley doth bid you take it for no scorne,  
With patience to attend the true Conjuccion,  
[...] For after death reviv’d againe to lyfe,  
This all in all both Husband Child and Wife<sup>1085</sup>.

Alchemical authors constantly repeat that the fulfilment of the art of alchemy consists in the *coniunctio* between the bride and bridegroom: “Voyez, philosophes, et comprenez: voici l’accomplissement de l’art, opéré per les conjoints, fiancé et fiancée, qui sont devenus un”<sup>1086</sup>. The structure of the *solve et coagula*, however, presupposes that the union of the husband and wife is followed by a separation, known as a “chemical divorce”<sup>1087</sup>: “If the first work proceed not, how is the second attained to? Because if no division be made, there is no conjunction”<sup>1088</sup>. Therefore, the so-called ‘philosophical child’, emblem of the newly-created stone, is sometimes represented as an “orphan”, reunited with his or her parents only at the final *coniunctio*, as suggested by Paracelsus himself: “the most wise Mercurius, the wisest of the Philosophers affirms, the same, hath called the Stone an Orphan”<sup>1089</sup>.

The idea of children giving birth to their parents is recurrent in alchemical literature: in the anonymous parable entitled *Experience and Philosophy*, the stone is cryptically described as “A Child begetting his owne Father, and bearing his Mother, / Killing himselfe to give lyfe, and lyght to all other”<sup>1090</sup>. The circular nature of the *opus alchymicum*, in which children beget their parents and new life is brought about by means

---

<sup>1084</sup> Richard Pilgrim, *You Precious Winners All*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>1085</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle’s Worke*, cit., TCB 328.

<sup>1086</sup> Comarius, *Livre de Comarius, philosophe et grand-prêtre enseignant a Cléopatre l’art divin et sacré de la pierre philosophale* (I-II century AD, Greek), in Marcelline Berthelot (ed.), *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, cit., Troisième livraison, p. 283.

<sup>1087</sup> See ‘divorce’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 56.

<sup>1088</sup> Arthur Dee in Id., *Fasciculus chemicus*, edited by Lyndy Abraham, Garland Publishing, New York and London, 1997, p. 32. As already said in chapter 4, Arthur Dee’s *Fasciculus chemicus* is a collection of quotations from several alchemical authorities. Dee himself attributes the quoted words to John Dastin.

<sup>1089</sup> Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, HAWP 1: 66. See also ‘philosophical child’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>1090</sup> Anon., *Experience and Philosophy*, TCB 341.

of an initiatory death, is visually represented by the hieroglyph of the serpent *uroboros*. The latter is traditionally an emblem of the *rota alchemica*, in its turn a mirror of the natural cycle of decay and renewal: “Ainsi, ce qui a été déformé par corruption est reformé par génération, et l’opération circulaire de la nature est analogue au mouvement céleste”<sup>1091</sup>. By eating its own tail, the *uroboros* both devours and generates itself, somehow recalling the king in *The Book of Lambspring*, who kills his son but also begets him when the alchemical wheel has accomplished a complete rotation. Another motif well representing the cyclical and paradoxical quality of the *opus alchymicum* is that of Saturn ‘vomiting’ the philosopher’s stone, equally dwelling upon the parable of the *senex-puer*. Maier employs the myth of Saturn, as it is recounted in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, in emblem XII of *Atalanta fugiens* (see plate 71). According to the myth, Cronus, the Greek god corresponding to the Roman Saturn, devoured all the children begotten by his companion Rea, after being warned that he would be dethroned by his own offspring. Enraged with her husband, Rea deceived Saturn by making him ingest some stones instead of her newborn son, Zeus. The latter, who had been hidden by her mother for fear that Cronus-Saturn would kill him, eventually compelled his father to ingest a drug that made him eject the stones and, as a consequence, restore all the children he had previously devoured<sup>1092</sup>. As remarked by Woodbridge, “Cronus’s eventual vomiting up of his children is an image of rebirth”<sup>1093</sup>. Maier actually employs the myth as a metaphor for the alchemical process of transmutation since, as the stone, or philosophical child, is extracted from Saturn’s belly, so whiteness is inherent within the initial blackness of the *nigredo*, symbolised precisely by Saturn: “For below the blackness the true whiteness is hidden and the latter is taken out, i.e. taken out of the small belly of Saturn”<sup>1094</sup>. From an alchemical point of view, Saturn is the ‘ore’ from which the real quintessence, also known as philosophical child, is extracted. In *Blomfields Blossoms* the key role of Saturn in the course of the *opus alchymicum* is clearly highlighted: “Saturne in all, to this Arte hath most respect, / Of whom we draw a Quintessence most excellent”<sup>1095</sup>.

The myth of Saturn and the symbolism related to the *uroboros* perfectly epitomise the controversial nature of the *opus circulatorium*, in which death and life, loss and recovery constantly alternate. The following lines from *Aurora consurgens* evidently

---

<sup>1091</sup> Gérard Dorn, *La clef de toute la philosophie chimistique et commentaires sur trois traités de Paracelse*, edited by Caroline Thuysbaert and Stéphane Feye, Beya Éditions, Grez Doiceau, Belgique, 2014, p. 18.

<sup>1092</sup> Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie*, cit., p. 104.

<sup>1093</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn. Shakespeare and Magical Healing*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1994, p. 275.

<sup>1094</sup> Michael Maier, Discourse accompanying Emblem XII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 120.

<sup>1095</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 313.

describe the alchemical work as a process in which what is taken away is finally restored: “Take away his soul and give him back his soul, for the corruption of one is the generation of another”<sup>1096</sup>. *The Winter’s Tale* does have a redemptive and circular structure, ending where it began, at the court of Sicily, where all that was lost is finally restored: “Our Perdita is found” (V, iii, 121), Paulina cheerfully exclaims in the very end, just before Hermione is seemingly brought back to life and is reconciled with the “redeemed” Leontes<sup>1097</sup>. The very last lines of the play, those pronounced by the protagonist, the king of Sicily, are especially significant as far as the regenerative, obliquely alchemical, pattern of the drama is concerned. Addressing Paulina, his guide throughout his spiritual path of re-creation, Leontes focuses on the dissolution that affected the initial order of things, a stage that presupposed that all the characters were first “dissevered”:

Good Paulina,  
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely  
Each one demand and answer to his part  
Performed in this wide gap of time since first  
We were dissevered.  
(V, iii, 151-5)

The initial division, however, is finally mended, somehow hinting at the alchemical cycle of solution and coagulation: as argued by Ripley, “Losyng and knyttyng [...] be Princypalls two / Of thys hard Scyence, and Poles most pryncypall”<sup>1098</sup>.

The *uroboros* also suggests that the alchemical process is “intrinsic”<sup>1099</sup> since one does not need anything other than one’s self, as already said. Discussing about the perplexing features of the *opus alchymicum*, a process in which one must go ‘backwards’ in order to go ‘forward’, and destroy in order to create again, Fabricius highlights the significance of the serpent *uroboros*, perfectly representing the rhythm of the alchemical work: “This is the famed opus circulatorium, in which the subject of regeneration consumes himself in the manner of the uroboric serpent”<sup>1100</sup>. As suggested by Morienus in *A Testament of Alchemy*, “the Major Work consist[s] in itself”:

consider the taylor sewing his cloth, of which he has made a shift or some other garment, using only the cloth. The top, the sleeves and the skirt are all of a cloth, and even sewn with thread which is itself of cloth, nothing else being required. Thus also the Major Work

<sup>1096</sup> Thomas Aquinas (attributed to), *Aurora consurgens*, cit., p. 71. Latin text: “Aufer ei animam et redde ei animam, quia corruptio unius est generatio alterius hoc est”. *Ibidem*, p. 70.

<sup>1097</sup> As claimed by lord Cleomenes while talking to Leontes: “Sir, you have done enough, and have performed / A saint-like sorrow. No fault could you make / Which you have not *redeemed*” (V, i, 1-3, italics mine).

<sup>1098</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 147.

<sup>1099</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 164.

<sup>1100</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 17.

consist[s] in itself, requiring nothing else<sup>1101</sup>.

Morienus is even more explicit in the already quoted passage where he reveals to King Khalid that the true stone is to be extracted from one's inner self: "What more can I tell you? For this matter comes from you, who are yourself its source, where it is found and whence it is taken, and when you see this, your zeal for it will increase"<sup>1102</sup>. In like manner, Ripley remarks that the much sought-for philosopher's stone is everywhere and is to be found in every man: "Every-ech Man yt hath, and ys in every place, / In thee, in me, in every tyme and space"<sup>1103</sup>. It is interesting to note that in *Henry V*, Shakespeare himself, in seemingly alchemical terms, argues that "There is some soule of goodness in things evil, / Would men observingly distill it out" (IV, i, 4-5), thus drawing on the alchemical precept according to which evil, or blackness, is the true source of regeneration. Shakespeare's lines recall the following words from *Turba philosophorum*, a passage in which the reader is told that whiteness has to be properly extracted, or 'distilled', from blackness:

When ye see that the matter is entirely black, know that whiteness has been hidden in the belly of that blackness. Then it behoves thee to extract that whiteness most subtly from that blackness, for ye know how to discern between them<sup>1104</sup>.

It was Paracelsus who specifically insisted on the possibility to distil healing treatments out of poisons, arguing that, since all living things are potentially curative and poisoning, the good physician must be skilled in alchemy in order to learn how to discern between good and evil: "In all things there is a poison, and there is nothing without a poison. It depends only upon the dose whether a poison is poison or not"<sup>1105</sup>. In another passage, Paracelsus describes alchemy in the following way: "Know, then, that this only is

---

<sup>1101</sup> Morienus, *A Testament of Alchemy*, cit., p. 17. Latin text: "Considera sartorem, qui scilicet vestes suere consuevit, quoniam de panno interulam, siue vestem quamlibet aliam componit, cuius scilicet partes, diuersa nomina fortiuntur: quae etiamsi naturaliter considerentur, ex ipso panno formatae inuenientur est tamen vnus pannus et materia principalis ex qua vestis conficitur. Nam torale, et manicae, et girones, licet, quantum ad vestis partes, diuersa habeant nomina, tamen principalis eorum materia est pannus. Nam et de ipso panno fila, quibus partes ipsius vestis in vnum iungantur, extrahuntur, non quod ipse pannus alio a se diuersoad hoc indigeat. Simili igitur modo hoc magisterium est vnum per se existens, nec alio indiget". *Liber de compositione alchemiae*, AA 2: 28.

<sup>1102</sup> Morienus, *A Testament of Alchemy*, cit., p. 27. Latin text: "Quid tibi multa referam? Haec enim res a te extrahitur: cuius etiam minera tu existis, apud te namque illam inueniunt, et vt verius confitear, a te accipiunt: quod cum probaueris, amor eius et dilectio in te augebitur". Morienus, *Liber de compositione alchemiae*, AA 2: 37.

<sup>1103</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 123. See also Calid, *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie*, cit., p. 40: "This Stone is to be found at all times, in everie place, and about every man, the search whereof is not troublesome to him that seeketh it, wheresoever he be".

<sup>1104</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, cit., pp. 195-6. Latin text: "Cum videritis ipsum iam nigrum totum, scitote quod in illius nigredinis ventre albedo occulta est, et tunc oportet albedinem illam extrahi a sua nigredine". *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 135.

<sup>1105</sup> Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, edited by Jolande Jacobi, translated by Norbert Guterman, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1951, p. 169.

Alchemy, which, by preparation through fire, separates what is impure, and draws out what is pure”<sup>1106</sup>. That Shakespeare was aware of this Paracelsian concept is testified by a specific passage in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Friar Lawrence notices that good and evil dwell in man as well as medicinal and poisonous virtues dwell in plants:

Within the infant rind of this small flower  
Poison hath residence and medicine power:  
[...] Two such opposed kings encamp them still  
In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will.  
(II, iii, 23-4 and 27-8)

Paracelsus defines alchemy as the art that distinguishes truth from falsehood and, therefore, as a symbolical process of transformation and distillation of goodness from evil: “Therefore learn Alchemy, which is otherwise called Spagyria. This teaches you to discern between the true and the false”<sup>1107</sup>. According to Iyengar, Shakespeare represents “a Paracelsian refinement process” in sonnet 114<sup>1108</sup>. Wondering whether the poet’s love is a mere kind of flattery or a form of alchemy that refines “monsters” and “things indigest” into “cherubins”, the sonnet, in Iyengar’s opinion, dwells on Paracelsian conceptions:

Or whether shall I say mine eye saith true,  
And that your love taught it this alchemy?  
To make of monsters, and things indigest,  
Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble,  
Creating every bad a perfect best  
As fast as objects to his beams assemble?  
O, ‘tis the first, ‘tis flatt’ry in my seeing,  
And my great mind most kingly drinks it up.  
(Sonnet 114, ll. 3-10)

Chemical refinement, Iyengar points out, “worked by ‘Creating every bad a perfect best”<sup>1109</sup>, that is to say by purifying what is bad and distilling goodness out of evil. The circular distillation of truth from falsehood, of “some soule of goodness” from “things evil” (IV, i, 4), as Shakespeare suggests in *Henry V*, is precisely what happens in *The Winter’s Tale*: in claiming that “Tears shed there / Shall be my recreation” (III, iii, 236-7), Leontes clearly presents himself as the “ore”<sup>1110</sup> from which good and truth are finally distilled. As already said, in a circular, and obliquely alchemical, way, Mamilus and

---

<sup>1106</sup> Paracelsus, *Labyrinthus Medicorum*, HAWP 2: 167.

<sup>1107</sup> Paracelsus, *The Coelum Philosophorum*, HAWP 1: 16.

<sup>1108</sup> Sujata Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>1109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1110</sup> The same excerpt from Morienus’s *Testament* is quoted by Edward Kelly: “Morienus, that illustrious Sage, answered King Calid’s question as to the matter of the Stone in the following way: ‘It is of thee, O King, and thou art its ore’”. Edward Kelly, *The Alchemical Writings*, cit., p. 71.

Perdita represent respectively the ‘diseased’ and the ‘renewed’ aspect of their father, who is submitted to a process of healing that Shakespeare’s audience could have read in alchemical terms.

### 5.6. ‘Be cured of this diseased opinion / And betimes for ‘tis most dangerous’. Alchemy, Medicine, and Leontes’s Ablution

As discussed above, a high number of alchemical treatises employ the metaphor of the disease of the chemical king as an allegory of the process of transmutation. Drawing on the traditional association between macrocosm and microcosm, Joseph Du Chesne remarks that the transmutation of metals corresponds to the healing of the human body:

in Man, (which is a little world) there lye hidde the mynes of Imperfect metals, from whence so many diseases do growe, which by a good faithful and skilful Phisitian be brought to Golde and Siluer, that is to say, vnto perfect purification<sup>1111</sup>.

In this respect, Philalethes notices that the tincture does not only allow the transmutation of metals into gold since it is “a Medicine Universal, both for prolonging Life and Curing of all Diseases”<sup>1112</sup>. The conception according to which the philosopher’s stone removes corruption from physical matter, metals, and the human body is recurrent in alchemical literature, as testified by the following excerpt from *Rosarium philosophorum*: “Geber dicit [...] lapis [...] curat omnia metalla infecta ab omni infirmitate, sic et humana corpora”<sup>1113</sup>. Discussing of “our Stone, our Medicine, our Elixir”<sup>1114</sup>, alchemists constantly refer to themselves as physicians, as demonstrated by the title-page to Andreas Libavius’s *Alchymia*, where alchemy and medicine are practised together<sup>1115</sup>. As Klossowski de Rola points out, the title-page to Libavius’s treatise shows Hippocrates and Galen, who embody the art of medicine, along with Hermes Trismegistus and Aristotle, who, instead, represent alchemical art<sup>1116</sup> (see plate 89). It is not surprising, thus, that the ‘disease’ of metals before

---

<sup>1111</sup> Joseph du Chesne, “Concerning the visible bodies of the Elements”, in Id., *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke*, cit., chapter XI.

<sup>1112</sup> Eiraneus Philalethes, *Secrets Reveal’d*, cit., p. 119.

<sup>1113</sup> *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 382.

<sup>1114</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 297.

<sup>1115</sup> See Andreas Libavius, *Alchymia*, Excudebat Joannes Saurius, Impensis Petri Kopffii, Francofurti, 1606.

<sup>1116</sup> Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 51.

transmutation is often referred to as a form of leprosy, the alchemical elixir being a medicine “Against leprous humors and false infeccions”<sup>1117</sup>. As a matter of fact, the author of *The Golden Tract* claims that the stone “cleanses them [bodies] of their leaprous infirmities”<sup>1118</sup>. In the alchemical parable known as *Dastin’s Dreame*, the transmutation of metals is allegorically described as the gradual healing of seven “Brethren”, symbolising the seven metals, from their infection. The narrator claims that in his alchemical vision he saw “a mighty rich King”, “Cleane of nature and of Complexion”, whose brothers are evidently sick:

Certaine Brethren I found he had in Number;  
And of one Mother they were borne every each one:  
But a Sicknes did them sore cumber,  
That none was whole on his feete to gone,  
Hoarse of language, cleere voice had they none:  
For with a scabb that was contagious,  
They were infected, hole was their none;  
For ever exiled because they were Leaprous<sup>1119</sup>.

Queen Elizabeth herself was identified as the “vndeluding alcumist” who cured the world’s “Leaprosie”:

Of whose faire-cured Leaprosie from former twaine to golde,  
(For in a quintessence was all eare Gods worlds-curse of olde)  
The vndeluding Alcumist is that *Elizabeth*  
Whom *English*, yea, and *Alients*, hold a Goddesse on the Earth<sup>1120</sup>.

It was undoubtedly Paracelsus who, in the second half of the sixteenth century, strengthened the connection between alchemy and medicine, explicitly defining the former as one of the pillars of medical art: “Anyone who would become a physician must learn the book of Alchemy thoroughly by heart”<sup>1121</sup>. The identification of alchemy and medicine constantly recurs throughout the writings of Paracelsus:

He who tempers the fire is a Vulcan, whether he be cook or heat-producer. And the same is the rule of Medicine. [...] This is Alchemy; this, the special office of Vulcan,

---

<sup>1117</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin’s Dreame*, cit., TCB 261.

<sup>1118</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 11. Latin text: “Tantum spiritus subtilis est, qui tingit, ac mundat corpora a suis leprositatibus”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, cit., MH 23.

<sup>1119</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin’s Dreame*, cit., TCB 260.

<sup>1120</sup> William Warner, *Albions England a continued historie of the same kingdome*, cit., p. 211.

<sup>1121</sup> Paracelsus, *The Labyrinth Medicorum*, HAWP 2: 165. As Linden observes, Paracelsus’s “major contribution to alchemy was its reorientation from gold-making and the pursuit of the philosopher’s stone to the formulation and application of medicinal preparations from minerals and chemicals”. Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 151.

who superintends the pharmacopoeia, and brings about the elaboration of the medicine<sup>1122</sup>.

As already said, several emblems in Maier's *Atalanta fugiens* depict the alchemical cycle in terms of the healing of a king "who not only embodies illness but also represents the Philosopher's Stone"<sup>1123</sup>. The plate accompanying emblem XLVIII, in particular, clearly shows a king in the background while lying in bed and being treated by some physicians thanks to whom "he regained health"<sup>1124</sup> (see plate 20). As always, the sources of Maier's emblems are to be traced in older alchemical treatises: the source of emblem XLVIII is the so-called *Merlini allegoria*, a text of possible Arabic origin, first attested in a manuscript dating from between the late fourteenth- and the early fifteenth-century, and published in Latin in 1593 in the collection *Artis auriferae*<sup>1125</sup>. Jong observes that the Merlin allegory "symbolizes not only the chemical conversion process, but also the medical conversion process"<sup>1126</sup>, thus testifying to the association between the transmutation of metals and the healing of man's body. In the same way as King Duenech, in the alchemical parable that bears his name and that is the subject of Maier's emblem XXVIII (see plate 35), is cured of the black bile by the physician Pharut, so the king protagonist of the allegory of Merlin is submitted to a process of purgation and cleansing that leads to his rebirth and to the recovery of his health before the eyes of his astonished relatives: "Tunc Rex ita de morte ad vitam resurgens"<sup>1127</sup>.

The story of a king who is miraculously healed from a seemingly incurable illness is at the core of one of Shakespeare's comedies, *All's Well That Ends Well*<sup>1128</sup>. In the drama, the king of France, spending his days sick in bed, is said to suffer from such a "malignant cause" (II, i, 110) that "The congregated college have concluded / That labouring art can never ransom nature / From her inaidible estate" (II, i, 116-8). However, the empirical skills of a humble girl, Helena, are opposed to the established and conventional medicine of the Royal College of Physicians. Helena, the daughter of the deceased physician Gerard de Narbon, is recruited by the Countess to employ her art, which she has received from her father, to cure the desperately ill king. Interestingly enough, the girl claims that her father

---

<sup>1122</sup> Paracelsus, *The Labyrinthus Medicorum*, HAWP 2: 166.

<sup>1123</sup> Francis McKee, "The Golden Medicine of Michael Maier", in Alison Adams and Anthony J. Harper (eds.), *The Emblem in Renaissance and Baroque Europe: Tradition and Variety*, Selected Papers of the Glasgow International Emblem Conference, 13-17 August 1990, Brill, Leiden, 1992, p. 172.

<sup>1124</sup> Michael Maier, Motto accompanying Emblem XLVIII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 289.

<sup>1125</sup> See *Merlini Allegoria Profundissimum Philosophici Lapidis Arcanum Perfecte Continens*, AA 1: 392-6.

<sup>1126</sup> H.M.E. De Jong, Commentary to Emblem XLVIII, in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 296.

<sup>1127</sup> Anon., *Merlini Allegoria*, cit., AA 1: 395.

<sup>1128</sup> On alchemical symbolism in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, see David Haley, *Shakespeare's Courtly Mirror: Reflexivity and Prudence in All's Well That Ends Well*, University of Delaware Press, Newark; Associated University Presses, London-Toronto, 1993, pp. 224-237.

bequeathed her “some prescriptions / Of rare and prov’d effects” (I, ii, 216-7) and that among them “is a remedy, approv’d, set down, / To cure the desperate languishings whereof / The king is render’d lost” (I, ii, 223-5). That Helena’s medicine might hint at an alchemical, possibly Paracelsian, treatment is a hypothesis that seems to be sustained by a few lines pronounced by Lafeu, lord to the king:

I have seen a medicine  
That’s able to breathe life into a stone,  
Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary  
With sprightly fire and motion; whose simple touch  
Is powerful to araise King Pippen.  
(II, i, 71-5)

The medicine Lafeu alludes to, able to breathe life into a stone and to revive “King Pippen”, the Elizabethan form for King Pepin of France, might well allude to the alchemical quintessence, the panacea that was thought to assure “the comfort of an *Uninterrupted Health*” and to “spin out his [man’s] *thread of life* to the longest end of that *Nature* fallen from *Originall Justice*”<sup>1129</sup>. The quintessence is also defined by Paracelsus as that “universal spirit” and “divine breath [...] which vivifies all bodies”<sup>1130</sup>. Paracelsus’s “balm” of nature, as already said, is that substance that, “suffering no body to decay”<sup>1131</sup>, protects against disease, decay, and death. In particular, the action of “breathing life into a stone” might be intended as an allusion to the alchemical process of ‘fixation’, by means of which the volatile spirit is restored within the ‘dead’ matter in the alembic and the stone is created<sup>1132</sup>. As a matter of fact, alchemy is conceived of as a “magical operation” thanks to which the natural spirit of life is recovered:

it is no ordinary speculation to awaken the sleeping spirit which lyes bound up in the straight Prison of the Body; to invite and allure that propitious spirit to descend from Heaven, and unite itself with that which is Internall [...] and fix the Celestial Influences. This is the series and Order of Nature conjoy’nd with Art: [...] one true Magicall Operation<sup>1133</sup>.

The prolongation of life is actually one of the central issues of alchemical philosophy, as one can infer from the following excerpt:

As touching the *Prolongation of life*, [...] we perceive *Nature* is so courteous to some kind

---

<sup>1129</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 449.

<sup>1130</sup> Paracelsus, *A Short Catechism of Alchemy*, cit., HAWP 1: 289.

<sup>1131</sup> Paracelsus, *The Treasure of Treasures for Alchemists*, HAWP 1: 38.

<sup>1132</sup> See ‘fixation’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>1133</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 465.

of *Creatures*, as the *Hart*, *Eagle*, and *Serpent*, that she affords them means to obtain the benefit of *Renovation* [...] and why then may it not be granted to Man if sought after? Nay the consideration of this *Favourable Blessing* afforded to *Animalls* has been the principall ground whence many *Philosophers* have addicted themselves to the search of this Mystery, hoping that might not be denied to Man, upon his search, which is bestowed gratis upon the Creature<sup>1134</sup>.

Since alchemists most frequently dwell on biblical language, it is not surprising to observe that the idea of “breathing life” comes from *Genesis*: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soule”<sup>1135</sup>. The quoted passage from *Genesis* describes, as Sacerdoti points out, the divine breath that creates and gives life<sup>1136</sup>, a process that alchemists attempt to imitate, the *opus alchymicum* being for them a microcosmic reproduction of Creation. In the same way as alchemists do, Narbon, if still alive, “would have made nature immortal” (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, I, i, 19) with his art so much so that “death / should have play for lack of work” (I, i, 19-20). Taking into account that the king of France, at the end of *All’s Well*, explicitly alludes to alchemy, referring to “Plutus himself / That knows the tinct and multiplying med’cine” (V, iii, 101-2), the alchemical background of the play becomes even more apparent. The scholar David Haley actually remarks that here Shakespeare refers very specifically to the *opus alchymicum* and that he “underscores its approaching climax”<sup>1137</sup>. In addition to this, the fact that the protagonist of Helena’s healing treatment is an ailing king, seemingly “lost” (I, ii, 225), recalls all those alchemical allegories whose protagonist is the *rex chymicus*. *All’s Well*, as already noticed, is the only play by Shakespeare in which Paracelsus is mentioned by name, thus clearly pointing to the alchemical context of the time<sup>1138</sup>. By contrasting the established medicine of the “most learned doctors” (II, ii, 115) and of the “congregated College” (II, ii, 116) to the art of the “empirics”<sup>1139</sup>, as Helena’s is, Shakespeare is implicitly referring to the ongoing controversy between the supporters of Galen and those of Paracelsus:

the articulation of the opposition as a contest between ‘empirics’ and the ‘learned doctors’ of the ‘college’ sharpens the allusiveness to the London scene by glancing at the antagonism then existing between the Paracelsian empirics and the Galenists of the College<sup>1140</sup>.

---

<sup>1134</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 448.

<sup>1135</sup> *Genesis*, 2:7.

<sup>1136</sup> Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo Cielo e Nuova Terra*, cit., p. 51.

<sup>1137</sup> David Haley, *Shakespeare’s Courtly Mirror*, cit., p. 227.

<sup>1138</sup> While discussing with Lord Lafeu about the illness of the king of France, Paroles mentions “Galen and Paracelsus” (II, iii, 11). See section 4.1. “Alchemical Texts in Shakespeare’s England”.

<sup>1139</sup> King of France: “I say we must not / So stain our judgment or corrupt our hope, / To prostitute our pasture malady / To empirics” (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, II, ii, 118-21).

<sup>1140</sup> Richard K. Stensgaard, “*All’s Well That Ends Well* and the Galenico-Paracelsian Controversy”, in

Linden observes that the ideas of the Swiss-born alchemist and physician “were widely disseminated in single-text and collected editions and translations that began to appear about 1570, three decades after Paracelsus’s death, thus assuring continued debate between supporters and detractors”<sup>1141</sup>. Paracelsus notoriously prompted the physicians of his time to learn their art not from conventional schools but, rather, from the “empirics”, thus plainly opposing his art to that of the Royal College of Physicians:

The physician does not learn everything he must know and master at high colleges alone; from time to time he must consult old women, gypsies, magicians, wayfarers, and all manner of peasant folk [...] and learn from them; for these have more knowledge about such things than all the high colleges<sup>1142</sup>.

As recorded by Iyengar, among the “most successful practitioners” who, despite the disapproval of the Royal College, employed the new Paracelsian chemical remedies was Shakespeare’s son-in-law, the aforementioned John Hall, “himself possibly an empiric”<sup>1143</sup>. In Stensgaard’s opinion, in *All’s Well* Shakespeare aims at underlining the contrast between Galenists and Paracelsians by making Helena a representative of the latter group:

the purpose of so identifying her [Helena] with the Paracelsian reformers is greater than mere dramatic pointing, for it serves as well to bring into focus significant religious and philosophical meaning<sup>1144</sup>.

Paracelsism was seen as similar, at least in its attempt to eradicate traditional dogmas, with the efforts of a number of Puritan reformers<sup>1145</sup>: in this respect, it should be recalled that Paracelsus was called “the Luther of medicine”. These considerations call to mind the still intense debate concerning Shakespeare’s personal faith. Some scholars argue that, though officially a Protestant, Shakespeare was raised in a Catholic environment<sup>1146</sup>. In a recent

---

*Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 25, n. 2 (Summer 1972), p. 182.

<sup>1141</sup> Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 151.

<sup>1142</sup> Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, cit., p. 131.

<sup>1143</sup> See ‘Paracelsus’, in Sujata Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language*, cit., p. 247.

<sup>1144</sup> Richard K. Stensgaard, “*All’s Well That Ends Well* and the Galenico-Paracelsian Controversy”, cit., p. 183.

<sup>1145</sup> See Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>1146</sup> In her recent study on Shakespeare and religion, Woods observes: “the question of how fiction translates theology into literary forms still lingers, even as it has become more urgent. Despite the increasing popularity of studies into ‘Shakespeare and religion’, the methods used to investigate connections between theology and drama remain in their relatively early stages. Within Shakespeare studies revisionism has primarily generated work focused on the question ‘Was Shakespeare a Catholic?’. Much of this scholarship is deeply sensitive to the confessional complexities of the age. [...] Stephen Greenblatt and Gary Taylor have, for example, provocatively theorized about a Shakespeare who negotiated the epistemological difficulties of dealing with a familial and perhaps personal allegiance to the outlawed

study, Gillian Woods suggests that the playwright's use of Catholic aesthetics is imaginative rather than doctrinal: "Shakespeare's plays heuristically frame dilemmas for audiences" since the dramatist "encourages us to think with and about the problems attendant on unreformed content, but he does not tell us what to think"<sup>1147</sup>. Since playhouses are places where contemporary issues are constantly probed, Shakespeare most frequently questions his audience rather than providing it with specific answers. The treatment of the dispute between Paracelsism and conventional medicine that is found in *All's Well That Ends Well*, with all its religious implications, evidently allows the dramatist to explore some of the most lively controversies of his time.

In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena, the "unlearned virgin", succeeds in curing the king, unlike the so-called "learned and authentic Fellows" (II, iii, 12). Floyd-Wilson highlights the difficulties encountered by scholars in defining with precision the nature of Helena's medical abilities, observing that "she has been identified as a cunning woman associated with fairy magic, a Paracelsian, a domestic medical practitioner, and a student of her father's medicine", and concludes that "to some degree, all of these critics are correct"<sup>1148</sup>. As is often the case with Shakespeare's works, the dramatist provides no definite answers, thus allowing spectators and readers to look at the plays from different perspectives. Considering that the philosopher's stone is the elixir that heals all diseases that physicians do not hope to cure by means of conventional medicine, I believe that the links between Helena's medical skills and alchemical art are particularly consistent: it can be assumed, at least, that Shakespeare's audience would have read Helena's knowledge also in the light of alchemy. As reported in *Rosarium philosophorum*, the elixir is a medicine for those illnesses which doctors despair at: "Geber quoque dicit, quod Elixir rubeum curat omnes infirmitates chronicas, de quibus medici desperauerunt"<sup>1149</sup>. Paracelsus himself, by way of legend, was said to be "capable of producing the fabulous universal medicines (panaceas, tinctures, arcana)"<sup>1150</sup>, that made him renowned in England and abroad. Somehow recalling the opposition between Paracelsian medicine and traditional medical notions that is drawn in *All's Well*, in the *Merlini allegoria* two groups

---

Roman faith". Gillian Woods, *Shakespeare's Unreformed Fictions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 6. On this topic, see also Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001; Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2004; Gary Taylor, "Forms of Opposition: Shakespeare and Middleton", *ELR* 24, 1994, pp. 283-314.

<sup>1147</sup> Gillian Woods, *Shakespeare's Unreformed Fictions*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>1148</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 28.

<sup>1149</sup> *Rosarium philosophorum*, cit., AA 2: 382.

<sup>1150</sup> Richard K. Stensgaard, "*All's Well That Ends Well* and the Galenico-Paracelsian Controversy", cit., p. 179.

of renowned physicians, the Alexandrians and the Egyptians, compete to establish who are those able to heal the diseased king: “Parentes vero statim cucurrerunt ad medicos Aegyptiacos et Alexandrinos prae caeteris honorandos, et adduxerunt ad eum, narrantes eis secundum quod Regi acciderat”<sup>1151</sup>. The Egyptian doctors, who begin to treat the monarch, do not succeed in properly curing him so that the Alexandrian physicians intervene and miraculously bring the king back to life:

Alexandrini vero Medici hoc audientes, iuerunt ad eos, et dixerunt: Nolite ipsum sepelire, quoniam (si placet vobis) restituemus eum saniolem, pulchriorem, et potentiolem quam prius. [...] Tunc Rex ita de morte ad vitam resurgens<sup>1152</sup>.

*The Winter's Tale* is undoubtedly a play in which “metaphors of illness and medicine are very frequent”<sup>1153</sup>. Even though Leontes's disease is much different from that affecting the king in *All's Well That Ends Well*, since he suffers from an inner and psychological rather than a physical illness, the references to the former's diseased condition permeate the whole drama, thus prompting the audience to focus on the healing journey of the king of Sicily. Camillo himself, addressing Leontes, exclaims “Good my lord, be cured / Of this diseased opinion, and betimes, / For 'tis most dangerous” (I, ii, 294-6). A few lines below, Camillo, talking with King Polixenes, warns him that a sickness has infected the whole court of Sicily:

CAMILLO: There is a sickness  
Which puts some of us in distemper, but  
I cannot name the disease, and it is caught  
Of you that yet are well.  
(I, ii, 380-83)

POLIXENES: A sickness caught of me, and yet I well?  
I must be answered.  
(I, ii, 394-5)

Garber remarks that the world surrounding Leontes has become a “wasteland”, with “a sick king bereft of wife and children, and the play's initial counsellor figure, Camillo [...], will flee the country, leaving the art of healing to [...] Paulina”<sup>1154</sup>. In the same way as Helena is the king of France's physician in *All's Well*, Paulina plays the role of Leontes's healer, as she herself declares:

---

<sup>1151</sup> Anon., *Merlini Allegoria*, cit., AA 1: 393.

<sup>1152</sup> *Ibidem*, AA 1: 395.

<sup>1153</sup> B. J. Sokol, *Art and Illusion in The Winter's Tale*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994, p. 133.

<sup>1154</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 834.

Good my liege, I come –  
And I beseech you hear me, who professes  
Myself your loyal servant, your physician,  
Your most obedient counsellor.  
(II, iii, 51-4)

Paulina actually claims to have “come with words as medicinal as true, / Honest as either, to purge him [Leontes] of that humour / That presses him from sleep” (II, iii, 36-8). The correct proportion of the four humours – that, according to Hippocratic and Galenic medicine, preserves the human body from disease – is evidently compromised in the character of Leontes, as Camillo remarks at the beginning of the play when referring to the king’s “distemper” (I, ii, 381). As Pitcher points out, the term “distemper” indicates an imbalance of the humours, in both body and mind<sup>1155</sup>. Along with Paracelsian theories, alchemists often rely upon the traditional doctrine of the four humours to describe the restoration to life and health of the chemical king. In both the Merlin and the Duenech allegories the proper balance of the humours has to be re-established within the sick body of the *rex chymicus*. If Duenech is “swollen by bile”<sup>1156</sup>, or melancholy, so the king in the *Merlini allegoria* “must be purified and balanced”<sup>1157</sup>. The physicians in charge of the latter’s healing “purified him by letting him sweat, purge and vomit” so that “Both his cheeks were soon coloured rose-red”, as reported in the epigram to Maier’s emblem XLVIII<sup>1158</sup>. In *Rosarium philosophorum* the stone is described precisely as that medicine that, healing all sorts of diseases, reinstates the right proportion of the humours within the human body: “Hic lapis noster virtutem habet efficacem omnes alias medicinas medicorum. [...] Non enim permittit sanguinem putrefieri, nec flegma superdominari, nec choleram aduri, nec melancholiam super exaltari”<sup>1159</sup>. When welcoming Perdita and Florizel, almost at the end of the play, Leontes acknowledges that an infection has poisoned the air he breathes, thus focusing on the idea of healing and purgation, a theme that is of paramount importance in the play: “The blessed gods / Purge all infection from our air whilst you / Do climate here!” (V, i, 168-70).

The presence of Apollo, god of physical and spiritual healing, and of order over

---

<sup>1155</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 180n. See also ‘distemper’, in Sujata Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language*, cit., p. 100.

<sup>1156</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem XXVIII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 206. On the Renaissance conception of melancholy and its relationship with natural philosophy, see Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, cit.; see section 5.4. “Therefore betake thee / To nothing but despair. Leontes’s nigredo”.

<sup>1157</sup> H.M.E. De Jong, Commentary to Emblem XLVIII, in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 297.

<sup>1158</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem XLVIII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 289.

<sup>1159</sup> *Rosarium philosophorum*, BCC 2: 119.

chaos, further strengthens the imagery related to medicine that is at the core of the drama. Apollo, traditionally associated to light, to the sun, and to alchemical gold, brings the gift of healing and somehow predicts the final rebirth, claiming that “the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost is not found” (III, ii, 132-3). Foreshadowing the final recovery of Perdita, the restoration of things “lost”, the god’s prophecy marks a turning point, a moment of enlightenment and awakening, thus beginning the journey towards the final re-establishment of truth and order: “Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, / Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant” (III, 2, 130-1). The healing, and obliquely alchemical, virtues of Apollo are celebrated in the parable known as *The Hermet’s Tale*, collected in Ashmole’s *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. The unknown author of *The Hermet’s Tale* depicts the *opus alchymicum* in terms of the healing of a “Patyent” who, first dead, is restored to health by Phoebus Apollo, “Disguis’d in habitt of a shining light”<sup>1160</sup>, ‘Phoebus’ meaning precisely ‘shining’ in Greek. Arrived to “bring some comfortable ayd”, Apollo is summoned to assist “Some dyeing Soule”<sup>1161</sup> calling for help from a “Christall founteine”<sup>1162</sup> and to “raise to life yonder dead thing”<sup>1163</sup>. When restored to life, the “Patyent” goes away for three weeks, after which he comes back with a stone that “did he lay downe att Apollo’s feete” with the following lines: “by cureing one th’hast saved three: / [...] Be our Physitian, and as we growe old, / Wee’le bring enough to make new world of Gold”<sup>1164</sup>. Highlighting the restorative faculties of Apollo, the parable draws on the concept of the *opus alchymicum* as a healing process during which the matter within the alembic is purged of its ‘infirmities’ and finally revived. Moreover, in *The Hermet’s Tale* Apollo clearly functions as a guide throughout the alchemical work, instructing Vulcan, representing the art of alchemy, on how to proceed: “Vulcan went to his Forge / [...] Smith (said Apollo) helpe to lade this spring, / That I may raise to life yonder dead thing”<sup>1165</sup>. As far as the alchemical symbolism of Vulcan is concerned, Paracelsus explicitly writes that alchemy is “the Art of Vulcan, and we know how useful a work Vulcan can accomplish. Alchemy is an Art, and Vulcan is the operator therein. Whoever is a Vulcan, he has power in this Art”<sup>1166</sup>. In alchemical imagery, Apollo, or Sol, is also the tincture, the alchemical medicine that heals all illnesses. In *The Hermet’s Tale*, it is actually Apollo who cures the patient of his sickness: “Sol sawe reliques left of th’ould disease, / A solutine (quoth he)

---

<sup>1160</sup> Anon., *The Hermet’s Tale*, cit., TCB 416-18.

<sup>1161</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 417.

<sup>1162</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 415.

<sup>1163</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 417.

<sup>1164</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 419.

<sup>1165</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 417.

<sup>1166</sup> Paracelsus, *The Labyrinthus Medicorum*, HAWP 2: 165.

were good to clense, / With which the sicknesse he did so appease”<sup>1167</sup>. Further attesting the role of Apollo in alchemical symbolism is *Dastin’s Dreame*, a parable that, presenting the *opus alchymicum* as a healing journey in which the characters are cured of their leprosy, begins not surprisingly with a dedication to the god: “Thys Boke was written with letters aureate, / Perpetually to be put in memory, / And to Apollo the Chapters consecrate”<sup>1168</sup>.

In a paradoxical way, Apollo is the god who both causes and dispels diseases, as suggested by his traditional symbols, the lyre and the bow, “emblems of punishment, comfort and reward”<sup>1169</sup>. He is, therefore, an apt emblem of alchemy, an art based on the principle of the *solve et coagula*, i.e. destroy in order to re-create, punish in order to heal. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Apollo, who was also the god of sudden death<sup>1170</sup>, actually punishes Leontes by means of Mamilius’s and Hermione’s death – even though the latter one is only a presumed death. The two events, as already considered, also represent the starting point of the king’s path towards rebirth. Immediately after Mamilius dies, Leontes realises that Apollo has condemned the injustices he has committed: “Apollo’s angry, and the heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice” (III, ii, 143-4). It is when the king of Sicily scorns the verdict of the god that a servant enters to bring the news of the prince’s demise. Words of reconciliation and forgiveness surprisingly characterise Leontes’s speech after the loss of his child, thus clearly indicating a propitious change within the king’s diseased imagination:

Apollo, *pardon*  
My great profaneness ’gainst thine oracle.  
*I’ll reconcile* me to Polixenes,  
*New woo* my queen, *recall* the good Camillo,  
Whom I proclaim a man of *truth*, of *mercy*.  
(III, ii, 150-4, italics mine)

By punishing Leontes, then, Apollo also enlightens him and paves the way to the king’s cleansing journey. From an alchemical point of view, Apollo’s prophecy can be identified with that moment of the *opus alchymicum* known as *albedo*, when, as claimed by Dobbs, matter receives “illumination” and is “endowed with the potentiality of life and growth”<sup>1171</sup>. Light, indeed, assumes a significant meaning in alchemical imagery, as

<sup>1167</sup> Anon., *The Hermet’s Tale*, cit., TCB 418.

<sup>1168</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin’s Dreame*, cit., TCB 257.

<sup>1169</sup> Raymond Anselment, *The Realms of Apollo. Literature and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*, Associated University Presses, London, p. 24.

<sup>1170</sup> See John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 229n.

<sup>1171</sup> Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *Alchemical Death and Resurrection*, cit., p. 15.

pointed out by the alchemist Thomas Norton: “Light is cause thereof within matter of Clereness”<sup>1172</sup>. Leontes has been cleared of the “diseased opinion” (I, ii, 295) that infected his mind and is now able to see clearly and acknowledge his ‘blackness’: “How he glisters / Through my rust! And how his piety / Does my deeds make the blacker!” (III, ii, 167-9). The alchemical wheel is now turning towards regeneration: Leontes’s *nigredo*-like phase of suffering and expiation, that begins soon after Apollo causes the death of Mamilus, will lead the king to his renewal. As asserted by Ripley, the *opus alchymicum* is actually a wheel that passes through “blackness” and “whiteness” before it reaches the final “redness”, i.e. the accomplishment of the alchemical journey:

Ageyne then must thow turne thy Whele,  
 Fyrst Blacknesse abydyng ys thow wylt do well,  
 Then into Whytenes congele yt up [...]  
 And by Rednes [...]  
 Then hast thou brought thy Base unto an end<sup>1173</sup>.

As already said, water is fundamental in the process of healing of the *rex chymicus*, as attested, for instance, by the Duenech and the Merlin allegories. If King Duenech is placed in a bath in order to be purged of the black bile by the physician Pharut, so the king protagonist of the Merlin allegory is purged in a vaulted, warm place, where he is left to sweat: “Now the King fell ill [...], and wanted to be laid in a vaulted, warm place, to sweat at a constant temperature day and night”<sup>1174</sup>. In alchemical symbolism, sweat stands for the phase of the “distillation and purification of the matter of the Stone”<sup>1175</sup>. In particular, the metaphor of the king being washed in his sweat bath or, more in general, in water indicates the phase of ablution, that is to say “the cleansing of the blackened, dead body of the Stone or metal at the bottom of the alembic”<sup>1176</sup>. As already discussed, the ablution of the chemical king can take different forms: it can be represented as an immersion into a steam-bath or a fountain – as in the case of the Duenech allegory (see plate 35) and of the king in the aforementioned treatise by Antonio Allegretti, *De la trasmutatione de metalli*<sup>1177</sup> – or as

<sup>1172</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 64.

<sup>1173</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 168.

<sup>1174</sup> The English translation of the Merlin allegory is by H.M.E. De Jong, in Id. (ed.), *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 292. Latin text: “Iubeo igitur vobis, quod ponatis me in cameram vnam lucidam et ea constituatur in loco calido et sicco, continue temperato per diem et noctem, et ita sudabo”. Anon., *Merlini allegoria*, cit., AA 1: 393.

<sup>1175</sup> See ‘sweat’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 197.

<sup>1176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1177</sup> “Sola l’uccide la fontana, e sola / Lo risuscita poi, e quand’egli entra / Ne la fontana, pria si spoglia quella / Vesta di drappo d’oro, e la concede / Al suo primo Baron Saturno detto”. Antonio Allegretti, *De la trasmutatione de metalli*, cit., ll. 467-71, p. 93.

a drowning within sea water – as in the Third Parable of *Splendor solis* (see plate 19) and in emblem XXXI of *Atalanta fugiens* (see plate 36). The fountain, as Abraham points out, is only a variation on the theme of the ablution, being “synonymous with the bath or spring into which the king [...] steps to be purified of his blackness”<sup>1178</sup>. Although in diverse ways, then, by means of the purification of the king in water alchemists aim at designating “the breaking down and cleansing of the old outmoded state of being, leading to the birth of the regenerated, illumined man”<sup>1179</sup>. As far as the alchemical allegories depicting the ablution of the *rex chymicus* are concerned, Abraham notices that sweat is “both the black bile that issues from the king [...] and the sweet dew which washes the king’s body clean”<sup>1180</sup>, thus testifying to the intrinsic and *uroboric* nature of the *opus alchymicum*, a process in which death is also a source of life and, in a paradoxical way, what is poisonous is also curative. The fifteenth-century alchemist Bernhardus Trevisanus explicitly remarks that mercurial water is the key of the whole *opus*, because it washes away the ‘blackness’ of bodies:

En laquelle nostre eau permanente est tout le secret de nostre pierre. Car par ladite eau est nôtre pierre parfaite, pource qu’en icelle gist l’humidité vivifiante la pierre, bien qu’elle soit la vie, et la resurrection d’icelle. [...] Bref nostre oeuvre n’est autre chose, que vapeur, et eau, qui est dite mundifiante, ou nettooyante, blanchissant, et rubifiant, et dejetant la noirceur des corps<sup>1181</sup>.

In *The Winter’s Tale*, as already remarked, Leontes suggests that his tears will be the starting point of his purgatorial journey of “recreation”: “tears shed there / Shall be my recreation” (III, iii, 236-7). His ‘black’ deeds, that contrast Camillo’s goodness<sup>1182</sup>, will be purged by his tears, that seem to function as the alchemical water that symbolically washes away ‘blackness’ and corruption, allowing regeneration to occur. Alchemists claim that

<sup>1178</sup> See ‘fountain’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 81.

<sup>1179</sup> See ‘bath (balneum)’, *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>1180</sup> See ‘sweat’, *Ibidem*, p. 197.

<sup>1181</sup> Bernhardus Trevisanus, *La parole délaissée*, in *Divers Traitez de la Philosophie Naturelle, sçavoir La Turbe des Philosophes, ou Le Code de Verité en l’Art. La Parole Delaissée de Bernard Trevisan. Led Deux Traitez de Corneille Drebel Flaman*, Paris, 1672, pp. 142-43. As De Jong remarks, among “the alchemical authors from the 15<sup>th</sup> century who are still quoted with preference in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century [...] are Bernhardus Trevisanus and George Ripley”. H.M.E. De Jong, Introduction to Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 37. *La parole délaissée* is also collected in J. M. D. Richebourg, *Bibliothèque des Philosophes Chimiques*, Cailleau, Paris, 1740, vol. 2, p. 400. See the list of all the works of Trevisanus in John Ferguson, *Bibliotheca Chemica: a Catalogue of the Alchemical, Chemical and Pharmaceutical Books in the Collection of the Late James Young of Kelly and Durris*, James Macle hose and sons, Glasgow, 1906, vol. 1, pp. 100-104. As documented by Schuler, Bernhardus Trevisanus, “a figure whose actual name and history have been obscured”, is “now usually identified with the historical Bernard of Treves”. Robert M. Schuler, Introduction to Bernhardus Trevisanus, *The Fourth Part of the Book of Bernard, Count of Marchia Trevisana, of the Practise of the Philosophick Stone*, AP 446.

<sup>1182</sup> “How he [Camillo] glisters / Through my rust! And how his piety / Does my deeds make the blacker!” (III, ii, 167-9).

during the stage of ablution some drops of sweat, dew, or tears descend on the black matter so that it is purified “with washing of his own Water, till it be pure, clear, bright and white shining”<sup>1183</sup> (see plate 40). Since water reduces matter to its *prima materia*, it also indicates the phase of *putrefactio*, or *nigredo*, that is the true source of renewal: the dissolution into the original stuff of Creation is not only a breaking down but also a form of regeneration. It is interesting to note that Leontes’s tears do not only signal his ‘awakening’, but also the starting point of his *nigredo* phase, a stage of suffering, penance, and melancholy leading to rebirth: as already said, in alchemical language internal melancholy corresponds to external dissolution<sup>1184</sup>. In *Rosarium philosophorum*, the plate illustrating the “Ablvtio”, or “Mundificatio”, shows a king and a queen who are placed in a grave, that symbolises the *nigredo*, and are cleansed by means of the dew or rain descending from above (see plate 40). According to alchemical symbolism, water, in the shape of dew, sweat, rain, and tears is both destroying and regenerative, since it dissolves in order to revive. As suggested by Ripley, “Thys Water ys like [...] Poyson [...] / But no man shall be by hyt intoxycate, / After the tyme yt ys into Medycyne Elevate”<sup>1185</sup>. Abraham remarks that alchemical water “is known as the water of life which first kills the metal or matter for the Stone, and then revives and regenerates it”<sup>1186</sup>. The concept of the alchemical ablution by means of tears recurs in a sermon by John Donne, in which the alchemical stage of cleansing is clearly associated with the action of “purging” and “melting into tears”: “Therefore he [David] saw that he needed not only a liquefaction, *a melting into teares*, or only *an Ablution*, and a Transmutation, those he had by this purging and this washing”<sup>1187</sup> (italics mine). In Ripley’s *Cantilena*, tears are the mercurial water in which the queen bathes before giving birth to the renewed king; they stand for the phase of ablution that precedes the ‘rebirth’: “Thus great with Child, 9 months she languished / And Bath’d her with the Teares which she had shed”<sup>1188</sup>. As already said, the *regressus ad uterum* of the *rex chymicus*, a stage mirroring the retrograde movement that allows the retrieval of the *prima materia*, is a recurring metaphor in alchemical treatises:

By other meanes I cannot enter Heaven:  
And therefore (that I may be Borne agen)  
I’le Humbled be into my Mother’s Breast

<sup>1183</sup> Francis Anthony, Eirenaeus Philalethes, George Ripley et al., *Collectanea chymica*, cit., p. 43.

<sup>1184</sup> See Noel Brann, “Alchemy and Melancholy in Medieval and Renaissance Thought: A Query into the Mystical Basis of their Relationship”, cit., p. 136.

<sup>1185</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 141.

<sup>1186</sup> See ‘water’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 213.

<sup>1187</sup> John Donne, Sermon No. 15. Preached upon the Penitentiall Psalmes, Psal. 51.7., in Id., *Sermons*, cit., vol. V, p. 314.

<sup>1188</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 179.

Dissolve to what I was. And therein rest<sup>1189</sup>.

Abraham suggests that tears also indicate the “sorrow” that marks the beginning of the alchemical work, a phase usually represented by some form of death or sacrifice and characterised by a melancholy state<sup>1190</sup>. As a case in point, in the parable that closes the treatise known as *The Golden Tract*, the narrator describes the stage of *nigredo* in terms of the deathly *coniunctio* of a bride and her bridegroom, both expressing their sufferance by means of tears: “Here were they do penance for their sins with ever-flowing tears, and true sorrow”<sup>1191</sup>.

In the last couplet of sonnet 34, Shakespeare praises the purgatorial virtues of tears: “Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds, / And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds” (Sonnet 34, ll. 13-4). It is interesting to note that *The Winter’s Tale* presents precisely a world “destroyed” and one “ransomed”, as one of the gentlemen remarks when reporting the encounter between the Shepherd, the Clown, Camillo, and Leontes, who is informed of the death of Antigonus and of the recovery of Perdita after the shipwreck, in Bohemia, sixteen years before: “They looked as they had heard / of a world *ransomed*, or of one *destroyed*” (V, ii, 14-5, italics mine). Ransoming all ill deeds, tears are purifying and healing, as Shakespeare suggests in sonnet 34 and as is also the case of *The Winter’s Tale*. In the journey of dissolution and re-creation of the play, a process in which goodness is distilled from evil, water, also in the shape of tears, plays a central role in both the microcosm of Leontes and in the macrocosm of the natural world: Leontes’s tears, that signal both his symbolical death and the beginning of his path towards rebirth, are actually mirrored in the death- and life-giving water of the shipwreck, a scene in which death and new life coexist, as the Shepherd remarks in the celebrated lines addressed to his son, the Clown: “thou met’st with *things / dying*, I with *things newborn*” (III, iii, 110-11, italics mine). In the language of alchemists, pearls, like tears, indicate exactly the stage of ablution and cleansing. Abraham points out that pearls are “a sign that the matter of the Stone has reached the ablution, during which stage the matter is washed of its impurities”<sup>1192</sup>. Like tears, pearls are the alchemical, mercurial water that cleanses black matter; as asserted by the alchemist George Starkey, during the ablution “shall rise a vapour, like pearl orient, / which shall the Dark earth from its filthiness / With gentle

---

<sup>1189</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178. See also the already quoted parable entitled *The Magistery*: “Into his *Virgin-Mothers* wombe, / Againe he *enter* must; / Soe shall the *King* by his *new-byrth*, / Be *ten times stronger* just”. *The Magistery*, cit., TCB 343.

<sup>1190</sup> See ‘tears’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 198.

<sup>1191</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 22. “ut ibi continuis lacrymis veraque poenitentia pro peccatis commissis satisfacerent”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, MH 47.

<sup>1192</sup> See ‘pearls’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 142.

showers wash”<sup>1193</sup>. With regards to the significance of pearls, Eliade asserts that in both Western and Eastern medicine, pearls were originally endowed with healing powers. As the alchemical elixir, Eliade observes, pearls were said to protect the human body from diseases, such as melancholy, and from death<sup>1194</sup>: Francis Bacon himself associates pearls with longevity<sup>1195</sup>, listing them among the “Medicines for the Prolongation of Life”<sup>1196</sup>. In alchemical imagery, constantly dwelling on the purgatorial virtues of water, pearls and tears hint at the stage of ablution, a phase in which all “ill deeds”, both from an actual and metaphorical point of view, are “ransomed”. That sonnet 34 might be imbued with alchemical symbolism is a hypothesis that seems to be sustained by the preceding lyric. In sonnet 33 the lyrical voice alludes to the heavenly alchemy of the sun, that, with “sovereign eye”, gilds the “pale streams” and “the meadows green” performing a kind of “heavenly alchemy”:

Full many a glorious morning I have seen  
 Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,  
 Kissing with golden face the meadows green,  
*Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.*  
 (Sonnet 33, ll. 1-4, italics mine)

The sun’s eye is a metaphor for the eye of the Fair Youth, who “gilds” the object whereupon he gazes, as the poet claims in the celebrated sonnet 20, in which the androgynous, quintessential features of the Youth, defined as “master” and “mistress” at the same time, are praised:

A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted,  
 Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;  
 A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted  
 With shifting change as is false woman’s fashion;  
 An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,  
*Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth.*  
 (Sonnet 20, ll. 1-6, italics mine)

The association of eyes with alchemical imagery is, therefore, made explicit in sonnets 20 and 33: the Youth, as the sun with its “sovereign eye”, gilds everything his eyes dwell on. Eyes are related with alchemy also in *Troilus and Cressida*, when Ulysses notices that the

---

<sup>1193</sup> George Starkey, *The Marrow of Alchemy*, quoted in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 142-3.

<sup>1194</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Immagini e simboli*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1980, p. 129 (or. ed. *Images et symboles. Essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux*, Gallimard, Paris, 1952).

<sup>1195</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 130-1.

<sup>1196</sup> Francis Bacon, *The History of Life and Death, or The Second Title in Natural and Experimental History for the Foundation of Philosophy: Being the Third Part of the Instauratio Magna*, in *Id.*, *Collected Works*, cit., vol. V, pp. 263-64.

sun's "med'cinable eye / Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil" (I, iii, 91-2). Again, alchemy is employed by Shakespeare as a metaphor indicating positive transformation and healing: as the sun turns everything into perfection, gilding and curing what is "ill", so the Youth, himself perfect, does, thus acting as the alchemical tincture that projects its medicinal virtues over impure matter. Taking into account that Shakespeare often relates eyes to alchemical imagery and language, it is reasonable to believe that the symbolism of eyes, tears, and pearls developed in sonnet 34 might be connected with alchemy or, at least, that it might be read *also* in the light of alchemy.

Sonnet 34, with its reference to the ransoming effect of tears, offers an appropriate context for *The Winter's Tale*, in which tears and water are fundamental in the purgatorial journey towards rebirth. As reported in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "ransom" is employed by Shakespeare with the meaning of "to expiate" and "atone"<sup>1197</sup>, that is what Leontes does when announcing his dissolution into tears and his coming re-creation. At the end of the play, lord Cleomenes defines Leontes as "redeemed": "Sir, you have done enough, and have performed / A saint-like sorrow. No fault could you make / Which you have not redeemed" (V, i, 1-3). Alchemists themselves consider the process of abluion through water as "equivalent to the metaphysical purification of sins by baptism"<sup>1198</sup>. Alchemical authors actually regard the *opus alchymicum* also as a redeeming work: the alchemist John Dastin, focusing on the conception of the phase of abluion as a form of purgation and redemption, argues that "what destroys redeems"<sup>1199</sup>. In an alchemical text by Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, two characters describe the abluion, allegorically depicted as a perilous sea journey, as a "Purgatory", a stage at the end of which they will receive a "Spirituell Body":

And we are now ready to the Sea prest,  
Where we must abide three moneths at the least;  
[...]  
For this our Sinns we make our Purgatory,  
For the which we shall receive a Spirituell body<sup>1200</sup>.

In a similar way, Ripley compares the phase of abluion to the waters of Noah's flood: he remarks that as "Noe plantyd hys Vyneyard" after the waters of the flood, so "shall our

<sup>1197</sup> See 'ransom', OED, entry 1c.

<sup>1198</sup> See 'abluion', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 1.

<sup>1199</sup> "Qui ergo animam suam amat, eam perdet, nam unde videbatur perdidisse quod erat, inde incipit apparere quod non erat: quoniam quae devastant, emendant, et unde corruptio procedit, inde emendatio apparet"  
John Dastin's *Visio*, BCC 2: 325.

<sup>1200</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 292.

Stone after hys darknes in Purgatory, / Be purged and joynyd in Elements wythoute stryfe” and “passe fro the darknes of Purgatory to light / Of paradyce”<sup>1201</sup>. As will be discussed below, the symbolical ablution of Leontes is mirrored in the cleansing of the outer world. Soon after the king melts into tears, the scene shifts to Bohemia, where a storm destroys the ship on which Perdita and Antigonus have arrived, killing the mariners, and, surprisingly, saving the newborn girl, symbol of renewed life. In the light of the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, as expressed in the *Tabula smaragdina*, the disease of Leontes is mirrored in the “illness” of the natural dimension, as one of the mariners notices when arrived in Bohemia: “We have landed in *ill time*. The skies look grimly / And threaten present blusters” (III, iii, 3-4, italics mine). As the king of Sicily is cured of his disease by means of tears, so the macrocosm is purged of its infection by means of water.

---

<sup>1201</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 151.

## Chapter 6

### ***‘Thou met’st with things / dying, I with things newborn’.*** **The Alchemical Symbolism of Time and Water**

#### 6.1. *‘Into their own first matter kindly retrogagate’.*

##### The Significance of Water in Alchemical Literature

Alchemists constantly argue that the stage of dissolution, a phase that presupposes that matter is reduced to the so-called *prima materia*, is the key of their work. The fifteenth-century alchemist known as Bernhardus Trevisanus observes that, since the first part of the *opus alchymicum* is fundamental in the development of the alchemical work, alchemists have often concealed it under the veil of allegories:

il est à noter, que toute l’oeuvre est divisée principalement en deux parties [...]. pource que le fondement de ce noble secret est en la premiere partie, les Philosophes doutans de divulger ou reveler ce secret, ont fait peu de mention de cette premiere partie. [...] Encores que cette premiere partie soit le commencement, la clef, et le fondement de nostre magistere, sans laquelle rien n’est accomply, et laquelle ignorée, la science demeure decevable et fausse en son experiment<sup>1202</sup>.

At the beginning of the “Second Gate” of *The Compound of Alchymie*, devoted precisely to the phase of “Solution”, Ripley explicitly claims that the alchemical wheel should be turned backwards: “Into ther owne fyrst nature [the elements] kyndly retrogagate”<sup>1203</sup>. The so-called *prima materia*, a concept derived from Aristotelian philosophy, refers to the original stuff from which the cosmos was created and alchemists associate it with water, being traditionally the source of all life, as testified in the text known as *Zoroaster’s Cave*: “Solution turns the Stone into its Materia prima, that is, into Water”<sup>1204</sup>. In alchemical imagery, then, water is a dissolving force since it destroys matter, but also a renewing one. The alchemist Basil Valentine, among others, heightens the importance of water in the alchemical cycle of *solve et coagula*:

---

<sup>1202</sup> Bernhardus Trevisanus, *La parole délaissée*, in *Divers Traitez de la Philosophie naturelle*, cit., pp. 102-103.

<sup>1203</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 135.

<sup>1204</sup> Anon., *Zoroaster’s Cave*, cit., quoted by Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 153.

tutto il magistero e la sua opera non è altro che dissolvere e congelare, ed è tutta la circolazione e imbibizione della nostra Acqua Mercuriale che i Filosofi comandano. [...] Per mezzo di quell'Acqua i corpi sono assottigliati e riportati nella materia prima e prossima alla pietra o Elisir dei Filosofi<sup>1205</sup>.

The retrieval of the *prima materia* usually corresponds to the dissolution of matter into water: as reported in the alchemical treatise *A Very Brief Tract Concerning the Philosophical Stone*, collected in *The Hermetic Museum*, “unless there be a dissolution into water, our work cannot be brought to a successful issue”<sup>1206</sup>. The association of the stage of *solutio* and the symbolism of water is evident also in the following excerpt from *Rosarium philosophorum*:

Corpus namque imperfectum conversum est in primam materiam, et istae aquae coniunctae cum aqua nostra faciunt unam aquam mundam, claram, omnia mundans, omnia tamen necessaria in se continens: et ista est cara et vilis, de qua et cum qua perficitur nostrum magisterium<sup>1207</sup>.

Mircea Eliade points out that the reduction of substances into primal matter evidently represents primeval Chaos. It is, therefore, not surprising that aquatic imagery is so prominent in alchemical literature:

C'est la réduction des substances à la *materia prima*, à la *massa confusa*, la masse fluide, informe, correspondant – au niveau cosmologique – à la situation primordiale, au Chaos. La mort représente la régression dans l'amorphe, la réintégration du Chaos. C'est du reste pourquoi le symbolisme aquatique joue un rôle si important<sup>1208</sup>.

Linden observes that water performs a primary role also in George Ripley's conception of transmutation<sup>1209</sup>. In *The Compound of Alchymie*, the author most frequently dwells upon the virtues of water, defined as both poison and medicine:

---

<sup>1205</sup> Basilius Valentinus, *Spiegazione dello spirito sulle qualità della materia prima*, in Sabina e Rosario Piccolini (eds.), *La Biblioteca degli Alchimisti*, cit., pp. 147-8. The Italian translation of the treatise was the only one available to me since I could not find any other version of the text at either the Warburg Institute and the British Library. The text is not included in either *Musaeum Hermeticum* and *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*. As documented by Sabina and Rosario Piccolini, the treatise is to be found only in *Janua Patefacta Thesauro, per quam Secretam ad Scientiam Facile ingredi possunt veri Hermetis Filii*, Amstelodami, Apud Elizeaeum Weyerstraten, 1678, on which their translation is based.

<sup>1206</sup> Anon., *A Very Brief Tract Concerning the Philosophical Stone. Written by an Unknown German Sage, About 200 Years Ago, and Called The Book of Alze*, HM 129. “Observandum igitur, nisi illorum quodlibet in aquam commutetur, tunc opus minime perficitur. [...] donec omne in aquam convertatur”. Anon., *Liber Alze de Lapide Philosophico*, MH 329.

<sup>1207</sup> *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 212.

<sup>1208</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>1209</sup> Stanton J. Linden, “The Ripley Scrolls and *The Compound of Alchymy*”, in Alison J. Adams and Stanton J. Linden (eds.), *Emblems and Alchemy*, cit., pp. 92-3.

Thys Water ys lyke [...]  
 Poison most stronge of yre;  
 A stronger Poyson can none be thought:  
 Att the Potecarys therfore oftyn yt ys bought:  
 But no man shall be by hyt intoxicate,  
 After the tyme yt ys into Medycyne Elevate<sup>1210</sup>.

In a similar way, the author of the text entitled the *Sophic Hydrolith* describes the “water of mercury” as “the water of life, which nevertheless contains the most malignant poison”<sup>1211</sup>. Washing clothes is another image employed by alchemists to indicate the phase of *ablutio*: in the illustration accompanying emblem III in *Atalanta fugiens*, a woman is shown while pouring hot water into a wooden vessel and cleaning dirty sheets (see plate 50). The epigram to emblem III explicitly prompts the alchemical adept to act in the same way as the lady who cleans dirty laundry:

Don’t you see how a woman is accustomed to cleaning dirty laundry  
 By pouring hot water over it?  
 Follow her example, so that you will not fail in your art,  
 For the water washes the precipitation of the black body away<sup>1212</sup>.

As might be expected, cleaning dirty laundry is a metaphor for the phase of purification of matter, that is purged of its blackness by means of water. In the discourse that accompanies emblem III, Maier argues that as women wash dirty linen, purging them of their filthiness, so alchemists employ philosophical water in their work of transmutation: “The same happens to the philosophical subject: for it is coarse and dirty, but the philosophers cleanse it with philosophical water, till it is white and perfect”<sup>1213</sup>. In alchemical texts sheets stand for “the unclean matter of the Stone which must be washed and dried at the ablution”<sup>1214</sup>. The same metaphor recurs in a plate of *Splendor solis*, an illustration in which women are depicted while washing some linen in a river (see plate 53). As will be further discussed, the *opus alchymicum* is often compared by alchemists to “Women’s Work” since it consists in a reiterated series of ablution and washing<sup>1215</sup>. In particular, it is the second stage of the

<sup>1210</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 141.

<sup>1211</sup> Johann Ambrosius Siebmacher, *The Sophic Hydrolith*, HM 39. Latin text: “cum ante dicta aqua Mercurii (quam Philosophi etiam [...] indestructibilem fontem, vel aquam vitae, que tamen etiam maximum venenum in se continet, nominarunt)”. *Hydrolithus Sophicus seu Aqvarium Sapientum*, MH 93.

<sup>1212</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem III, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>1213</sup> *Ibidem*, Discourse accompanying Emblem III.

<sup>1214</sup> See ‘sheets’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 182.

<sup>1215</sup> See M.E. Warlick, “The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems”, in Alison J. Adams and Stanton J. Linden (eds.), *Emblems and Alchemy*, cit., pp. 25-47.

*opus*, “the work of cleansing and purifying the matter of the Stone”<sup>1216</sup>, that alchemists define as “women’s work”.

Ripley emphasises the importance of water throughout *The Compound of Alchymie* by declaring that “Water ys the secret and lyfe of every thyng / That ys of substance in thys world y found; / For of the Water eche thyng hath begynnyng”<sup>1217</sup>. It is exactly because alchemists conceive of the *opus alchymicum* as a microcosmic reproduction of Creation that water is given such a primary role. As highlighted in *Turba philosophorum*, the starting point of the *opus alchymicum* is in water, thus mirroring the creative action of God: “Know, O all ye investigators of this Art, that our work, of which ye have been inquiring, is produced by the generation of the sea, by which and with which, after God, the work is completed”<sup>1218</sup>. As already said, alchemical authors believe that the *rota alchemica* should be turned backwards, so that matter is first dissolved into the *prima materia* before it is created anew. The first part of the *opus alchymicum*, then, can be defined as a retrogression that is, paradoxically, also a progress. Roberts remarks that stages such as the putrefaction or dissolution are not regarded by alchemists as mere “degradations of matter” but, rather, as “temporary regressions, clearly necessary as the seed must rot and the body die before new growth and a glorious resurrection”<sup>1219</sup>.

The alchemical idea of retrogression and progress is expressed by the alchemist Basil Valentine in the treatise *Twelve Keys* by employing the metaphor of the ebb and flow of water: “The daily ebb and flow of the sea, which are caused by the sympathetic influence of heavenly bodies, impart great wealth and blessing to the earth. For whenever the water comes rolling back, it brings a blessing with it”<sup>1220</sup>. Interestingly enough, Basil Valentine’s words recall the incipit of Shakespeare’s sonnet 60:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end,  
Each changing place with that which goes before,  
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.  
(Sonnet 60, ll. 1-4)

---

<sup>1216</sup> See ‘women’s work’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 219.

<sup>1217</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 164.

<sup>1218</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, cit., p. 194. Latin text: “Scitote fratres, quod opus nostrum quod quaeritis, ex maris fit generatione, que post Deum omnia perficit”. *Turba philosophorum*, AA 1: 60.

<sup>1219</sup> Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy*, cit., p. 59.

<sup>1220</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., HM 161. “Per quotidianos maris saevientis cursus ac recursus, qui ex simpathia quadam superne ex coelorum influentia contingentes causantur, multae magnaeque divitiae terris accedunt: Nam quotiescunque refertuntur, hominibus aliquid boni secum adferunt”. Basilus Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, II Clavis, MH 396.

Healy notices that the sonnet, if read in the light of alchemical imagery, condenses the rhythm of the *opus alchymicum* since “the progress of the alchemical *opus* always incorporates erosive movement and counter-movement – both loss and hard won gain”: that of the alchemical work is actually a “spiralling movement back and forth”<sup>1221</sup>, like that of the sea waves described by Shakespeare in sonnet 60 and by Basil Valentine in his treatise. According to Healy, Shakespeare’s lyric evokes the alchemical symbolism of the mercurial water, often described as a ‘sea’ within which matter is dissolved in order to be re-created:

Shakespeare’s metaphors are particularly appropriate because mercurial water was known as the ‘sea’ which dissolved the base metals and nourished the infant stone which ‘crawls to maturity’ [...]: phases of putrefaction and death which, negative as they may seem, lead to new understanding and thus to ‘growth’<sup>1222</sup>.

In the course of the *opus alchymicum*, the philosophical child “crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown’d” (Sonnet 60, l. 6) and reaches the perfection of gold despite the paradoxical action of Time, “for nothing stands but for his scythe to mow” (l. 12)<sup>1223</sup>. As will be discussed, time and water are deeply connected in the imagery of alchemy and are both regarded by alchemists as regenerative and destroying at once.

In the aforementioned treatise by the Elizabethan alchemist Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, the *opus alchymicum* is allegorically described as a sea voyage. Two characters are said to be “ready to the Sea prest”, to undertake a journey on which they will spend “three moneths at the least” in order to purge their sins:

And we are now ready to the Sea prest,  
Where we must abide three moneths at the least;  
All which tyme to Land we shall not passe,  
No although our Ship be made but of Glasse,  
But all tempest of the Aire we must abide,  
And in dangerous roades many tymes to ride;  
[...] But shortly we shall passe into another Clymate,  
Where we shall receive a more purer estate;  
For this our Sinns we make our Purgatory,  
For the which we shall receive a Spirituall body<sup>1224</sup>.

Charnock’s parable draws on the alchemical symbolism of the sea, symbol of the *prima*

---

<sup>1221</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>1222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1223</sup> “Nativity, once in the main of light, / Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown’d, / Crooked eclipses ‘gainst his glory fight, / And Time, that gave, doth now his gift confound. / Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth, / And delves the parallels in beauty’s brow, / Feeds on the rarities of nature’s truth, / And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow” (Sonnet 60, ll. 5-12).

<sup>1224</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 292.

*materia*, that is to say the mercurial waters in which matter is dissolved, purified, and re-created. Since it is a stage in which death and life coexist, the *ablutio* is conceived of by alchemists as a troublesome experience, a “battleground of opposing forces”<sup>1225</sup>. In Charnock’s alchemical parable, the protagonists of the sea journey claim to be ready to bear “all tempest of the Aire” and to ride “in dangerous roades many tymes” before they will expiate their faults and “receive a more purer estate”.

George Ripley argues that the first stage of the Great Work consists precisely in the dissolution of matter in the water of life: “Dissolve him [matter] with the Water of life”<sup>1226</sup>. The alchemical phase of ablution is also represented by means of the metaphor of the *regressus ad uterum* of the chemical king, an allegory that equally draws on the idea of regression and on the role of water:

By other meanes I cannot enter Heaven:  
And therefore (that I may be Borne agen)  
I’le Humbled be into my Mother’s Breast  
Dissolve to what I was<sup>1227</sup>.

By entering again his mother’s womb, the chemical king dies in order to be reborn in water, the amniotic liquid being traditionally a symbol of new life. Alchemists most frequently define the alembic where the stone is created as a womb since they conceive of their work as an imitation of the process by means of which human life grows within the female uterus (see plates 3 and 62). The analogy between the birth of a child and the creation of the philosopher’s stone is to be found in one the earliest alchemical texts. In the so-called *Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers* (I-II century AD), the author, known as the Hellenistic alchemist Comarius, evidently dwells on this kind of imagery:

Car ils sont nourris dans le feu, comme l’embryon, nourri dans le ventre de la mère, s’accroît peu à peu. Lorsque le mois réglementaire, approche, (l’embryon) n’est pas empêché de venir au jour. C’est ainsi que procède cet art admirable. Les vague et les flots successifs désagrègent les produits dans l’Hadès, dans le tombeau, où ils sont déposés. Mais lorsque le tombeau aura été ouvert, ils remonteront de l’Hadès, comme l’embryon sort du ventre (de sa mère). Il [cet art] imite le développement de l’enfant, la façon dont il est formé et amené à perfection<sup>1228</sup>.

---

<sup>1225</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>1226</sup> George Ripley, *A Short Worke that beareth the Name of the aforesaid Author George Ripley*, TCB 394.

<sup>1227</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>1228</sup> Comarius, *Livre de Comarius, philosophe et grand-prêtre enseignant a Cléopatre l’art divin et sacré de la pierre philosophale* (I-II century AD, Greek), in Marcelline Berthelot (ed.), *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, cit., Troisième livraison, p. 282. An English translation of part of the text is in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., pp. 44-45.

The rebirth of matter from the phase of *nigredo*, associated with a descent into “Hades”, is compared to the birth of the philosophical child. In Ripley’s *Cantilena* the imagery of water is not only related to the amniotic fluid that gives birth but also to the tears shed by the queen before delivering the reborn king – tears that, as already noticed, stand for the stage of dissolution preceding the rebirth: “Thus great with Child, 9 months she languished / And Bath’d her with the Teares which she had shed”<sup>1229</sup>. As Eliade argues, the alchemical idea of the *regressus ad uterum* is one of the several images alchemists employ to represent the *prima materia*: “Cette réduction alchimique à la *prima materia* [...] peut être valorisée notamment comme une régression au stade pré-natal, un *regressus ad uterum*”<sup>1230</sup>. The chemical king has to symbolically die and be regenerated in the same way as gold has to be deprived of its original form in order to attain a more perfect state: “Thus change your gold back into what it was before it became gold; and thou shalt find the seed, the beginning, the middle, and the end”<sup>1231</sup>.

In alchemical symbolism, water is conferred some features similar to those alchemists attribute to time. As will be further discussed, Saturn has been associated with time since antiquity because of an erroneous identification of the Titan Cronus, the Greek counterpart of the Roman Saturn, with Chronos, the personification of time<sup>1232</sup>. Alchemists, therefore, inherited the traditional association of Saturn with Time. In the discourse accompanying emblem XII of *Atalanta fugiens*, the author claims that Saturn “carries a scythe because, like time, he mows everything he produces”<sup>1233</sup>. The illustration of emblem XII actually shows Saturn while, carrying his most traditional tool, the scythe, flies over mount Helicon and ‘ejects’ the philosopher’s stone (see plate 71). As already said, the alchemical metaphor of Saturn ‘vomiting’ the stone is based on the classical myth according to which the god, who devoured all the children begotten by his wife, Rea, was finally compelled to ingest some stones instead of his newborn son, Zeus<sup>1234</sup>. After having been administered a drug, Saturn expelled the stones he had previously ingested and all the children he had eaten. In alchemical terms, the myth of Saturn represents a perfect allegory

<sup>1229</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 179.

<sup>1230</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 131.

<sup>1231</sup> Basil Valentine, *The Tract of Basilius Valentinus, the Benedictine, concerning the Great Stone of the Ancient Sages*, HM 157. Latin text: “atque fac ex auro tuo retrorsum id, quod ante fuerat: Tum reperies semen, principium, medium atque finem”. Basilius Valentinus, *De Magno Lapide Antiquorum Sapientum Fr. Basillii Valentini Benedictini Ordinis*, MH 388.

<sup>1232</sup> See sections 6.4. “*For the red blood reigns in the winter’s pale*. The Alchemical Symbolism of Saturn-Time in *The Winter’s Tale*” and 6.5. “*I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing / As you had slept between*. The Inversion of Time and the *opus contra naturam*”.

<sup>1233</sup> Michael Maier, Discourse accompanying Emblem XII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 120. See also ‘Saturn’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>1234</sup> Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie*, cit., pp. 104-105.

of the *opus alchymicum*, a paradoxical process in which death is a source of new life, so that what is taken away is finally restored, thus following the circular course of the *rota alchemica*. As time is conceived of by alchemical philosophers as both destroying and redeeming, so water kills in order to revive: in *Rosarium philosophorum*, mercurial water is actually defined as “the water that killeth and reviveth”<sup>1235</sup>. It is interesting to note that ‘Saturn’ is one of the epithets alchemists give also to the so-called *prima materia*: Isaac Newton describes primal matter as “that which has been stripped of every form by putrefaction so that a new form can be introduced, that is, the black matter in the regimen of Saturn”<sup>1236</sup>. Indicating dissolution and renewal, an action causing death and one fostering rebirth, the *prima materia*, usually identified with water, is also associated with Saturn. The destroying action of Saturn-time signals a phase of both dissolution and cleansing that is necessary in the development of the alchemical *opus*. As recorded in the text that describes the first plate of Basil Valentine’s *Twelve Keys*, an illustration that shows old Saturn with a scythe (see plate 14), the initial stage of *olutio*, regarded as a form of purification, is a *conditio sine qua non* in the course of the alchemical work:

As the physician purges and cleanses the inward parts of the body, and removes all the unhealthy matter by means of his medicine, so our metallic substances must be purified and refined of all foreign matter, in order to ensure the success of our task<sup>1237</sup>.

The action of Saturn, in his role of devouring time, is explicitly related to that of the alchemist-physician who cleanses unhealthy matter and refines it. Valentine’s engraving depicts Saturn, portrayed as an old man with a scythe, beside the king and the queen united in a chemical wedding: the plate suggests that in order to attain the end of the alchemical *opus*, i.e. the ‘chemical wedding’ and the birth of the philosophical child, the destroying, and paradoxically healing, action of Saturn-time is essential. As will be discussed in the following sections devoted to the redeeming role of time in *The Winter’s Tale*, the alchemical symbolism related to Saturn turns out to be enlightening for the reading of the play.

Retrieving the chaotic, formless state from which the cosmos was created is an action that alchemists represent by means of the symbolism of water, simultaneously killing and

---

<sup>1235</sup> *The Rosary of the Philosophers*, quoted by Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 148. Latin text: “Aqua est quae occidit et viuificat”. *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 214.

<sup>1236</sup> Isaac Newton, *Index chemicus*, quoted by Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, p. 153.

<sup>1237</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., “First Key”, HM 160. Latin text: “Ac quemadmodum medicus interiora corporis purgat et purificat per media medicamentorum suorum, omnesque sordes inde expellit: Ita et nostra corpora purificari et purgari debent ab omni sua impuritate, ut in nostra generatione perfectio operari possit”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, I Clavis, MH 394.

reviving, and of Saturn, intended also as a personification of time, that, in the course of the alchemical work, is turned back to the origins of Creation, i.e. to primal matter<sup>1238</sup>. As Saturn, with its negative features as the devourer of things, is a symbol of the *nigredo*, the destructive stage of the alchemical *opus*, so water is the dominant element in the phase of dissolution and putrefaction. Water, as alchemists write, is “a natural agent which dissolves the elements of bodies, and then again unites them”<sup>1239</sup>. Healy observes that the progress of the *opus alchymicum*, that recalls the ebb and flow of the sea described by Shakespeare in sonnet 60, is “paradoxically facilitated and yet obstructed by time”<sup>1240</sup>. As a matter of fact, “in attempting to hasten the extremely slow growth of nature, the alchemist’s task was, in part, that of conquering time”<sup>1241</sup>. On the one hand, the adept is always prompted to be guided by time and be patient<sup>1242</sup>, whereas, on the other hand, he has to ‘go against’ the course of time, bringing the *rota alchemica* backward to the origins of the cosmos, and accelerate the natural process of achieving the perfect state of ‘gold’. Eliade notices that, by performing the alchemical work of transmutation, the alchemist somehow replaces time, taking on the task to change and improve nature:

en assumant la responsabilité de changer la Nature, l’homme se substitua au Temps: ce qu’aurait demandé des millénaires ou des Eons pour ‘mûrir’ dans les profondeurs souterraines, le métallurge, et surtout l’alchimiste, estiment pouvoir l’obtenir en quelques semaines<sup>1243</sup>.

That of alchemists is actually an endeavour to abolish time, in an effort to release the cosmos from temporal existence: “leur œuvre, la transmutation, ait comporté, sous une forme ou sous une autre, l’abolition du Temps”<sup>1244</sup>. Shakespeare himself declares to be “in war with Time”<sup>1245</sup> in his sonnets. In an alchemical way, the poet employs his art to free the Fair Youth from time’s sway:

And do what’er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,  
To the wide world and all her fading sweets:  
But I forbid thee one most heinous crime,  
O carve not with thy hours my love’s fair brow,

<sup>1238</sup> See ‘prima materia’ and ‘Saturn’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 153-6 and p. 178.

<sup>1239</sup> Anon., *A Very Brief Tract Concerning the Philosophical Stone*, cit., HM 128-9.

<sup>1240</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>1241</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 301.

<sup>1242</sup> “Be patient, and follow always in the footsteps of Nature”. Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 38. Latin text: “sis patiens intima naturae passim vestigia servans”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., [page unnumbered].

<sup>1243</sup> Mircea Eliade, “Alchimie et temporalité”, in Id., *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 176.

<sup>1244</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 177.

<sup>1245</sup> “And, all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new” (Sonnet 15, ll. 13-14).

Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen.  
(Sonnet 19, ll. 6-9)

The true essence of the “beauteous and lovely youth”, who is sometimes described in alchemical terms by the lyrical voice<sup>1246</sup>, is distilled by the poet’s art, in the same way as alchemists try to refine metals to their highest degree, thus creating a kind of gold that is able to resist time’s action: “And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth: / When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth” (Sonnet 54, ll. 13-14). In sonnet 5 Shakespeare more overtly dwells on the idea of alchemical distillation, intended as a way of preserving the Fair Youth’s essence against “never-resting Time”:

For never-resting Time leads Summer on  
To hideous Winter and confounds him there;  
Sap check’d with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,  
Beauty o’ersnow’d and bareness every where:  
Then, were not summer’s distillation left,  
A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,  
Beauty’s effect with beauty were bereft,  
Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was.  
(Sonnet 5, ll. 6-12)

The metaphor of the “liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass” would have easily reminded Shakespeare’s contemporaries of those alchemical illustrations that show the philosophical child, emblem of the philosopher’s stone and, therefore, of gold, enclosed within the hermetically-sealed alembic that fulfils the function of the female uterus<sup>1247</sup> (see plates 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 62). Alchemists, however, do not regard time merely as a negative force since they believe that metals are naturally transmuted within the womb of Mother Earth: precisely because it leads nature to perfection, Time is also a healer. As will be discussed, Time is usually identified with Saturn, that in the alchemical language denotes the substance from which alchemical gold is ‘distilled’, the metal lead, and the so-called *prima materia*. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the healing aspect of time is fairly evident in the development of the drama. Unlike the sonnets, time is not only a destroyer but also a preserver and redeemer, allowing the finally reconciliation, or ‘chemical wedding’, to occur.

In Shakespeare’s romance, time and water are essential in the redemptive, and obliquely alchemical, pattern of the play. Water, in particular, is both deadly and healing,

---

<sup>1246</sup> See section 3.2. “Queen Elizabeth as a Symbol of Alchemical Art”.

<sup>1247</sup> See Margaret Healy, “‘Making the quadrangle round’: Alchemy’s Protean Forms in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and *A Lover’s Complaint*”, in Michael Schoenfeldt (ed.), *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Blackwell, Malden, 2007, pp. 413-14. See also ‘womb’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 219.

either as the tears that signal the symbolical death of Leontes's old self and the beginning of his regenerative journey or as the enraging sea that kills the mariners in the shipwreck and, conversely, saves Perdita. The third act of the play is a stage in which death and new life coexist since the death of the mariners and of lord Antigonus evidently corresponds to the recovery of Perdita – an association that is highlighted by the Shepherd when, addressing his son, the Clown, he remarks: “thou met'st with *things dying*, I with *things newborn*” (III, iii, 110-111, italics mine). Considering that during the *ablutio* phase the “deathly waters are miraculously transformed into the waters of life”<sup>1248</sup>, the scene of the shipwreck that occurs in the third act of the play and displays a world dying and a world that has been reborn can be read in the light of the alchemical state of ablution: a stage of dissolution that, through water, leads to new life.

## 6.2. ‘We have landed in ill time. The skies look grimly’. The Alchemical Power of Water in *The Winter's Tale*

As already pointed out, in the third act, after repenting for the faults committed, King Leontes discloses his intention to expiate his sins by means of the tears he will shed on the grave of his son Mamilius and his wife Hermione: “Once a day I'll visit / The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there / Shall be my recreation” (III, iii, 235-7). The king's process of inner re-creation is explicitly related to the imagery of tears that, as already said, in the alchemical language indicate a cleansing phase known as ‘ablution’ – a stage that alchemists also conceive of in metaphorical terms as a form of atonement. Immediately after Leontes announces his ‘dissolution’ into tears, the scene shifts to the coast of Bohemia, where Antigonus has arrived on a ship with the task of abandoning Perdita, just before a storm outbreak. Indeed, a few scenes before the lord has been commanded by Leontes to kill the newborn girl, whom the king considers as the evidence of Hermione's adultery. Persuaded by some lords, the king of Sicily finally resolves to spare the child from immediate death and orders Antigonus to bring the “female bastard” to “some remote and desert place”:

---

<sup>1248</sup> See ‘flood’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 78.

We enjoin thee,  
As thou art liegeman to us, that thou carry  
This female bastard hence, and that thou bear it  
To some remote and desert place, quite out  
Of our dominions; and that thou leave it,  
Without more mercy, to it own protection  
And favour of the climate.  
(II, iii, 171-7)

Perdita, defined by Antigonus as a “Poor thing, condemned to loss” (II, iii, 189), is then brought to remote Bohemia. Once arrived at destination, the lord enquires whether the ship has touched the right coast. To Antigonus’s question, one of the mariners replies that they “have landed in ill time”:

Ay, my lord, and fear  
*We have landed in ill time.* The skies look grimly  
And threaten present blusters. In my conscience,  
The heavens with that we have in hand are angry,  
And frown upon’s.  
(III, iii, 2-6, italics mine)

In the same way as Leontes has to be purged of the disease that affects him, the external world has to be healed because “ill”, as the mariner suggests. According to alchemical literature, constantly dwelling on the analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, “what is above” and “what is below”<sup>1249</sup>, the diseases affecting the “little world”<sup>1250</sup> of man are always reflected in some sort of disruption in the macrocosm. Medicine, as Paracelsus argues, is “the Alchemy of the Microcosm”<sup>1251</sup> since it cures man in the model of the cosmos and the good physician, therefore, is the one who studies “the macrocosm outside man” first:

If the physician understands things exactly and sees and recognizes all illnesses in the macrocosm outside man, and if he has a clear idea of man and his whole nature, then and only is he a physician. Then he may approach the inside of man [...]. This would not be possible without profound knowledge of the outer man, who is nothing other than heaven and earth<sup>1252</sup>.

Throughout his writings, the Swiss alchemist and physician constantly insists on the idea

---

<sup>1249</sup> “True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing”. Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula smaragdina*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>1250</sup> As Paracelsus writes, “man is a little world”. Paracelsus, *The Archidoxies of Theophrastus Paracelsus*, HAWP 2: 90.

<sup>1251</sup> Paracelsus, *The Book of Alchemy*, HAWP 2: 166.

<sup>1252</sup> Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, cit., p. 137.

that man is a reflection of the world:

man is now a microcosm, or a little world, because he is an extract from all the stars and planets of the whole firmament, from the earth and the elements; and so he is their quintessence. The four elements are the universal world, and from these man is constituted. [...] man comprises in himself all the qualities of the world<sup>1253</sup>.

Hartmann observes that the leitmotiv of Paracelsus's alchemical and medical theories lies precisely in the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm:

The forces composing the Microcosm of man are identical with the forces composing the Macrocosm of the world. [...] Man may be affected with spasms, or dropsy, or colic, or fevers, etc., and the Macrocosm of the earth may be affected with earthquakes, rain-spouts, storms, and lightnings<sup>1254</sup>.

In the light of the close connection between man and the cosmos, alchemical authors often represent the corruption of base metals at the beginning of the *opus alchymicum* either as a form of sterility affecting the chemical king himself or as a condition of barrenness of the land. If the king of Ripley's *Cantilena* is "Barren" and "Infoecund"<sup>1255</sup>, so in the aforementioned vision of Arisleus, the reign of the so-called *rex marinus* is completely sterile because no procreation, or *coniunctio*, occurs<sup>1256</sup>: in the latter's case, it is the alchemist's task to restore health to the king's arid land. There seems to be a connection between the alchemical parables dwelling on the imagery of the *rex chymicus* and the legend of the Fisher King, a myth that has its origins in the primitive cults dedicated to the gods Attis, Osiris, and Adonis, and that was further developed in the medieval romances of the Arthurian cycle<sup>1257</sup>. In her invaluable study on the Grail legend, Jessie Weston demonstrates that the enigmatic figure of the Fisher King is to be understood in the light of the ancient rituals that celebrated the seasonal cycle of death and rebirth. These ceremonial practices presupposed the worship of a semi-divine figure that was thought to embody the

---

<sup>1253</sup> Paracelsus, *The End of the Birth, and the Consideration of the Stars*, HAWP 2: 289-90.

<sup>1254</sup> Franz Hartmann, *The Life of Philippus Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim Known by the Name of Paracelsus and the Substance of his Teachings Concerning Cosmology, Anthropology, Pneumatology, Magic and Sorcery, Medicine, Alchemy and Astrology, Philosophy and Theosophy, Extracted and Translated from His Rare and Extensive Works and from Some Unpublished Manuscripts*, Kegan Paul, London, 1896, p. 193.

<sup>1255</sup> "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". George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 177.

<sup>1256</sup> See section 5.3. "If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within. Leontes as Rex Chymicus"

<sup>1257</sup> See Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Doubleday, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1957. (or. ed. Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1920). See also James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*, Macmillan, New York, 1930.

regenerative spirit of Mother Earth. The relationship between the infirmity of this king or semi-god and the consequent barrenness of the earth is a topic that, Weston argues, stands at the basis of the myth of the Fisher King and of the Arthurian tales, usually recounting the quest undertaken by a knight to find the Grail and cure the sick king, whose recovered health will be mirrored in the healing of his reign<sup>1258</sup>. As far as alchemical literature is concerned, Mino Gabriele observes that medieval tales widely contributed to transmit to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century culture a rich imaginative background that inevitably flowed into alchemical texts and iconography<sup>1259</sup>. Given that the legend of the Fisher King is at the basis of a cult that propitiated nature and the seasonal cycle of decay and regeneration and that, as Weston remarks, the stories of the Grail derive from primeval rituals of life<sup>1260</sup>, it can be assumed that the alchemical allegories that dwell on the restoration to health and strength of the chemical king might equally be regarded as a celebration of the natural rhythm of life and death: a mechanism that alchemists, in the wake of the primeval myth of the *homo faber*<sup>1261</sup>, believe to be able to regulate by controlling the very processes of nature. Eliade remarks that the *opus alchymicum* is conceived of as an initiatory journey based on the model of the ancient Mysteries: the main part of the initiation consisted in the participation to the death and rebirth of a god, usually embodying the spirit of nature. In the course of the alchemical work of transmutation, Eliade argues, matter is submitted to the same initiatory path of death and resurrection:

c'est le drame mystique du dieu – sa passion, sa mort, sa résurrection – qui est projeté sur la Matière pour la transmuier. En somme, l'alchimiste traite la Matière comme la divinité était traitée dans les Mystères<sup>1262</sup>.

---

<sup>1258</sup> “He [the Fisher King] is not merely a deeply symbolic figure, but the essential centre of the whole cult, a being semi-divine, semi-human, standing between his people and land, and the unseen forces which control their destiny. If the Grail story be based upon a Life ritual the character of the Fisher King is of the very essence of the tale, and his title, so far from being meaningless, expresses, for those who are at pains to seek, the intention and object of the perplexing whole. The Fisher King is, as I suggested above, the very heart and centre of the whole mystery, and I contend that with an adequate interpretation of this enigmatic character the soundness of the theory providing such an interpretation may be held to be definitely proved”. Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, cit., p 136.

<sup>1259</sup> See Mino Gabriele (ed.), *Il Giardino di Hermes*, cit., note 101, pp. 165-6.

<sup>1260</sup> “Can it be denied that, while from the standpoint of a Christian interpretation the character of the Fisher King is simply incomprehensible, from the standpoint of Folk-tale inadequately explained, from that of a Ritual survival it assumes a profound meaning and significance?”. Jessi L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, cit., p. 136.

<sup>1261</sup> According to the celebrated historian of religions, the primeval attempts to act on matter carried out by ceramicists, blacksmiths, and miners were accomplished in the light of the myth of the *homo faber* and in the attempt to have a role in the sphere of the sacred. These practices gave birth to the first alchemical operations: “Si nos analyses et nos interprétations sont fondées, l'alchimie prolonge et consomme un très vieux rêve de l'*homo faber*: collaborer au perfectionnement de la Matière, tout en assurant à soi-même sa propre perfection”. Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 175.

<sup>1262</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

Massimiliano Palombara, in the text *La Bugia*, clearly emphasises the close link between the health of the *rex chymicus* and the latter's reign:

Mentre io stavo travagliando del continuo per la liberazione del Re, andavo similmente sempre prendendo godimento che le mie fatiche non fossero vane, poiché dai segni benissimo argumentavo che il Re mediante l'opera mia sarebbe ritornato non solo sano e salvo nel suo regno a dominare, ma con maggior forza e con miglior aspetto e maestà di quella che aveva avuto per il passato<sup>1263</sup>.

Even though Palombara's work was published in the seventeenth century, it draws on themes that are to be found in previous alchemical works, as pointed out by Mino Gabriele<sup>1264</sup>. In *The Winter's Tale*, the expiation or, in alchemical terms, the 'ablution' of Leontes, who is submitted to a *nigredo*-like process of suffering and atonement, is reflected in the disruption of the outer world, hit by a savage storm: in like manner, Leontes's spiritual rebirth will be mirrored in the regeneration of the whole court of Sicily, at the end of the drama: as Frye observes, "we begin with Sicilia dying and end with Sicilia newborn"<sup>1265</sup>.

The cleansing power of water during the ablution is of paramount importance in the course of the *opus alchymicum*, because, as already noticed, it allows the purification of matter and the beginning of the journey leading to the achievement of the philosopher's stone: it represents a phase in which the old and corrupted form of the metal is annihilated in order to be purified. As argued by Paracelsus, "dissolution is a kind of retrogression. Whatever things Nature has gradually formed by composition, those things you ought to be able to dissolve by a reverse process"<sup>1266</sup>. The first step of the alchemical work is defined by alchemists as *opus contra naturam*, because, "[i]n order for regeneration to occur, the imperfect metal (or outmoded state of being) has first to be destroyed"<sup>1267</sup>. In a paradoxical

---

<sup>1263</sup> Massimiliano Palombara, "*La Bugia*". *Opera d'incerto autore nella quale si tratta della vera pietra dei sapienti*, 1656, in Mino Gabriele (ed.), *Il Giardino di Hermes*, cit., p. 138.

<sup>1264</sup> "Nel suo complesso la 'parabola' di Massimiliano ripropone contenuti comuni alla cultura alchemica tanto seicentesca che precedente. Molti brani dello scritto – e ciò vale del resto anche per l'intera *Bugia* – rinviano implicitamente e talvolta in modo esplicito al *Pimandro*, alla *Turba* e al *Rosarium* [...]. Tutto ciò trova una sua ragione immediata nella vasta e non comune cultura filosofico-ermetica del Palombara (si ricordi che la sua ragguardevole biblioteca comprendeva oltre 'cinquecento tomi' d'argomento alchemico a stampa e manoscritti, fatti venire da tutta l'Europa), erudizione che permise allo stesso di poter contare su spunti e riferimenti autorevoli durante la composizione del trattato. Nondimeno il motivo di una tale tradizionalità dei contenuti va individuato nell'essenza religiosa della vicenda alchemica, concretata in una ricerca non indirizzata ad alcunché di originale e nuovo, bensì verso la coscienza di un sapere arcano e immutabile, vera chiave ermeneutica delle leggi naturali che da sempre governano l'universo". Mino Gabriele (ed.), *Il Giardino di Hermes*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>1265</sup> Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, cit., p. 161.

<sup>1266</sup> Paracelsus, *The Third Column of Medicine*, HAWP 2: 154.

<sup>1267</sup> See 'opus contra naturam', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 139.

way, the alchemist has to go ‘against’ nature in order to go forward and improve it<sup>1268</sup>. Fabricius remarks that the alchemical rebirth is always preceded by a return to the source of life, to the original chaos: as the scholar observes, alchemists begin their *opus* “by a rotary movement turning the wheel of creation backward in an *opus contra naturam* aimed at a return to the source of all creation”<sup>1269</sup>. Ripley himself suggests that the *rota alchemica* should be turned backwards: “Thys done, go backward, turnyng thy wheele again”<sup>1270</sup>. The so-called *prima materia* is also referred to in alchemical writings with the term ‘chaos’ and is conceived of as the starting point of the alchemical process of ‘creation’: in the parable entitled *Blomfields Blossoms*, the alchemist is told that “Chaos is all thing / That we begin of, the true way of working”<sup>1271</sup>. As God moulded the cosmos from a chaotic, shapeless mass, so alchemists extract their quintessence by means of the same procedure: “Out of this misty *Chaos*, the *Philosophers* expert, / Doe a substance draw called a *Quintessence*”<sup>1272</sup>. Isaac Newton, among others, clearly dwells on the association between the creation of the world by God and the alchemical *opus*, arguing that “just as all things were created from one Chaos by the design of one God, so in our art all things [...] are born from this one thing, which is our Chaos, by the design of the Artificer”<sup>1273</sup>.

Again, I believe that alchemical symbolism can shed light on *The Winter’s Tale*, in this case on the scene of the shipwreck, in the third act, that precedes the following ‘rebirth’, in Bohemia, and the beginning of the process leading to the final regeneration. Immediately after the king of Sicily repents, announcing his purgatorial journey of re-creation, the audience witnesses the savage death of Antigonus, devoured by a bear, and the death of the mariners, who die in a sea storm, near the coast of Bohemia. The moment Antigonus lays the baby down, with a box and a few letters that will eventually allow the identification of the girl<sup>1274</sup>, the storm begins, as he himself acknowledges: “The storm

---

<sup>1268</sup> “The first step in the process of purification in the *opus alchymicum* was, then, the dissolution of the old corrupted form so that a new and purified form could be created. The alchemist must go ‘backward’ before he can go forward with the work”. Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 64.

<sup>1269</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>1270</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 133.

<sup>1271</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 317.

<sup>1272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1273</sup> Isaac Newton, *The Commentary on the Emerald Tablet*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 247. As Linden points out, Newton’s *Commentarium* is recorded in Latin autograph in Keynes MS 28 (King’s College, Cambridge). See Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Isaac Newton’s *Commentary*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 243.

<sup>1274</sup> In Act 5 the Steward recounts to the gentleman Rogero the encounter between the Shepherd, the Clown, and King Leontes. The Shepherd and the Clown describe how they found Perdita, sixteen years before, and show the king the objects and letters that were with the baby. As Paulina’s Steward reports to Rogero: “Most true, if ever truth were pregnant by circumstance. That which you hear you’ll swear you see; there is such unity in the proofs. The mantle of Queen Hermione’s; her jewel about the neck of it; the letters of Antigonus found with it, which they know to be his character; the majesty of the creature, in resemblance of the mother; the affection of nobleness which nature shows above her breeding, and many other

begins. Poor wretch, / That for thy mother's fault art thus exposed / To loss and what may follow!" (III, iii, 48-50). That the following scene, displaying the death of the whole crew in the enraging sea, might have appeared to Shakespeare's public as a clear image of primordial chaos is suggested by the emblem *Sine iustitia, confusio* collected in what is usually considered as the first of English emblem books, Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586). As Loretta Innocenti remarks, books of emblems and devices were constantly emulated, revised, expanded and, consequently, re-arranged<sup>1275</sup>. The English emblematic genre, in particular, developed on the basis of a tradition that was already flourishing on the continent. The aforementioned emblem by Whitney is actually based on the one by the French Barthélemy Aneau (1552), devised to represent 'order out of chaos'<sup>1276</sup> (see plates 82 and 83). In the epigram accompanying the illustration in Aneau's emblem, primeval chaos is described in the following terms: "If with earth heaven should mingle and the sea with heaven, / Into ancient chaos at last all things would be confounded"<sup>1277</sup>. Interestingly enough, the words employed in Aneau's epigram to describe the state of chaos existing before Creation recall the lines pronounced by the Bohemian Clown in *The Winter's Tale*, after witnessing the dreadful death of the mariners and of Antigonus: "I have seen two such sights, by sea and by land! But I am not to say it is a sea, for it is now the sky; betwixt the firmament and it you cannot thrust a bodkin's point" (III, iii, 81-4). Unable to draw a dividing line between the sea and the land, earth and heaven, the Shepherd's son witnesses an apocalyptic scene, where all things are "confounded", exactly as Aneau's epigram reads. The description of the shipwreck made by the Clown suggests that the relationship between man and nature, microcosm and macrocosm, is evidently altered, thus further highlighting the disorder that dominates the scene: "But to make an end of the ship – to see how / the sea flapdragoned it! But first, how *the poor souls / roared*, and *the sea mocked them*" (III, iii, 96-8, italics mine). The mariners "roar" while nature, instead, is described in human terms, with a sea that "mocks" man and "flapdragoned" the ship, almost swallowing it. In a similar way, when recounting the death of lord Antigonus, surprisingly chased and killed by a bear, the Clown describes the events

---

evidences proclaim her with all certainty to be the king's daughter" (V, ii, 30-38).

<sup>1275</sup> Loretta Innocenti, *Vis eloquentiae*, cit., p. 18. See also Michael Bath and Daniel Russell (eds.), *Deviceful Settings: the English Renaissance Emblem and its Contexts*, Selected Papers from the Third International Emblem Conference, Pittsburgh, 1993, AMS Press, New York, 1999.

<sup>1276</sup> Aneau's and Whitney's emblems are reproduced by Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers*, Trübner, London, 1870, pp. 449-50.

<sup>1277</sup> Barthélemy Aneau, Epigram to the emblem "Sine iustitia confusio", in Id., *Picta poesis, Vt Pictura Poesis Erit*, Apud Mathiam Bonhomme, Lyons, 1552, p. 49. The translation of the epigram from English to Latin is by Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers*, cit., p. 449. The same emblem is reproduced by Whitney in Id., *A Choice of Emblemes*, a fac-simile reprint, edited by Henry Green, Lovell Reeve & Co., London, 1866, p. 122.

as if the respective roles of man and nature had been suddenly reversed<sup>1278</sup>: “and how *the poor / gentleman roared*, and *the bear mocked him*, both / roaring louder than the sea or weather” (III, iii, 97-9, italics mine).

If read in alchemical terms, the scene of the shipwreck, that displays a situation of total confusion, in which death and life are closely intertwined, might be associated with the alchemical phase of ablution, a stage that presupposes a retrograde movement of dissolution towards primeval chaos, that functions as a starting point of a healing journey leading to rebirth. Alchemists call the *prima materia* also *Corpus confusum*<sup>1279</sup> precisely because it indicates a state in which disorder reigns and often describe it as a ‘sea’. The sea is an apt metaphor for primordial matter since, as Abraham remarks, its “amorphous state makes it an obvious choice of image for something that is formless but contains forms within it”<sup>1280</sup>. As already said, the characters at the centre of the alchemical parable by Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, announce to be ready to undertake all sorts of tempests at sea before passing at “another Clymate”, where they “shall receive a more purer estate”<sup>1281</sup>. After being purified at sea during the ablution stage, which they define as a “Purgatory”, they will be conferred “a Spirituall Body”<sup>1282</sup>, thus attaining the end of their alchemical journey. Charnock’s text recalls the structure of *The Winter’s Tale*: after the storm of the third act, that signals the end of the tragic part of the play and the beginning of the ascent towards the final reunion, the scene shifts to “another Clymate”<sup>1283</sup>, to a renewed dimension, i.e. the world of Bohemia, where Perdita has “grown in grace / Equal with wondering” (IV, i, 24-5), as will be discussed.

The image of the *massa confusa* as a sea or an abyss is a recurrent metaphor in alchemical treatises. One of the Ovidian myths alchemists constantly refer to as an allegory of the *opus alchymicum* is that of the Golden Fleece, that further draws on the trope of the troublesome journey at sea. The abyss, as the sea, is one of the epithets alchemists attribute to the primordial matter from which God created the cosmos: “The Heavens, the Earth, and all that in them is, / Were in six Dayes perfected from Abisse”<sup>1284</sup>. Being

---

<sup>1278</sup> As Romero argues, “i verbi utilizzati dal Clown per descrivere la morte di Antigono, cui assiste impotente alla fine della parte tragica, avvalorano l’idea che sia in atto un rovesciamento di ruoli tra mondo umano e animale, uno stravolgimento dell’armonia del mondo, una sorta di vendetta da parte della natura”. Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done*. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., pp. 52-53.

<sup>1279</sup> “Here is *Materia Prima*, and *Corpus confusum*”. William Blomfield, *Blomfields blossoms*, cit., TCB 318.

<sup>1280</sup> See ‘sea or sea water’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 179.

<sup>1281</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 292.

<sup>1282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1284</sup> Thomas Robinsonus, *De Lapide Philosophorum*, TCB 335. See also ‘abyss’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 2.

traditionally the source of life, water represents the origins of Creation and, therefore, of the alchemical work, as recalled by the alchemist Jean d'Espagnet: "Thales, Heraclitus, and Hesiodus accounted water the first matter of all things, to whose opinion the Writer of the holy Genesis seems to consent: This they call an Abyss and Water"<sup>1285</sup>. Since the mercurial 'sea' is both deathly and regenerative, killing and reviving, as recorded in *Rosarium philosophorum*<sup>1286</sup>, alchemists also use the metaphor of the flood to indicate the waters of dissolution and re-creation in the phase of ablution. The Biblical episode of the flood recounted in Genesis represents an allegory of the process by means of which new life follows destruction and is, therefore, a suitable metaphor for the cycle of *solve et coagula*: "In both biblical and alchemical symbolism the waters of the flood were paradoxically destructive and regenerative"<sup>1287</sup>. After the deluge, Noah allegedly planted a vineyard, thus suggesting that regeneration has followed dissolution, in the same way as the alchemical stage of *nigredo* is always replaced by the *albedo*:

Sone after that *Noe* plantyd hys Vyneyard,  
 Whych really floryshed and brought forth Graps anon:  
 After whych space thou shalt not be aferd;  
 For in lykewyse shall follow the floryshyng of our *Stone*<sup>1288</sup>.

When the perils of the ablution have passed, a new phase of peace begins, the so-called *albedo*: this is why Ripley argues that after Noah's flood the alchemist "shalt not be aferd" anymore. In his *Lexicon Alchimiae*, Martin Ruland observes that the *albedo* indicates that the dangers related to the phase of *nigredo*, or dissolution, have been overcome: "When the stone [...] has arrived at the perfect White Stage [...], then all the philosophers say that this is the time of joy, [...] and they have avoided all the rocks and dangers of the sea"<sup>1289</sup>. Alchemical re-creation actually begins only after the previous, old, and diseased state of things has been annihilated, as suggested by the formula *solve et coagula*, 'dissolve and coagulate'.

<sup>1285</sup> Jean d'Espagnet, *The Summary of Physics Restored*, cit., p. 14

<sup>1286</sup> "Aqua est quae occidit et viuificat". *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 214.

<sup>1287</sup> See 'ark', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>1288</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 151.

<sup>1289</sup> Martin Ruland, *A Lexicon of Alchemy or Alchemical Dictionary, Containing a Full and Plain Explanation of All Obscure Words, Hermetic Subjects, and Arcane Phrases of Paracelsus*, 1612, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, John Watkins, London, 1893, p. 379. (or. ed. *Lexicon alchimiae, sive Dictionarium alchemisticum alchemisticum Cum obscuriorum Verborum, et Rerum Hermeticarum, tum Theophrast-Paracelsicarum phrasium, planam explicationem continens*, Palthenus, Francofurti, 1612).

### 6.3. 'The white sheet bleaching on the hedge'.

#### The Reborn World of Bohemia and the Alchemical Stage of *albedo*

*The Winter's Tale* can be read as an alchemical journey that, passing through a phase of dissolution by means of water, leads to a renewed condition and to the final *coniunctio* between the king and the queen of Sicily, Leontes and Hermione, the royal couple that, as expected from alchemical imagery, is separated before being reconciled. The climax of the play is represented precisely by the shipwreck, that is staged in the third act, usually functioning as a turning point. As the alchemical phase of ablution is always followed by a regeneration, so in Shakespeare's romance the storm is the prelude to a new beginning. As if the waters of the sea storm had cleared the cosmos from the 'illness' that initially affected it<sup>1290</sup>, the tragic half of the play ends and comedy begins: a world dying is replaced by one reborn, in the same way as alchemical re-creation begins only after matter has been purified in water during the stage of ablution. The third act of the play is closed by the image of a world "destroyed"<sup>1291</sup>, whereas the fourth act is opened by the words of Father Time, who, as will be discussed, presents "th' freshest things now reigning" (IV, i, 13), thus leaving the diseased and corrupt microcosm of Leontes behind and paving the way for a healing journey of rebirth. Taking into account that the *albedo* is a stage where "all is fresh, sweet, pure, and white after the advent of the 'dew' and 'rain'"<sup>1292</sup>, the reborn dimension of Bohemia, to which the audience is introduced after the scene of the shipwreck, is highly reminiscent of the alchemical phase of regeneration that always follows the *ablutio*. One of the images alchemists employ to indicate that the stage of *albedo* has been attained is that of the white sheets<sup>1293</sup>. As already said, a plate in *Splendor solis* shows women while washing and drying some linen (see plate 53): the white sheets laid out to dry stand for the *albedo*, that has succeeded the cleansing phase of ablution. The song of the daffodils sung by the peddler and rogue Autolycus, announcing the renewed, spring-like spirit that will dominate the second half of *The Winter's Tale*, presents images of regeneration, among which is precisely that of the "white sheet bleaching on the hedge":

---

<sup>1290</sup> The moment the ship touches the coast of Bohemia, one of the mariners says to Antigonus: "Ay, my lord, and fear / We have landed in ill time" (III, iii, 3-4).

<sup>1291</sup> When, almost at the end of the play, a Gentleman tells Autolycus about the encounter between Camillo, Leontes and the two shepherds, who narrate of how they found Perdita after a shipwreck in Bohemia, sixteen years before, he observes that "They looked as they had heard / of a world ransomed, or one destroyed" (V, ii, 13-5).

<sup>1292</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>1293</sup> See 'sheets', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 182.

When daffodils begin to peer,  
With heigh, the doxy over the dale,  
Why then comes in the sweet o'the year,  
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.

The white sheet bleaching on the hedge,  
With heigh, the sweet birds, O how they sing!  
(IV, iii, 1-6)

The metaphor of the white sheet that bleaches on the hedge in Autolycus's song acquires a particular significance if read in the light of alchemy. As a matter of fact, the reference to the white sheet bleaching on the hedge, that opens precisely the second half of the drama and comes after the destruction caused by the "birth-and-death-bringing sea storm"<sup>1294</sup> of the third act, might hint at the purified state that has followed the 'dissolution' displayed in the scene of the shipwreck.

In the course of the alchemical work the turning point occurs precisely at the stage of ablution, when matter is destroyed in order to be created anew and the *rota alchemica* is turned backwards: "Such an inversion of the world occurs in the middle of the alchemical *opus*, when all is dissolved back into the *prima materia* of the abyss"<sup>1295</sup>. Northrop Frye notices that in the third act of *The Winter's Tale*, i.e. in the middle of the play, the audience clearly witnesses "a world dissolving into chaos"<sup>1296</sup>. The idea of disorder is also evident at a linguistic level since, as Frye observes, after Antigonus's speech the rhythm suddenly shifts from blank verse to prose<sup>1297</sup>. Immediately after the Sicilian lord hears a "savage clamour"<sup>1298</sup> that announces the coming of the storm and of the bear that would devour him, prose replaces blank verse. At this point, Antigonus dies and the two shepherds, who witness the violent deaths of the mariners and of the lord and find the newborn girl, come into play. The one displayed in the third act of *The Winter's Tale* is evidently a scene of total confusion, both from a thematic and structural point of view – a scene that, taking place precisely at the centre of the drama and preceding the consequent regeneration in Bohemia, might be associated with the central stage of the alchemical cycle, when the *rota alchemica* is turned backwards and primeval chaos is restored. As the phase of *albedo* succeeds that of ablution, and order replaces the disorder of the *materia prima*, so, in *The*

---

<sup>1294</sup> B. J. Sokol, *Art and Illusion in The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 118.

<sup>1295</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 103.

<sup>1296</sup> Northrop Frye, "Shakespeare's Romances: *The Winter's Tale*", in Harold Bloom (ed.), *William Shakespeare: Romances*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>1297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1298</sup> Antigonus: "A savage clamour! / Well may I get aboard. This is the chase. / I am gone for ever!" (III, iii, 55-7).

*Winter's Tale*, the movement towards death and chaos that closes the first half of the drama is followed by an 'ascent', defined by Northrop Frye as "anastrophe": a reversal and a counter-movement leading to the final renewal<sup>1299</sup>. The concept of inversion is fundamental in alchemical symbolism because it alludes to the stage of dissolution of the *opus contra naturam* and to the consequent regeneration at the *albedo*<sup>1300</sup>. As written in a text attributed to the legendary alchemist known as Maria Prophetissa, usually considered as the founding mother of alchemy and possibly living in the early third century AD<sup>1301</sup>, in the course of the *opus alchymicum* the order of nature should be 'inverted': "Invert nature and you will find that which you seek"<sup>1302</sup>. In a similar way, dwelling on the paradoxical nature of alchemical art, Trismosin compares the *opus* to the play of children, arguing that alchemists "turn undermost that which before was uppermost"<sup>1303</sup>. In *The Winter's Tale*, the idea of inversion is highlighted by Father Time, who announces a reversal at the beginning of the fourth act: "Your patience this allowing, / *I turn my glass*, and give my scene such growing / As you had slept between" (IV, i, 16-8, italics mine). After the state of dissolution displayed in the scene of the shipwreck, an inversion occurs: the 'dying' and winter-like world of Sicily is replaced by the 'reborn' and spring-like world of Bohemia.

The dichotomous structure of *The Winter's Tale*, in which life and death, as much as tragedy and comedy, are conflated, recalls "the tragi-comic art of the *Magnum opus*"<sup>1304</sup>, as it has been defined by Simonds. Though it resists classifications, the play, that closes the section of the *Comedies* in the 1623-Folio<sup>1305</sup>, is usually regarded as a tragicomedy since the tragic and the comic modes are evidently united, as if the romance had been conceived of as a diptych, whose panels are "held together by the hinge of Time"<sup>1306</sup>. Pafford, for instance, argues that "*The Winter's Tale* can be called a romantic tragi-comedy"<sup>1307</sup>. It has been remarked that Shakespeare "seems like an astonishingly literal-minded man who, attempting to write tragicomedy, assumes that it must mean a tragedy joined to a

<sup>1299</sup> Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: the Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1965, p. 73.

<sup>1300</sup> See 'inversion', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>1301</sup> See Raphael Patai, "Maria the Jewess – Founding Mother of Alchemy", *Ambix*, vol. 29, Part 3, November 1982, p. 178.

<sup>1302</sup> Maria the Jewess, "Discourse of the Most Sage Maria About the Philosopher's Stone", quoted in Raphael Patai, "Maria the Jewess – Founding Mother of Alchemy", cit., p. 180.

<sup>1303</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 39.

<sup>1304</sup> Peggy Munoz Simonds, "'Love is a spirit all compact of fire': Alchemical Coniunctio in *Venus and Adonis*", in Alison Adams and Stanton J. Linden (eds.), *Emblems and Alchemy*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>1305</sup> See William Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare*, cit., p. 277.

<sup>1306</sup> Charles Moseley, "The Literary and Dramatic Contexts of the Last Plays", in Catherine M. S. Alexander (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, cit., p. 56: "*The Winter's Tale* is built like a diptych. Its two panels, held together by the hinge of Time, contrast in location, in theme, in language, in genre".

<sup>1307</sup> J.H.P. Pafford, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, edited by J.H.P. Pafford, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, Methuen, London and New York, 1984, p. 1.

comedy”<sup>1308</sup>. In a tragicomedy, the climax in the third act is not followed by a descent into catastrophe, as in the tragic genre<sup>1309</sup>, but, rather, by an ascent, or, as Frye remarks, an anastrophe, i.e. an ‘inversion’: the second half of a tragicomedy is usually devised as an upward journey at the end of which harmony is restored. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Pitcher points out, the turning point is represented precisely by the shipwreck, “when the themes of rebirth and regeneration are announced”<sup>1310</sup>. According to the scholar, the celebrated lines “thou met’st with things dying, I with things newborn” (III, iii, 100-111) are significant also in terms of genre since Shakespeare seems to have in mind the definition of comedy and tragedy made by the grammarian Evanthius: “In comedy, it was said, ‘the beginning is turbulent, the end tranquil, while in tragedy the opposite holds true’”<sup>1311</sup>. In like manner, the climax of the *opus alchymicum*, usually corresponding to the phase of *ablutio*, is always followed by a renewal, the alchemical work being a cycle of dissolution and reconstruction, division and reunion at the end of which all contrasting polarities are resolved in the *coniunctio* between the royal couple (see plates from 1 to 17).

One of the reasons why the *opus alchymicum* seems to have a tragicomic structure is the constant alternation of death and life, sorrow and joy, ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’ that characterises the whole cycle of the *solve et coagula*. If the first half of the Great Work is a phase of death, melancholy, and “strife”<sup>1312</sup>, the second part, conversely, is a phase of regeneration and joy, that begins with the *albedo* and that leads to the chemical wedding. Considering that *The Winter’s Tale* presents “doleful matter merrily set down” (IV, iv, 191), as suggested by the Clown, one might see a particular connection between Shakespeare’s romance and the ‘tragicomic’, and paradoxical, scheme of the *opus alchymicum*. *The Winter’s Tale* is a play that, as Romero remarks, longs for the fusion of contraries, both from a structural and interpretative point of view<sup>1313</sup>: the diptych-like scheme of the play,

<sup>1308</sup> David Young, *The Heart’s Forest. A Study of Shakespeare’s Pastoral Plays*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1972, p. 117.

<sup>1309</sup> On the scheme of tragedy, see Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama. An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, translated by Elias J. McEwan, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1900, pp. 114-15: “Trough the two halves of the action which come closely together at one point, the drama possesses – if one may symbolize its arrangement by lines – a pyramidal structure. It rises from the *introduction* with the entrance of the exciting forces to the *climax*, and falls from here to the *catastrophe*. Between these three parts lie (the parts of ) the *rise* and the *fall*”.

<sup>1310</sup> John Pitcher, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>1311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1312</sup> See ‘peace and strife’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 141: “Peace is the harmonious state attained when the opposing principles of the opus [...] are united in the chemical wedding. [...] the chemical wedding paradoxically comes about through a process of strife. The reconciliation of the couple is also known as the conversion of the four elements. The elements with their opposing qualities are said to be warring, conflicting foes until reconciled and united in peace”. On the constant alternation of images of death and life, destruction and renewal in alchemical imagery, see also Lyndy Abraham, “‘The Lovers and the Tomb’: Alchemical Emblems in Shakespeare, Donne, and Marvell”, cit., pp. 301-320.

<sup>1313</sup> Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done*. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter’s Tale*”,

evidently made up of two halves, a tragic and a comic one, is reflected in the opposition between death and life, winter and spring, art and nature, youth and old age, Sicily and Bohemia that marks the whole work and that is resolved at the end of the drama, in the symbolical reconciliation between Leontes and Hermione – a ‘chemical wedding’ that, in alchemical imagery, symbolises the reunion of all opposites. The adjective ‘tragicomic’, blending two antithetical meanings, well expresses the spirit of *The Winter’s Tale*<sup>1314</sup>. The words spoken by the Clown, referring to the ballads of the peddler Autolycus, condense the oxymoronic essence of the play: “I love a ballad but even too well, if it be *doleful matter merrily set down*; or a *very pleasant thing* indeed, and *sung lamentably*” (IV, iv, 189-92). It should be noted that in alchemical emblems and illustrations, symbols of life are usually accompanied by symbols of death, thus testifying to the constant synthesis of opposing conceptions that distinguishes alchemical imagery. In particular, the *coniunctio* between the king and the queen is usually represented as a deathly embrace, alluding to the idea that it is only through a phase of separation, sorrow, and death that joy can be achieved (see plate 46). As a case in point, a plate in *Rosarium philosophorum* shows the royal couple united in a grave, thus evidently conflating joy and sorrow, life and death (see plate 45). In a similar way, an engraving in Mylius’s *Philosophia reformatata* depicts the lovers within a coffin and a skeleton carrying a scythe stands next to them (see plate 43).

The clash between life and death is particularly evident in the stage of ablutio, when the phase of dissolution ends and one of re-creation begins. The alchemist Thomas Norton argues that the mercurial waters at the ablutio allow “things mortified [...] to revive”<sup>1315</sup>. As already said, the waters of life and death of the alchemical sea, abyss, or flood are said to be both deathly and regenerative<sup>1316</sup>. Fabricius remarks that the *prima materia* is a troublesome experience for the alchemist precisely because it represents “the battleground of opposing forces”: it is “a ‘putrefying’ movement of death and rebirth”<sup>1317</sup>. In a similar way, Abraham notices that, at the phase of *ablutio*, the “black waters of dissolution [...] threaten to drown every living creature, and yet, at the nadir, these deathly waters are miraculously transformed into the waters of life”<sup>1318</sup>. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita’s unexpected recovery clearly corresponds to the death of Antigonus and of the mariners. When lamenting the passing of her husband Antigonus, Paulina remarks that he

---

cit., p. 46.

<sup>1314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1315</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 59.

<sup>1316</sup> “Aqua est quae occidit et viuificat”. *Rosarium philosophorum*, AA 2: 214.

<sup>1317</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>1318</sup> See “flood”, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 78.

“Did perish with the infant” (V, i, 44). However, unbeknownst to everyone, the girl was saved. Death and life meet in the third act, that is also the join of the two halves of the play, the tragic and the comic. Perdita, who, as suggested by her name, is “counted lost for ever”<sup>1319</sup>, epitomises, instead, new life springing from the ashes of a world reduced into chaos, thus recalling the alchemical motto according to which there is no generation without corruption<sup>1320</sup>. Alchemical writers constantly dwell on the idea that regeneration and putrefaction are closely connected, as suggested in the following words by Trevisanus:

Car cette mortification est sa revivification; parce qu’en se mortifiant, il se revivifie, et en se revivifiant, il se mortifie. Certes ces deux operations sont tellement enchainée l’une avec l’autre, et entrelacées, que l’une ne peut ester sans l’autre, comme enseigne la doctrine Philosophale: car la generation de l’un, est la corruption de l’autre<sup>1321</sup>.

The lives of Antigonus and Perdita are put in relation from the very beginning of the play. When ordering Antigonus to kill the child, Leontes asks the lord what he would do to save her: “What will you adventure / To save this bastard?” (II, iii, 160-1). Foreshadowing the events of the third act, Antigonus prophetically replies that he would give his own life: “I’ll pawn the little blood which I have left / To save the innocent – anything possible” (II, iii, 164-5). Further highlighting the tension between death and life, loss and recovery, dissolution and re-creation that characterises the scene of the shipwreck, the Steward notices that “all the instruments which aided to expose the child were even then *lost* when it was *found*” (V, ii, 69-71, italics mine). As the alchemical *prima materia*, so the scene that portrays the shipwreck in *The Winter’s Tale* is a “battleground of opposing forces”<sup>1322</sup>, a conflict that ends with the triumph of life over death: Perdita, whom everybody believes to be dead, is miraculously recovered and the play’s journey of renewal begins. Considering that in alchemical imagery the retrieval of primal matter “denotes an act of creation and one of destruction, [...] a retrograde movement and a progressive movement”<sup>1323</sup>, one might read the scene of the storm in *The Winter’s Tale*, in which “things dying” are the source of “things newborn” (III, iii, 110-11), in the light of the alchemical phase of abluion – a stage of dissolution that, by means of water, generates new life.

Since water is the dominating element during the abluion, it is not surprising that

<sup>1319</sup> Antigonus: “for the babe / Is counted lost for ever, Perdita / I prithee call’t” (III, iii, 48-50).

<sup>1320</sup> As already said, alchemists believe that there cannot be any generation if there is no corruption: “corruption of one is the generation of another”. Marie-Louise von Franz (ed.), *Aurora consurgens*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>1321</sup> Bernhard Trevisanus, *La parole délaissée*, in *Divers Traitez de philosophie naturelle*, cit., pp. 128-129.

<sup>1322</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>1323</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

alchemists also employ the image of the ship to identify the alembic during this stage<sup>1324</sup>. In Charnock's *Breviary of Philosophy*, the vessel in the stage *ablutio* is described as a "Ship [...] made but of Glasse" and abiding "tempest of the Aire"<sup>1325</sup>. As might be expected, Noah's ark is another metaphor for the alchemical alembic in the phase of dissolution<sup>1326</sup>. An engraving from a seventeenth-century text by Goosen van Vreeswijk, *De Goude Leeuw* (*The Green Lion* in English) shows the "biblical waters of destruction and salvation inundating the laboratory"<sup>1327</sup> (see plate 41). In Vreeswijk's plate the alchemical laboratory is depicted in the shape of Noah's ark, in the middle of the impetuous waters of the flood. Abraham observes that "[s]ince the ark contained the new race of beings which were to repopulate the world, it was seen by the alchemists as a matrix of generation"<sup>1328</sup>. In *The Winter's Tale*, the ship where Antigonus and Perdita are is undoubtedly a vessel of new life. As "the old outmoded race was drowned" in the flood during the stage of dissolution and "the new race generated from the ark on the waters"<sup>1329</sup>, so Antigonus and the mariners have to be sacrificed in order for Perdita to be saved: the girl is actually a personification of "th' freshest things" (IV, i, 13) with which the second part of the drama is opened and that indicate the beginning of the ascent that leads to rebirth.

Fabricius's description of the stage of regeneration that replaces the dissolution in the course of the *opus alchymicum* is particularly enlightening as far as the connections between *The Winter's Tale* and alchemical imagery are concerned. The scholar actually observes that "[a]lthough the adept's world has become a sinking island, it has been simultaneously transformed into a *treasure island*"<sup>1330</sup>. Fabricius's commentary refers to a sequence of plates in Johann Conrad Barchusen's *Elementa chemiae*: the engravings dwell specifically on the theme of the deluge. Since Barchusen's text dates from 1718, it was of course not known in Shakespeare's time. Nevertheless, it attests to the widespread and persistent use of the imagery related to the symbolism of water and of the flood in alchemical writings and illustrations. As a matter of fact, the "cosmic inundation" that is depicted in Barchusen's plates is based on the woodcuts collected in *Rosarium philosophorum*, first published in 1550<sup>1331</sup>. One of the engravings in the series considered by Fabricius shows the island of the alchemist almost completely sunk in the waters of the

<sup>1324</sup> See 'ship', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 183.

<sup>1325</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 292.

<sup>1326</sup> See 'ark', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>1327</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>1328</sup> See 'ark', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>1329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1330</sup> Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>1331</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

flood. However, as remarked by the scholar, “the alchemist’s sinking island is ‘supported’ by a sealed chest of drawers emerging from the sea and containing immense riches of gold and silver”<sup>1332</sup> (see plate 42). Gold and silver stand for the “riches”, both material and symbolical, that the alchemist attains after the troublesome and grim beginnings of the alchemical work: the phase of *albedo*, usually related to silver, and that of *rubedo*, usually related to gold, have replaced the ‘black’ *nigredo*, associated with lead. Interestingly enough, the world of Bohemia, soon after the destructive sea storm, has become a “treasure island”. When the Shepherd and the Clown find Perdita, they also discover some gold that Antigonus has left in a box when he abandoned the girl. At the sight of gold, the Clown addresses his father, the Shepherd, exclaiming: “You’re made old man. If the sins of your youth are forgiven you, you’re well to live. Gold, all gold!” (III, iii, 116-8). The recovery of Perdita, the noble daughter of the king of Sicily, signals a new condition of prosperity for the two shepherds: metaphorically speaking, moreover, ‘gold’ might also allude to the new phase of regeneration that has followed the ‘dissolution’ caused by the storm. Considering that alchemists often call the philosopher’s stone a ‘philosophical child’<sup>1333</sup>, the association of Perdita with alchemical gold, intended by alchemists also as a symbol of truth and wisdom and as an emblem of perfection, is at least plausible. Alchemical symbolism has much to do with the myth of *temporis filia veritas*, with which Perdita, in her turn, is usually associated: alchemical gold has to be ‘digested’ by time, in the same way as Perdita, the ‘philosophical child’ and a symbol of truth, is reunited with her family after “a wide gap of time” (V, iii, 154). John Dryden himself employs alchemical language to describe the role performed by time on the transmutation of metals into gold: “Till Time digests the yet imperfect Ore, / And know it will be Gold another day”<sup>1334</sup>. Alchemists actually believe in the healing effects of time since they claim that metals are naturally transformed into gold in the womb of Mother Earth: this is why alchemical writers conceive of their art as a way to foster the natural tendency to reach “a gradual attainment of perfection, and [...] approximation to the highest standard of purity and excellence”<sup>1335</sup>. As the alchemist known as ‘Sendivogius’ remarks, the “Philosophers

---

<sup>1332</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1333</sup> See ‘philosophical child’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 148.

<sup>1334</sup> John Dryden, *Annus Mirabilis*, 1666, ll. 553-6, quoted in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 153.

<sup>1335</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 8. “Haec omnia cum ita sint, quod nimirum, una unica et communis metallorum materia exstat, quae vi innati sui sulphuris aut confestim, aut postquam externum et malum reliquorum metallorum sulphur temporis successu per digestionem seposuit, in aurum abeat, quod metallorum finis, et vera naturae intention est: fateri utique et dicere cogimur, naturam et in hoc genere aequae ac in vegetabili et animali regno secundum puritatem et subtilitatem subjecti emendationem et perfectionem suae naturae auerere et deponere”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, MH 16-17.

stone or tincture is nothing else but Gold digested to the highest degree”<sup>1336</sup>. Gold, that represents the most perfect state that can be achieved in nature, is a product of time, that transmutes base metals and symbolically brings truth to light. Truth is traditionally said to be time’s ‘daughter’, in the same way as the ‘philosophical child’, or philosopher’s stone, is a product of time. Given the complexity of alchemical symbolism, always based on paradox, the newly-born *filius philosophorum* is sometimes defined as an ‘orphan’, because the royal couple has to be separated before being reconciled in the chemical wedding<sup>1337</sup>. A number of alchemical illustrations, as noticed above, depict the *coniunctio* of the king and the queen not only as an act of union but also as a form of death. As argued by Paracelsus, “the most wise Mercurius, the wisest of the Philosophers affirms, the same, hath called the Stone an Orphan”<sup>1338</sup>. Kelley claims that the alchemist has to wait for the true conjunction before child, husband, and wife are reunited:

*Ripley* doth bid you take it for no scorne,  
With patience to attend the true Coniunctiōn,  
For saith he in the Aire our Child is borne,  
[...] For after death reviv’d againe to lyfe,  
This all in all both Husband Child and Wife<sup>1339</sup>.

Taking into account that the infant stone, when “it has grown to maturity”, “has the power to conquer all disease and transform all things to perfection”<sup>1340</sup>, alchemical imagery seems to apply perfectly to Perdita, the girl who, somehow acting as the philosopher’s stone itself, “still betters what is done” (IV, iv, 136), and whose recovery, at the end of the play, corresponds to the reconciliation, or ‘chemical wedding’, between Leontes and Hermione – first “dissevered” (V, iii, 155) in order to be finally reunited. In alchemical literature the philosopher’s stone, or philosophical child, is always conceived of as a symbol of union and harmony<sup>1341</sup>. Pernety attests that alchemists usually describe the philosophical child as more perfect than his parents and argue that he or she is nurtured by Mother Earth: “Cet enfant est, selon eux [les alchimistes], plus noble et plus parfait que ses pere et mere, quoiqu’il soit fils du Soleil et de la Lune, et que la Terre ait été sa premiere

<sup>1336</sup> Michael Sendivogius, “The Tenth Treatise. Of the Supernaturall Generation of the Son of the Sun”, *A New Light of Alchymie*, in Stanton J. Liden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>1337</sup> See ‘philosophical child’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>1338</sup> Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, HAWP 1: 66. See also ‘philosophical child’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>1339</sup> Edward Kelley, *Kelle’s Worke*, cit., TCB 328.

<sup>1340</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>1341</sup> See ‘philosopher’s stone’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 148: “Despite the many names of the Stone, the alchemists stressed that it personified unity and consisted in one thing and one thing only”.

nourrice”<sup>1342</sup>. Pernety’s words refer to one of the principles in the *Tabula smaragdina*: “The father thereof is the Sun, the mother the Moon. The wind carried it in its womb, the earth is the nurse thereof”<sup>1343</sup>. Being the Earth the first nurturer of the philosophical child, the character of Perdita, raised as a shepherdess and associated with Flora and Proserpina, and, therefore, with nature itself<sup>1344</sup>, might be interpreted in the light of the alchemical concepts of the philosophical child and the philosopher’s stone. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that the philosophical child is sometimes personified as a female child, as is the case of Johan Valentine Andreae’s *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz* (*The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*) and Johannes Mylius’s *Philosophia Reformata*<sup>1345</sup>. Since the two texts date from 1616 and 1622 respectively, they cannot have had any kind of influence on the depiction of the character of Perdita. However, if considering that the first, no longer extant, version of Andreae’s *The Chymical Wedding* was very likely completed in 1603 and possibly circulated in manuscript form before the official publication in 1616, then one might wonder if there have been some sort of connections with *The Winter’s Tale*<sup>1346</sup>. The similarities between Shakespeare’s romance and Andreae’s work are particularly startling if considering that the latter, telling the story of a little girl who is found on a coast, recounts the effects of time on a young and an old generation, in order to end with a complete reconciliation, symbolised precisely by a ‘chemical wedding’ between a king and a queen. Yates actually argues that Andreae’s work is imbued with alchemical imagery:

[Andreae’s *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz*] is an alchemical fantasia,

<sup>1342</sup> See ‘Enfant’, in Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique*, cit., p. 118.

<sup>1343</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula smaragdina*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>1344</sup> As Antigonus exclaims when laying Perdita on the earth: “Some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens / To be thy nurses. Wolves and bears, they say, / Casting their savageness aside, have done / Like offices of pity” (II, iii, 184-7).

<sup>1345</sup> See ‘philosophical child’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>1346</sup> Francis Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, cit., p. 31: “Whilst a student at Tübingen, so he [Andreae] tells us, he made his first juvenile efforts as an author, in about the years 1602 and 1603. These efforts included [...] a work called *Chemical Wedding* [...]. The early version of the *Chemical Wedding*, which is not extant, must have been brought up to date for the publication of 1616. Nevertheless, the lost early version may have provided the core of the work”. Romero observes that, given the fact that Johann Valentine Andreae, the founder of the Rosicrucian movement, wrote *The Chymical Wedding* in 1603, one might legitimately wonder whether Andreae’s work, officially published in 1616 but possibly circulating in manuscript form well before that date, might have had some sort of influence on the composition of *The Winter’s Tale*: “Si ricordi, inoltre, che nel 1603 Johann Valentin Andreae, colui che fonda ufficialmente il movimento dei Rosacroce, scrive *Le nozze chimiche*, un’opera perduta che costituisce il nucleo da cui poi sviluppa l’opera *Le nozze chimiche di Christian Rosencreutz*, il ‘testo sacro’ dei Rosacroce, pubblicato nel 1616 ma probabilmente circolante in forma manoscritta ben prima: risulta spontaneo pensare alla trama di *The Winter’s Tale* se si osserva che il testo rosacrociano racconta la storia di una bambina ritrovata sulla costa, narra il passaggio e gli effetti del tempo su una generazione vecchia e su una generazione nuova e si conclude con la riconciliazione generale”. Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done*. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., pp. 85-86.

using the fundamental image of elemental fusion, the marriage, the uniting of the *sponsus* and the *sponsa*, touching also on the theme of death, the *nigredo* through which the elements must pass in the process of transmutation<sup>1347</sup>.

As I have tried to demonstrate so far, Leontes's ablution is reflected in the dissolution of the external world, so that the king's journey into his own 'blackness' is mirrored in an external journey. Leontes's inner quest for wisdom is also the outer quest for love and truth, two values that are finally re-established with the return of Hermione and Perdita, thus closing the circular course of the play. Time heals the king of Sicily and fosters the reconciliation of contraries, symbolised by the 'chemical wedding' between Leontes and Hermione, as if retracing the steps of the alchemical *rota*. Leontes, who performs a "saint-like sorrow" (V, i, 2) for sixteen years, is redeemed, in the same way as the cosmos, first "destroyed", is finally "ransomed" (V, ii, 15). As already said, water is of paramount importance in the alchemical work of healing and re-creation. In Charnock's *Breviary of Philosophy* the phase of cleansing is represented precisely as a sea journey: when the two characters announce to be "ready to the Sea prest", they claim that they will be cleansed in water: "Bread we shall have none, nor yet other foode, / But only faire water descending from a Cloude"<sup>1348</sup>. Their phase of expiation, defined as a "Purgatory", corresponds to the ablution, allegorically described as an expedition at sea: "For this our Sinns we make our Purgatory"<sup>1349</sup>. According to Jung, the alchemical parables that depict the *opus alchymicum* as a troublesome journey, either in a watery abyss, in a cavern, in a forest, in an island or in a castle, show the necessity of the descent into "the region of danger", i.e. the *nigredo*:

The purpose of the descent as universally exemplified in the myth of the hero is to show that only in the region of danger (watery abyss, cavern, forest, island, castle, etc.) can one find the "treasure hard to attain" (jewel, virgin, life-potion, victory over death)<sup>1350</sup>.

The beginning of the *opus alchymicum* is actually conceived of as a *nox profunda*, a descent into blackness: a phase of death and melancholy. Alchemists actually claim that matter "Must pass the darkness of the night, and then / Renewed shall be"<sup>1351</sup>. Abraham observes that the plunge into the abyss or in the sea is another version of the 'perilous

---

<sup>1347</sup> Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, cit., pp. 64-5.

<sup>1348</sup> Thomas Charnock, *The Breviary of Philosophy*, cit., TCB 292.

<sup>1349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1350</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Routledge, London, 1968<sup>2</sup>, p. 335. (or. ed. *Psychologie und Alchemie*, Rascher Verlag, Zurich, 1944; 2nd edition, 1952).

<sup>1351</sup> George Starkey, *The Marrow of Alchemy*, Printed by A.M. for Edw. Brewster, London, 1654, p. 55.

journey' into the depths of matter<sup>1352</sup>. Once corrupted matter is purified, the alchemical wheel can be turned towards regeneration, thus 'inverting' the cycle of the *solve et coagula*.

In *The Winter's Tale*, water plays a central role both in the shape of tears, that symbolically cleanse Leontes of his 'blackness', and, at the same time, as the sea, that purifies the outer world: the purgatorial path of Leontes is, therefore, mirrored in the purgation of the external world. When the old order of things has been annihilated, Time intervenes and announces an inversion. Not surprisingly, tragedy ends and comedy begins, thus clearly indicating that a reversal, a turning of the alchemical wheel, is occurring. In *The Marrow of Alchemy*, George Starkey explicitly remarks that the *opus alchymicum* is not successful and the stone cannot be created unless there is an initial retrograde movement of dissolution: "But ours is not, until by retrograde / Motion to resolution it intend"<sup>1353</sup>. In *The Winter's Tale*, this retrograde movement is staged in the third act, in the scene that clearly displays a world that is completely dissolved and reduced into chaos before it is created anew. In *Blomfields Blossoms*, chaos, or primal matter, a phase that alchemists associate with water, is defined as the starting point of the alchemical work: "Consider that I said that *Chaos* is all thing / That we begin of, the true way of working"<sup>1354</sup>. In Shakespeare's romance, Leontes's process of 're-creation', that consists in his symbolical death and rebirth, is also the 're-creation' of the macrocosm: the play actually depicts an inner and outer journey of renewal in which water and time follow the natural, and obliquely alchemical, cycle of dissolution and regeneration.

---

<sup>1352</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 104.

<sup>1353</sup> George Starkey, *The Marrow of Alchemy*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>1354</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 317.

#### 6.4. 'For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale'.

##### The Alchemical Symbolism of Saturn-Time in *The Winter's Tale*

One of the elements that have provoked the most intense discussions about *The Winter's Tale* is undoubtedly the treatment of time. "Time and the bear", it has been observed, "seem to be the greatest challenges" for actors and stage directors<sup>1355</sup>. The presence of time as a Chorus at the beginning of the fourth act, the sudden and unexpected entrance of the bear that kills Antigonus<sup>1356</sup>, but also the statue-scene, that displays the seeming resurrection of Queen Hermione, and Leontes's irrational jealousy have long puzzled audiences, stage directors, and scholars. At the simplest level, Time functions as a Chorus, announcing the end of the tragic part of the drama and the beginning of comedy, thus evidently joining the two halves of the play and attesting to the "wide gap of time" (V, iii, 154), i.e. sixteen or fifteen years<sup>1357</sup>, that elapses between Acts III and IV. A similar device appears in another of Shakespeare's 'last plays'<sup>1358</sup>, *Pericles*, a work that, according to critics, was written before *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, very likely in collaboration with George Wilkins<sup>1359</sup>. Although the name of Shakespeare always appeared

---

<sup>1355</sup> "They [Time and the bear] have tempted some directors toward symbolic interpretations. Time has assumed other characters' lines, appeared in the guise of, say, a gardener, or recurred as an aural or visual motif. So too the bear – although almost always best represented by an actor in bear costume – has been presented as a visual motif or been associated with another character in the play". Patricia Tatspaugh, "The *Winter's Tale*: Shifts in Staging and Status", in Catherine M.S. Alexander (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 127.

<sup>1356</sup> Scholars have long debated whether the bear scene in *The Winter's Tale* was inspired by *Mucedorus*, a play that was revived in those years by Shakespeare's theatre company and that presents a similar device, or whether, conversely, the revival of *Mucedorus* was prompted by the success of Shakespeare's romance: "The record of Simon Forman's visit to the Globe for a performance of *The Winter's Tale* indicates that it cannot have been written later than 11 May 1611. The revival of *Mucedorus*, with its expanded 'bear scene', by the King's Men on 18 February 1610 is complicated in terms of what it means for the early dating of Shakespeare's play. Did the company revive *Mucedorus* based on the success of *The Winter's Tale* or did the success of the revived play inspire Shakespeare to make use of it in writing *The Winter's Tale*? The positioning of the chapter on this play in the volume should indicate that we favour the latter opinion, while again accepting that it is far from certain". Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane, Introduction to Id. (eds.), *Late Shakespeare, 1608-1613*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 9.

<sup>1357</sup> It should be noticed that Time's statement according to which sixteen years have passed between Acts III and IV is in contrast with Camillo's claim according to which he left the court of Leontes fifteen years before – "It is fifteen years since I saw my country" (IV, ii, 4) –, thus further emphasising the temporal incongruities of the play, as will be discussed.

<sup>1358</sup> On the use of the expression 'last plays' instead of 'late plays', see Catherine M.S. Alexander, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, cit., p. 3: "The use of 'last' rather than 'late' in the title of this *Companion* is determined, in part, by the connotations in the word of survival and endurance – Shakespeare's *lasting* plays – and one of the characteristics shared by these works, prompted perhaps by their difference and the experimental nature of their stagecraft, is their rich afterlives evident not only in criticism, textual and authorship studies but in the imaginative responses that they have generated on the stage and in new media".

<sup>1359</sup> See Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, Introduction to *Pericles*, in

in the Quarto copies of the play that were issued before the 1623-Folio, the fact that *Pericles*, that in the Jacobean period became “a byword for theatrical success”<sup>1360</sup>, was thought to have been composed not entirely by Shakespeare is possibly one of the reasons why Heminge and Condell decided to exclude it from the first complete edition of the Bard’s dramatic works<sup>1361</sup>, thus inevitably contributing to cast some doubt on the authorship of the text. In *Pericles* the role of the Chorus is played by the medieval English poet John Gower, who intervenes to justify the temporal and spatial ellipses that recur throughout the play and to fast the narrative together, gradually “developing dramatic identity in his sustained interactions with the audience”<sup>1362</sup>.

As it is well known, in *The Winter’s Tale* Time appears as an actual character in Act IV and delivers his celebrated speech with the aim “to smooth over the rough spots left by a gap of sixteen years”<sup>1363</sup>. The fourth act, then, begins with the words of Time, who claims that he will turn his hourglass, thus leaving Leontes, “Th’effect of his fond jealousies so grieving, / That he shuts up himself” (IV, i, 18-19), and presenting Perdita, “now grown in grace / Equal with wondering” (IV, i, 24-5), after sixteen years have passed from when she was found in Bohemia:

I, that please some, try all; both joy and terror  
 Of good and bad, that makes and unfolds error,  
 Now take upon me, in the name of Time,  
 To use my wings. Impute it not a crime  
 To me or my swift passage that I slide  
 O’er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried  
 Of that wide gap.  
 (IV, i, 1-7)

---

William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, cit., p. 1059. As remarked by Gossett, “*Pericles* is an anomaly in the Shakespeare canon. It does not appear in the First Folio, but has always been published, from its first appearance in a quarto of 1609, with Shakespeare’s name on the title-page”. Suzanne Gossett, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London, 2004, p. 1. Despite the fact that the play is rarely staged nowadays, *Pericles* was an extremely popular play: “*Pericles* is one of Shakespeare’s most popular plays. This fact astonishes many readers who have barely heard of the drama and who have rarely encountered it on the page. Yet from its first performances, almost certainly in a brief theatrical respite from plague closures in 1608, to revivals at the beginning of a new millennium, it has been successful on the stage”. Suzanne Gossett, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>1360</sup> Andrew Hiscock, “Pericles, Prince of Tyre: Pericles, Prince of Tyre *and the Appetite for Narrative*”, in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare*, cit., p. 17. Hiscock notices that “in response to its continuing success, demand was such that the Quarto had been reprinted six times by 1635”. *Ibid.*

<sup>1361</sup> “A more credible explanation for exclusion is that the play was a collaborative effort – today most scholars agree that George Wilkins, the author of a prose narrative about Pericles in 1608, was co-author”. Eugene Giddens, “*Pericles: the afterlife*”, in Catherine M.S. Alexander (ed.), *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, cit., p. 174.

<sup>1362</sup> Andrew Hiscock, “Pericles, Prince of Tyre: Pericles, Prince of Tyre *and the Appetite for Narrative*”, cit., p. 26. As Hiscock observes, “Some playtexts were experimenting in the Jacobean period with choric devices”.

<sup>1363</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, p. 842.

As Frye notices, “[i]t was still a general critical view that such breaks in the action of a play were absurd, and Shakespeare seems to be not just ignoring such views but deliberately flouting them”<sup>1364</sup>. The function of time, however, is not limited to the role of the Chorus: the play is governed by time in a deeper and more complex way, from the very beginning, when Camillo says to lord Archidamus that the king of Sicily will visit the king of Bohemia “this coming summer” (I, i, 5), immediately placing the drama within a specific temporal frame, to the end, when Paulina seemingly restores Hermione to life only when “’Tis time” (V, iii, 99). The title itself, *The Winter’s Tale*, refers to the season in which the play opens, i.e. winter, thus highlighting the role of time and nature. The effects of the passing of time, as will be considered, are crucial in the development of the drama: time proverbially brings truth to light and finally allows it to triumph. The Elizabethans and Jacobean were highly familiar with the belief according to which time unfolds truth. In *King Lear*, Cordelia, a character highly reminiscent of Perdita, remarks that “Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides, / Who covert faults at last with shame derides” (I, i, 278-9). In a similar way, in the comedy *As You Like It*, the audience is explicitly told that “time is the old Justice that examines all such / offenders, and let Time try” (IV, i, 189-90). As will be discussed, Shakespeare’s contemporaries were undoubtedly acquainted also with the alchemical conception of time, conceived of as the main force that allows nature to reach the highest degree of perfection that can be achieved, i.e. gold.

The subtitle of Robert Greene’s *Pandosto* (1588), the prose romance that is the main source of *The Winter’s Tale*, is precisely *The Triumph of Time*. Time evidently triumphs in Shakespeare’s romance, that is closed by the reunion of all previously “dissevered” (V, iii, 155) characters and by the final retrieval of things “lost”<sup>1365</sup>, clearly following a circular and redemptive path. The play ends exactly where it begins, at the court of Sicily, that, from being a place of discord and strife, is eventually transformed into a microcosm of harmony and love. Scholars have remarked that, by reversing the relationship Sicily-Bohemia as it is in Greene’s *Pandosto*, Shakespeare wanted to “begin with Sicilia dying

<sup>1364</sup> Northrop Frye, “Shakespeare’s Romances: *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Harold Bloom (ed.), *William Shakespeare: Romances*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>1365</sup> The imagery related to the concepts of loss and return are frequent in the play, from Apollo’s prophecy, that seems to foreshadow the future recovery of Perdita – “the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost is not found” (III, ii, 132-3) – to lord Antigonus’s decision to name the girl Perdita because he believes her to be “lost for ever”: “for the babe / Is counted lost for ever, Perdita, / I prithee call’t” (III, iii, 31-3). Perdita, however, will return, thus recalling Paulina’s prediction according to which “the gods / Will have fulfilled their secret purposes” (V, i, 35-6). At the very end of the play, when Perdita, the ‘lost maiden’, is almost miraculously recovered and brought back home after a wide gap of time, Paulina cheerfully exclaims: “Our Perdita is found” (V, iii, 121).

and end with Sicilia newborn”<sup>1366</sup>. The king and the queen of Bohemia, Pandosto and Bellaria, become the king and the queen of Sicily, Leontes and Hermione, so that the events that are set in Bohemia in *Pandosto* take place in Sicily in *The Winter’s Tale*. It follows that the celebrated sheep-shearing scene, that is set in Sicily in Greene’s work, occurs in Bohemia in Shakespeare’s romance. Frye argues that the playwright’s decision to reverse the relationship between the two countries should be understood in the light of the myth of Proserpina and Ceres since it is precisely in Sicily that the former was abducted by Pluto<sup>1367</sup>. This hypothesis further highlights the circular scheme of the play: Perdita, who is brought away from Sicily and sent to Bohemia at the behest of King Leontes, is reconciled with her father and mother exactly in Sicily. The myth of Ceres and Proserpina, the two goddesses who might be identified with Hermione and Perdita, evidently functions as a metaphor for the natural cycle of birth, decay, change, and rebirth and is traditionally considered as an allegory of the course of the seasons. According to some versions of the myth, Proserpina, kidnapped by Pluto, the god of the underworld, is allowed to spend half of the year on earth, thus embodying the regeneration of nature in springtime<sup>1368</sup>. Perdita, like Proserpina, is recovered and reunited with her mother only after a wide lapse of time, during which she was thought to have been “lost for ever” (III, iii, 32). Frye remarks that, in *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione does not desperately search for her daughter, as Ceres does in the myth, but is clearly restored to life only when Perdita is found, thus indirectly hinting at the myth of the two goddesses of grain and agriculture and at the idea of circularity: “In this play Hermione doesn’t search, but she doesn’t come to life either (or whatever she does) until Perdita, whose name means the lost maiden, is said to be found”<sup>1369</sup>. As a matter of fact, immediately after Hermione is turned again into a living woman, she reveals to have preserved herself in order to be reunited with her daughter:

For thou shalt hear that I,  
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle  
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved  
My self to see the issue.  
(V, iii, 125-28)

<sup>1366</sup> Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, cit., p. 161.

<sup>1367</sup> “The names Sicily and Bohemia came from *Pandosto*, but Shakespeare reverses their relation to the characters. I doubt that the name Bohemia means much of anything, and the setting of the play doesn’t stay there: it changes back to Sicilia for the end of the play, so that we begin with Sicilia dying and end with Sicilia newborn. And I think the name Sicilia may mean something. It was in Sicily that the literary pastoral – and this play is full of pastoral imagery – originated, and it was in Sicily that the beautiful maiden Proserpine was kidnapped and carried off to the lower world by Pluto, forcing her mother, Ceres, to search all over the upper world for her”. *Ibid.*

<sup>1368</sup> On the Classical myth of Proserpina-Persephone, see Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie*, cit., pp. 362-363.

<sup>1369</sup> Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, cit., p. 161.

As Romero points out, the disruption of the cosmos displayed at the end of the third act of the play – the sea storm, Antigonus’s violent death, and the reversal of the relationship between man and nature – might be read as an allusion to Ceres’s grief and anger for the loss of her daughter: while looking for Proserpina, the goddess intentionally caused the death of farmers and damaged crops<sup>1370</sup>. Considering that Perdita herself addresses Proserpina, it can be assumed that the connections between the Shakespearean maiden and the Ovidian goddess must have been evident to the audience. Lamenting the absence of spring flowers, namely primroses, lilies, violets, and cowslips, Perdita clearly invokes Proserpina:

O Proserpina,  
 For the flowers now that, frighted, thou let's fall  
 From Dis's wagon! Daffodils,  
 [...] violets, dim,  
 But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes  
 Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses,  
 [...] bold oxlips, and  
 The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,  
 The flower-de-luce being one. O, these I lack  
 To make you garlands of.  
 (IV, iv, 116-28)

The never-ending seasonal cycle of death and rebirth, a sort of imagery that is central in *The Winter's Tale*, is the model of the *opus alchymicum*, conceived of as a wheel, due to its constant return to the beginning. The hieroglyph of the *uroboros*, the serpent that both kills and generates itself, is a perfect emblem of the *rota alchemica*, a process that alchemists most frequently describe in terms of the course of the seasons (see plate 79). In the following excerpt from the aforementioned alchemical treatise *Le Don de Dieu*, the stages of the *opus alchymicum* are plainly associated with the four seasons:

Car l'an est party en quatre partie, ainsi est partie nostre benoiste heuvre: la premiere partie est l'hiver froit et humide pluviant; la seconde est le prins temps chaut et humide fleurissant; la tierce est l'esté chaut et sec et rouge; la quart est l'automne froict et sec et pour amasser les fruitz. Avec celle dispoicion [...] de pluie gouverne

<sup>1370</sup> “Cerere, l’equivalente romano di Demetra, cerca la figlia ovunque e, mossa dal dolore, dalla disperazione e dall’ira, fa morire contadini, guasta semi, germogli e messi finché viene a sapere che, grazie all’intervento di Giove, Proserpina può trascorrere la metà dell’anno sulla terra e l’altra metà nel mondo infernale. Alla luce del mito di Proserpina, credo si possa leggere lo stravolgimento dell’ordine dell’universo che ha luogo alla fine del terzo atto di *The Winter's Tale* (la tempesta, il naufragio dei marinai e la morte di Antigono) come il risultato della furia vendicativa di Cerere, ossia dell’intero mondo naturale, in preda alla disperazione e all’ira per la perdita della figlia”. Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done*. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter's Tale*”, cit., p. 70.

la nature jusque atant quelle pourte en avant tout meurs jusques a la vraye fleurs<sup>1371</sup>.

The same metaphor recurs in an anonymous alchemical text dating from the seventeenth century, thus further testifying to the association of the *opus* with the annual cycle of nature:

As to the (length of) time required for the preparation, you must begin it in the winter, which is moist, and extract the moisture until the spring, when all things become green, and when our substance, too, should exhibit a variety of colo[u]rs. In the summer the substance should be reduced to powder by means of a powerful fire. The autumn, the season of ripeness, should witness its maturity, or final redness<sup>1372</sup>.

Winter, as already noticed, represents the outset of the alchemical work, indicating a phase of sterility, ‘blackness’, and dissolution, that is nonetheless the right path towards renewal: “Philosophers in handling their Philosophical work, begin their yeare in Winter, to wit, the Sun being in *Capricorne*, which is the former House of *Saturne*, and so come towards the right hand”<sup>1373</sup>. Since winter stands for the starting point of the alchemical process, it is a metaphor for the phase of putrefaction, or *nigredo*, as attested, among others, by Dom Pernety:

ils [les alchimistes] s’en servent communément dans un sens allégorique, pour signifier le commencement de l’oeuvre, ou le temps qui précède la putréfaction. C’est pourquoi ils disent communément, qu’il faut commencer par l’hiver, et le finir par l’automne<sup>1374</sup>.

The first step of the *opus alchymicum* is associated by alchemical writers precisely with Saturn, that denotes lead, the base metal that has to be transmuted into gold<sup>1375</sup>. As one can read in a treatise by the sixteenth-century Dutch alchemist known as John Isaac Holland, *A Work of Saturn*, the philosopher’s stone is extracted precisely from Saturn: “My Child shall know, that the Stone called the *Philosopher’s Stone*, comes out of *Saturn*”<sup>1376</sup>. Gold is

---

<sup>1371</sup> Anon., *Le Precieux Don de Dieu*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>1372</sup> Anon., *A Very Brief Tract Concerning the Philosophical Stone. Written by and Unknown German Sage*, HM 131. “Scias tempus laboris, et, quum annus quatuor partes divisus siet, opus hoc in hyeme inchoandum est, quae humida est: et tum humiditatem extrahamus usque ad Ver, quod virescit, ut tunc nobis etiam colores leni quodam in igne sub labore adpareant. Dein ad aestatem progredimur, et tunc opus forti igne pulverisandum est: Ultimo ad autumnum accedimus, et tunc, fructibus maturescentibus, ad nobilem operis rubedinem pervenimus”. *De Lapide Philosophico Perbreve Opusculum, Quod Ab Ignoto Aliquo Germanico Philosopho*, MH 334.

<sup>1373</sup> Jean D’Espagnet, *The Summary of Physics Restored*, cit., p. 182

<sup>1374</sup> See ‘hiver’ in Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 159.

<sup>1375</sup> See ‘Saturn’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>1376</sup> John Isaac Holland, *A Work of Saturn*, in Basil Valentine, *Of natural & supernatural things also of the first tincture, root, and spirit of metals and minerals, how the same are conceived, generated, brought forth, changed and augmented; Whereunto is added Fryer Roger Bacon, Of the Medicine or Tincture of*

produced from the basest of metals, lead, and Saturn, conceived of as “a cold, gross, dull and heavy Body, replete with much Impurity, yet full of a Golden Mercury”<sup>1377</sup>, is the key of the alchemical work. The alchemical imagery of Saturn is especially articulated since it is not only related to the metal lead but also to the so-called *prima materia* and, therefore, to an initial phase of dissolution. A plate collected in the seventeenth-century text known as *Mutus Liber* actually shows the *prima materia* as Saturn devouring his children<sup>1378</sup> (see plate 49). In alchemical literature, the complex symbolism of Saturn, in its turn connected with the imagery of Father Time, implies “the ‘killing’ of the old state and its reduction to the *prima materia*”<sup>1379</sup>, a stage of destruction that paves the way to the consequent renewal.

Before considering the relevance of the alchemical concept of Saturn to *The Winter's Tale*, it should be pointed out that the classical myth of the god is more or less evidently embedded in the play. Leontes, as the god Saturn, deprives himself of his offspring, thus making himself “heirless” (V, i, 10) and “issueless” (V, i, 173). The Renaissance idea of Saturn, as already said, derived from a conflation of the Roman Saturnus, the youngest of the Titans, with the Greek Cronus<sup>1380</sup>. Saturn was traditionally the god of harvest and seedtime, whereas Cronus, who castrated his own father, Uranus, “embodied lethal tension between generations”<sup>1381</sup>. As remarked by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, Cronus was originally marked by a profound ambiguity, being “the benevolent god of agriculture”, on the one hand, and the god of death and the devourer of children<sup>1382</sup>, on the other hand. Saturn, conversely, “was originally not ambivalent but definitely good”<sup>1383</sup>: however, the fusion of Cronus with Saturn inevitably handed down the negative and contradictory features of the former to the latter, thus making the two gods essentially indistinguishable in Renaissance times. It follows that the scythe of Saturn-Cronus came to be regarded as an emblem of both death and new life: it is “an instrument of the most

---

*Antimony; Mr. John Isaac Holland, his Work of Saturn; and Alex. Van Suchten, Of the Secrets of Antimony*, Translated out of High Dutch by Daniel Cable, Printed by Moses Pitt at the White Hart in Little Britain, London, 1671, p. 184.

<sup>1377</sup> William Salmon, *Polygraphices*, cit., p. 479

<sup>1378</sup> *Mutus Liber*, an alchemical work devoid of text and composed of fifteen plates, was first published in 1677 and later included at the end of the first volume of Manget's *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa* (1702). See Mino Gabriele, *Commentario sul 'Mutus Liber'*, Archè, Milano, 1974, p. 21. As Mino Gabriele observes, *Mutus Liber*, attributed to an author known as ‘Altus’, represents an unprecedented example of alchemical iconography: “Iconograficamente il *Mutus Liber* è unico nel suo genere; infatti se pure altri ‘Artisti’ si sono cimentati in serie di raffigurazioni simboliche, hanno sempre aggiunto versi o prosa, spesso con una oscura fraseologia, ma mai alcuno ha esplicitamente realizzato un’opera che col solo contributo figurativo volesse indicare la ‘via’ ermetica”. *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>1379</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, cit., p. 109.

<sup>1380</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, cit., p. 275. See also Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie*, cit., pp. 104-105 and p. 415.

<sup>1381</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, cit., p. 275.

<sup>1382</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, cit., pp. 134-5.

<sup>1383</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

horrible outrage and at the same time of harvesting”<sup>1384</sup> since it recalls the sickle employed by Cronus to castrate Uranus but also the tool with which to work the land, thus alluding to agriculture, an art whose knowledge was given to humanity precisely by Saturn<sup>1385</sup>.

Several connections can be traced between the symbolism of Saturn and *The Winter's Tale*: the paradoxical imagery related to Saturn-Cronus – a god of both destruction and renewal, sterility and fecundity – underlies the play. Woodbridge points out that the parable of the *senex-puer*, one of the key themes of *The Winter's Tale*, is implied in the myth of Saturn that, on a symbolical level, hints at the interchange of the generations and, therefore, at the natural course of decay and rebirth<sup>1386</sup>. As already said, the imagery of the *senex-puer* is also of paramount importance in alchemical literature since it alludes to the circular nature of the *opus alchymicum* and to the cycle of the *solve et coagula*<sup>1387</sup>. Alchemists actually believe that “Old man Saturn (Mercurius senex) is that force which mercilessly destroys the old and yet miraculously makes way for the new (Mercurius puer)”<sup>1388</sup>. Saturn-Cronus, who rebelled against the authority of his father, also devoured his own children because he had been warned that they would overthrow him. Besides being a figure embodying the idea of barrenness, however, Saturn also represents regeneration since he was eventually compelled to expel the children he had previously ingested, thus restoring them to life. In a circular way, Saturn himself was finally defeated by one of his sons, Zeus, who dethroned him. The dichotomy youth-old age, that is also reflected in the opposition winter-spring, a kind of imagery that is obliquely implied in the myth of Saturn<sup>1389</sup>, recurs throughout *The Winter's Tale*. The conflict between the old and the young, however, is also a fruitful movement of rebirth since the old ‘die’ in order to let

---

<sup>1384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1385</sup> As Woodbridge observes, “The scythe was the harvesting tool of a fertility god, Saturn, lord of seedtime and harvest; but it is also an iconographic sibling of the grim reaper’s scythe, which descends in the history of emblematic art from the sickle with which Cronus castrated his father. Peeling off layers of story to find Greek myth under the Roman myth reminds us that Saturn and Cronus are one god: the god of harvest and the god of parent killing are the same”. Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, cit., pp. 21-22.

<sup>1386</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 276.

<sup>1387</sup> See section 5.5. “*It is a gallant child; one that, indeed, physicks the subject, makes old hearts fresh.* The Alchemical Parable of the *Senex-Puer*”.

<sup>1388</sup> See ‘Saturn’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>1389</sup> The identification between the god Saturn and time was already well known in antiquity, as will be discussed. The symbolism of Cronus-Saturn came to be assimilated with that of Chronos, the god of time. As a consequence, Saturn was considered as the god overseeing both the interchange of the generations and the alternation of the seasons: “Almost five hundred years earlier, Cicero [...] was already unambiguously aware of the identification between Cronus and the personification of time: ‘Men have believed it to be Saturn who rules the cyclic courses of the times and seasons. In Greek the nature of this god is expressed in his name. He is called Kronos, which is the same as Chronos, and means a lapse of time, just as our Roman name ‘Saturn’ means ‘sated with years’”. Samuel L. Macey, *The Patriarchs of Time. Dualism in Saturn-Cronus, Father Time, the Watchmaker God, and Father Christmas*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia, 1987, p. 36.

the young ‘ripen’. In Shakespeare’s romance the members of the younger generation, namely Mamilius, Perdita, and Florizel, even though contrasted by their fathers in various ways, are evidently associated with renewal. Mamilius, whose premature death is provoked by Leontes’s “folly” (I, ii, 425), is said to make “old hearts fresh” (I, i, 39) to such an extent that “They that went on crutches ere he was born desire yet their life to see him a man” (I, i, 39-41), as lord Camillo argues. To Archidamus’s question, “Would they else be content to die?” (I, i, 42), Camillo, further underlining the idea that youth regenerates life, replies: “Yes, if there were no other excuse why they should desire to live” (I, i, 43-4). In like manner, Prince Florizel, who tries to overrule his father Polixenes in the fourth act, when the latter opposes his son’s desire to marry the shepherdess Perdita, is presented as a source of healing: “He makes a July’s day short as December, / And with his varying childness cures in me / Thoughts that would thicken my blood” (I, ii, 168-70).

Saturn has much to do with the theme related to “the younger generation striving to seize power from the old”<sup>1390</sup>: Woodbridge actually remarks that an example of this process, that is deeply connected with the imagery of the wheel of time, is to be found precisely in Polixenes’s attempt to contrast Florizel and in the latter’s disobedience to his father<sup>1391</sup>. In “a wintry blast of paternal anger”<sup>1392</sup>, King Polixenes takes position against Florizel’s will to marry Perdita, whom everybody believes to be the daughter of a Bohemian shepherd:

Make your divorce, young sir,  
Whom son I dare not call. Thou art too base  
To be acknowledged.  
(IV, iv, 421-23)

However, Prince Florizel, disregarding his father’s order, flees with Perdita to the court of Sicily thanks to Camillo’s help. As Garber notices, “the sheepshearing scene [...] seems almost to enact a minicycle of the seasons – beginning in harvest and succumbing to a wintry blast of paternal anger”<sup>1393</sup>. The antithesis between the old and the young, winter and spring, is especially evident in the sheep-shearing scene, when Perdita, identified with Proserpina and Flora and, therefore, with the spirit of spring<sup>1394</sup>, offers rosemary and rue,

---

<sup>1390</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, cit., p. 276.

<sup>1391</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 281-2.

<sup>1392</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 847.

<sup>1393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1394</sup> During the sheep-shearing festival, Florizel, disguised as Doricles, a countryman, compares Perdita, whom he believes to be a shepherdess, with Flora: “no shepherdess, but Flora / Peering in April’s front. This your sheep-shearing / Is as a meeting of the petty gods, / And you the queen on’t” (IV, iv, 2-5). A few lines below, when offering flowers to King Polixenes and Camillo, Perdita invokes Proserpina: “O

“flowers of winter” (IV, iv, 78), to the “Reverend sirs” (IV, iv, 73) Polixenes and Camillo, thus identifying them with old age<sup>1395</sup>. While accepting Perdita’s gift, Polixenes, himself disguised as a shepherd, remarks: “Shepherdess, / A fair one are you. Well you fit our ages / With flowers of winter” (IV, iv, 76-8). A few lines below, Perdita further links Camillo and Polixenes with the imagery of winter: “Out, alas, / You’d be so lean that blasts of January / Would blow you through and through” (IV, iv, 110-111). Also King Leontes, himself related to ‘winter’ and old age<sup>1396</sup>, might be connected with the imagery of Saturn, embodying the most negative features of the god. As a Saturn-like figure, Leontes deprives himself of lineage, being responsible for the actual death of Mamilius and ordering lord Antigonus to kill Perdita, and falls into a condition of barrenness, both real and metaphorical, that culminates in the speech on ‘nothingness’<sup>1397</sup>. Despite Leontes’s attempts to get rid of her newborn daughter, however, Perdita is finally recovered and reunited with her “redeemed” (V, i, 3) father, thus alluding to the idea of “inverting generations through the action of Time”<sup>1398</sup>, a concept that is at the basis of the mythical story of Saturn and of the celebrations dedicated to the god, i.e. the Saturnalia rites, as will be discussed. It is interesting to point out that according to the Orphic religious tradition Saturn-Cronus was finally reconciled with his son Zeus, who had previously revenged against him: this version of the myth evidently highlights the idea of positive transformation inherent in the imagery of Saturn<sup>1399</sup>.

One of the aspects of Saturn that is most relevant to *The Winter’s Tale* and to alchemical imagery is that connected with the Time-symbolism. Cronus has been erroneously equated with Chronos, the personification of time, since antiquity<sup>1400</sup>, an identification that is to be found already in Plutarch<sup>1401</sup>. The contradictory features of

---

Proserpina, / For the flowers now that, frightened, thou let’st fall / From Dis’s wagon!” (IV, iv, 116-18).

<sup>1395</sup> See William O. Scott, “Seasons and Flowers in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 14, n. 4, Autumn 1963, pp. 411-17.

<sup>1396</sup> Marjorie Garber defines Leontes’s imagination as “wintry”. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 834.

<sup>1397</sup> See section 5.3. “If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within. Leontes as *Rex Chymicus*”. As remarked by Engel, “Kairos, who stood for propitious action in the Renaissance visual imagination, differed from Kronos who, as Saturn, was the most malignant of the planetary influences, the father of all things who devours what he creates. Leontes embodies this aspect of time, the murderous father associated with melancholy and death. Like Saturn, he is held to be responsible for all manner of disasters and destruction. Neoplatonic thought later tempered the figure of Saturn as being also ‘an exponent and patron of profound philosophical and religious contemplation’, and this latter view accords with Leontes’s sixteen years of penitential mourning”. William E. Engel, “*Kinetic emblems and memory images in The Winter’s Tale*”, in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 75-76.

<sup>1398</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, cit., p. 277.

<sup>1399</sup> Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie*, cit., p. 105.

<sup>1400</sup> “Chronos the god of time [...] had been equated with the two former [Saturn and Cronos] even in antiquity”. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, cit., p. 133.

<sup>1401</sup> See Samuel L. Macey, *The Patriarchs of Time*, cit., pp. 34-5.

Saturn, rightfully defined by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl as “the god of opposites”<sup>1402</sup>, perfectly merged with the symbolism of time, that the Elizabethans and Jacobean regarded as both a negative and a positive force. Time was often represented with the scythe of Saturn and was said to be simultaneously benevolent and cruel. Scholars remark that “[t]hough Saturn-Cronus was not originally a god with temporal attributes, we can see how suitable some aspects of his cult were to become considered as symbols of all-destroying time”<sup>1403</sup>. Time, however, was also a revealer and a protector, in the same way as Saturn was both a favourable and a gloomy divinity. Considering the penchant for enigmas, emblems, and twofold meanings typical of the Renaissance culture<sup>1404</sup>, it is not surprising to see that the ambiguous figure of Father Time, ‘devourer’ and ‘healer’, was such an exploited trope in early modern England. Woodbridge notices that the character of Saturn, like the alchemical hermaphrodite, perfectly appealed to the Renaissance mentality:

Saturn as Saturnus and Cronus, scythe symbolizing harvest and murder, was the sort of figure that appealed to the Renaissance, a union of contraries, like that other favoured emblem the hermaphrodite<sup>1405</sup>.

In her invaluable study on Shakespearean imagery, Spurgeon points out that Time is present throughout the Bard’s macrotext as a “destroyer”, “fruit being ripened”, “life-giving nourishing power”, and as the “revealer and disentangler of truth”<sup>1406</sup>. As a matter of fact, Pitcher remarks that Father Time, who was the subject of some sixty English proverbs at the time when *The Winter’s Tale* was composed<sup>1407</sup>, appeared in a number of plays and pageants. As it is well known, during the progress organised in honour of Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1559, Time comes out of a cave with his daughter, Truth, who carries the English Bible. Queen Elizabeth, the daughter of Time, embodied the restoration of the true Protestant religion, in contrast with the Catholicism of Queen Mary. Dwelling on a well-known topic, in *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare deals with the manifold meanings

<sup>1402</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, cit., p. 134.

<sup>1403</sup> Samuel L. Macey, *The Patriarchs of Time*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>1404</sup> In his celebrated study *Shakespeare e il paradigma della specularità*, Marcello Pagnini quotes Victor Hugo’s words on the Renaissance passion for twofold meanings: “L’idea dell’azione duplicata è espediente tipico del sedicesimo secolo. [...] Il Rinascimento fu un’epoca di sottigliezze, un’epoca di riflessione. Lo spirito del sedicesimo secolo indulgeva a un gioco di specchi. Non c’è idea che a quel tempo non assuma un duplice volto. [...] Duplicazione, triplicazione dei temi: questo era il suggello del sedicesimo secolo”. Quoted by Marcello Pagnini, *Shakespeare e il paradigma della specularità*, cit., pp. 41-2. As Pagnini remarks, the Italian translation of the excerpt by Victor Hugo is from Gabriele Baldini (ed.), *La fortuna di Shakespeare*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1965, p. 317.

<sup>1405</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, cit., p. 276.

<sup>1406</sup> Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [1935] 1968, pp. 172-5.

<sup>1407</sup> John Pitcher, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 79.

of time<sup>1408</sup>, a theme that is already of paramount importance in the sonnets, in which the poet declares to be “in war with Time”<sup>1409</sup>. The imagery of time is also central in alchemical literature and iconography. Taking into account that “Shakespeare’s choric Time is in a firm Elizabethan tradition when he insists on the multiplicity of his powers”<sup>1410</sup>, it can be assumed that among the numerous interpretations of time that were known in Renaissance England and that flow into *The Winter’s Tale* is also the alchemical one. Alchemical time, identified with Saturn, is conceived of as a force that destroys in order to renew, thus facilitating and yet obstructing the progress of the *opus alchymicum*<sup>1411</sup>: in a paradoxical way, the alchemist has to go against time in the *opus contra naturam*, bringing matter to the *prima materia*, a destructive action that is essential in the alchemical work of re-creation. Time-Saturn is associated with a phase of dissolution that is nonetheless a *conditio sine qua non* in the production of the philosopher’s stone, a process that reflects the natural tendency to achieve the perfect condition of ‘gold’ through the healing and transformative action of time. Eliade remarks that Saturn-Chronos represents both death, that alchemists identify with the phase of *nigredo*, and rebirth: “La figure de Chronos-Saturne symbolise le Grand Destructeur qu’est le Temps, donc aussi bien la mort (= *putrefactio*) que la nouvelle naissance”<sup>1412</sup>.

As already said, a number of alchemical parables begin by depicting a state of barrenness or illness that affects either the chemical king or his reign: in the aforementioned vision of Arisleus, the realm of the *rex marinus* is said to be fruitless and arid, and, in a similar way, the king of Ripley’s *Cantilena* defines himself as “Infoecund”<sup>1413</sup>. The infertile stage of *nigredo* is not surprisingly associated with Saturn, in its turn traditionally linked with melancholy and, therefore, with the imagery of blackness related to the melancholic humour: “Our Stone [...] in the putrefaction is called Saturnus”<sup>1414</sup>. Eliade observes that alchemists assign a central role to the experiences of ‘blackness’ and ‘death’, the so-called *descensus ad inferos*, and represent them precisely by means of the saturnine symbolism:

Il faut souligner l’importance que les alchimistes accordant aux expériences ‘terribles’

<sup>1408</sup> See Inga-Stina Ewbank, “The Triumph of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Maurice Hunt (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale: Critical Essays*, cit., pp. 139-155.

<sup>1409</sup> “And, all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new” (Sonnet 15, ll. 13-14).

<sup>1410</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank, “The Triumph of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 147.

<sup>1411</sup> Healy remarks that the progress of the alchemical work of transmutation is “paradoxically facilitated and yet obstructed by time”. Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>1412</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., pp. 137-8.

<sup>1413</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>1414</sup> Anon., *Zoroaster’s Cave*, cit., quoted by Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 178.

et ‘sinistres’ de ‘noirceur’, de mort spirituelle, de descente aux Enfers: [...] ces sortes d’expériences sont traduites par le symbolisme saturnien<sup>1415</sup>.

This phase of “blackness”, or “reign of Saturn”, as Pernety points out, is paradoxically the entrance, the door, and the key leading the alchemist to the accomplishment of the *opus*:

ces Philosophes [les alchimistes] appellent *regne de Saturne* le temps que dure la noirceur, parce qu’ils nomment Saturne cette même noirceur; c’est-à-dire, lorsque la matière Hermétique mise dans le vase, est devenue comme de la poix fondue. Cette noirceur étant aussi, comme ils le disent, l’entrée, la porte et la clef de l’oeuvre<sup>1416</sup>.

Edward Kelly, among others, explicitly claims that the source of the *albedo* has to be found in the blackness of the *nigredo*: “When ye see that the matter is entirely black, know that whiteness has been hidden in the belly of that blackness”<sup>1417</sup>. In another excerpt, Kelly remarks that the whole *opus* is actually based upon the stage of dissolution, that alchemists identify precisely with Saturn: “The blackness must precede whiteness. [...] Our whole magistry, then, is based on putrefaction; for it can come to nothing, unless it is putrefied”<sup>1418</sup>. The imagery related to Saturn is essential in alchemical symbolism since it embodies the essence of the *opus alchymicum*, based on an alternation of death and rebirth, dissolution and renewal. With regards to a plate belonging to the alchemical work entitled *Chymica vannus* (1666), an illustration that clearly dwells upon the myth of Saturn by showing the god emasculated like his father Uranus, Rola points out that “Saturn’s action reflects the Night or Blackness of Dissolution, the Raven’s Head or *Caput Corvi*: the Crow which is the Crown of the Work, since there can be no Generation without Putrefaction”<sup>1419</sup>. It should be recalled that in emblem XII of *Atalanta fugiens*, Maier exploits the complex symbolism related to the myth of Saturn-Cronus, suggesting that in the same way as the god expelled the children he had devoured, the philosopher’s stone is extracted from Saturn’s belly: “For below the blackness the true whiteness is hidden and the latter is taken out, i.e. taken out of the small belly of Saturn”<sup>1420</sup> (see plate 71). The myth of Saturn actually alludes to the wheel of time and to the constant and fruitful interchange of the generations and of the seasons, a cyclical process that, as already said, brings renewal.

The rogue Autolycus, who introduces the second half of *The Winter’s Tale* with the

---

<sup>1415</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., pp. 137-8.

<sup>1416</sup> Dom Pernety, *Les Fables Égyptiennes et Grecques*, cit., vol. 1, p. 569.

<sup>1417</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle’s Worke*, cit., TCB 195-6.

<sup>1418</sup> Edward Kelly, *The Alchemical Writings*, cit., p. 138.

<sup>1419</sup> See Klossowski De Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 239n, plate 400.

<sup>1420</sup> Michael Maier, Discourse accompanying Emblem XII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 120.

song of the daffodils and appears on stage immediately after the speech of Father Time, remarks that “the red blood reigns in the winter’s pale” (IV, iii, 4). As already noticed, Autolycus’s song contains several images of regeneration, among which is the one of the “white sheet bleaching on the hedge” (IV, iii, 5), a kind of imagery that is very frequent in alchemical literature as a symbol of the phase of *albedo* (see plates 50, 52, and 53). Claiming that “the red blood reigns in the winter’s pale” (IV, iii, 4), Autolycus seems to suggest that the play is following the rhythm of the alchemical work: winter, in alchemical terms the *nigredo*, is the source of the *rubedo*, the last stage of the *opus alchymicum*, represented by the colour red. According to alchemists, the *rubedo*, the fruitful moment when the alchemical *coniunctio* occurs and the philosopher’s stone, or philosophical child, is created, cannot be attained unless the *rota alchemica* passes through the “Gate of Blacknes”<sup>1421</sup>, i.e. the phase of *nigredo*, also known as ‘winter’. Roberts remarks that “[a] black colour [...] indicated that the material had been successfully broken down and the long complicated and repetitive journey to the achievement of the Stone could continue on its way to ‘perfect ruby’”<sup>1422</sup>. Autolycus’s words, that follow the stage of destruction displayed in the scene of the shipwreck, a phase that recalls the alchemical dissolution of matter into the *prima materia*, evoke the cycle of the alchemical *rota*. In the treatise *Le Don de Dieu*, the *opus alchymicum* is actually described as that thing that has black feet and a red head: “la chose qui as la teste rouge et les piedz noirs est le magistere”<sup>1423</sup>. In a similar way, in *Turba philosophorum* one can read that the redness is to be found in lead, that is to say in blackness: “Ad haec insuper dico, quod in plumbo rubedo sit”<sup>1424</sup>. Taking into account that alchemists relate the season of winter to the step of *nigredo*, it can be argued that the three main phases of the *opus*, connected with black, or winter, with white, and with red, are all present in Autolycus’s song: “Why then comes in the sweet o’the year, / For the *red blood* reigns in the *winter’s pale*. / The *white sheet bleaching* on the hedge” (IV, iii, 3-5, italics mine).

In order to better understand the connections between the structure of *The Winter’s Tale* and the pattern of the *opus alchymicum*, it is worth dwelling again on the association between the *rota alchemica* and the cycle of the seasons. Pernety attests that ‘autumn’ is considered by alchemists as the fruitful time when the alchemical tincture is attained:

Temps où l’Artiste recueille les fruits de ses travaux. Il est d’une complexion froide et

<sup>1421</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 150.

<sup>1422</sup> Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy*, cit., pp. 62-3.

<sup>1423</sup> Anon., *Le Precieux Don de Dieu*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>1424</sup> *Turba Philosophorum*, cit., AA 1: 10.

seche. Souvenez-vous donc bien qu'il faut dissoudre en hiver, cuire au printemps, coaguler en été, et cueillir les fruits en automne, c'est-à-dire, donner la teinture<sup>1425</sup>.

In a circular way, the adept should begin the alchemical work in winter and conclude it in autumn, the season of harvest:

Know, also, that the year is divided into four seasons; the first season is of a frigid complexion, and this is Winter; the second is of the complexion of air, and this is Spring; then follows the third, which is summer, and is of the complexion of fire; lastly, there is the fourth, wherein fruits are matured, which is Autumn<sup>1426</sup>.

Given that the metaphor of the seasons is so frequently exploited by alchemical writers, it is not surprising that the *opus alchymicum* is often compared to the art of agriculture, as Pernety remarks: "L'agriculture est un symbole parfait des opérations du grand oeuvre"<sup>1427</sup>. The alchemical symbolism related to the alternation of the seasons opens up interesting perspectives concerning the possible relationships between *The Winter's Tale* and alchemical imagery. Scholars actually consider the title of Shakespeare's romance to be particularly significant: "a suggestion that the play is an allegory of the seasons or even, in the hint that the fable is a fantasy, an invitation to seek for profundity in the play"<sup>1428</sup>. In Elizabethan and Jacobean times, a 'winter's tale' was a proverbial expression for a trivial tale, like the one about "sprites and goblins" (II, i, 26) that Mamilius recounts to Queen Hermione, a story that is, in fact, everything but trivial since it foreshadows some of the coming events<sup>1429</sup>. Although the most straightforward meaning the title would have had to Shakespeare's public was that of 'fanciful story', the use of the definite article, Pafford argues, focuses on the word 'winter' and, therefore, highlights the connotations of the season<sup>1430</sup>. Given that in the language of alchemists winter represents the outset of the alchemical work of transformation, the fact that *The Winter's Tale* begins in winter might have prompted the audience to read the play also as an alchemical journey starting from a state of barrenness and conflict and leading to 'gold', intended as a condition of harmony and perfection – a journey in which the healing features of time are essential. Although the

---

<sup>1425</sup> Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>1426</sup> *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, cit., p. 59. Latin text: "Et scitote, quod annus in quatuor dividitur tempora. Primum est frigidae complexionis, Hyems scilicet. Secundum vero complexio est Veris. Tertium Aestatis: deinde quartum, in quo fructus maturatur, Autumnus". *Turba philosophorum*, cit., AA 1: 12.

<sup>1427</sup> Dom Pernety, *Les Fables Égyptiennes et Grecques*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 261-2.

<sup>1428</sup> J.H.P. Pafford, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, edited by J.H.P. Pafford, cit., p. liii.

<sup>1429</sup> See section 5.2. "A sad tale's best for winter. The Beginning of Leontes's Story of Death and Rebirth".

<sup>1430</sup> J.H.P. Pafford, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, edited by J.H.P. Pafford, cit., pp. liii-liv.

setting of the second part of *The Winter's Tale* is unclear and temporal references are ambiguous and fluid, it has been suggested that the play seems to end in autumn, that in alchemical terminology indicates the accomplishment of the *opus alchymicum*. This hypothesis would further strengthen the connections between Shakespeare's romance and the scheme of the *rota alchemica*. Pafford actually remarks that the first part of the play takes place in winter and "even in the pastoral scene the season approaches winter" since the sheep-shearing festival has "autumnal overtones", the season of the year being "late summer or even autumn"<sup>1431</sup>. As a matter of fact, in offering "flowers of winter" (IV, iv, 78) to Polixenes and Camillo, Perdita argues that the year is "growing ancient, / Not yet on summer's death, nor on the birth / Of trembling winter" (IV, iv, 79-81). If accepting this reading, then the end of *The Winter's Tale*, significantly closed by what seems to be a 'chemical wedding' between Leontes and Hermione and Perdita and Florizel, would allude to the *rubedo*, the last and successful step of the *opus*, known as 'autumn' or the season of harvest. Stage directors have variously exploited the idea of circularity that is constantly alluded to in the drama, both in terms of time and space. In the 2016-production of *The Winter's Tale* by Kenneth Branagh, with Judi Dench in the role of both Paulina and Time-Chorus, the play begins and ends in winter. Almost at the end of the performance, before Hermione is turned from stone to living woman, an aged Leontes appears on stage while some snow is falling, thus symbolically leading the audience back to the beginning of the romance, to the tale of winter recounted by Mamilius and to the season in which the story begins<sup>1432</sup>.

Interestingly enough, in *The Winter's Tale* time and water follow the same circular pattern. The fourth act of the play, as already said, begins with the sheep-shearing scene that, having "autumnal overtones"<sup>1433</sup>, seems to suggest that the end of the drama is approaching the season of autumn or even winter. The circular scheme of the play becomes even more evident if noticing that Act IV is opened by Camillo's wish to return to Sicily, thus signalling a motion back to the beginning of the romance:

It is fifteen years since I saw my country. Though I have for the most part been aired abroad, I desire to lay my bones there. Besides, the penitent king, my master, hath sent for me, to whose feeling sorrows I might be some allay – or I o'erween to think so – which is another spur to my departure. (IV, ii, 4-9)

---

<sup>1431</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. liv and lxix.

<sup>1432</sup> I attended the performance of *The Winter's Tale* directed by Kenneth Branagh, who also plays the role of Leontes, at the Garrick Theatre of London on 16 January 2016.

<sup>1433</sup> J.H.P. Pafford, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. liv.

Garber rightfully points out that “the sheepshearing scene [...] now gives way to another journey over water, bringing Camillo home, and Perdita, too, though she does not know it”<sup>1434</sup>. As a matter of fact, Camillo decides to accompany Perdita and Florizel to Leontes, in Sicily, fleeing the court of Polixenes, who is enraged for the two youths’ decision to marry<sup>1435</sup>. Water, first bringing Antigonus and Perdita to remote Bohemia and causing the dissolution of the ‘old’ world and the restoration of a ‘new’ dimension, is now leading lord Camillo and Leontes’s daughter home, in Sicily, thus emphasising the circular, and possibly alchemical, scheme of the drama. The end corresponding to the beginning, the structure of *The Winter’s Tale* recalls the hieroglyph of the *uroboros*, emblem of the *opus circulatorium* or *rota alchemica*<sup>1436</sup>.

In the same way as winter is followed by the renewal of the natural world in springtime, in the course of the *opus alchymicum* black is replaced by white, that is to say by a phase of regeneration, as remarked, among others, by the alchemist Bernhardus Trevisanus:

Cette masse ainsi noire ou noircie, est la clef, le commencement et le signe de parfaite invention de la maniere d’oeuvrer [...]. C’est pourquoy Hermes dit, la noirceur veuë, croyez que vous avez esté par un bon sentier et tenu un bon chemin. Doncques cette couleur de noirceur, montre la vraye maniere d’oeuvrer: car en ce, la masse est faite difforme et corrompuë de vraye corruption naturelle: à laquelle s’ensuit generation de nouvelle disposition reelle en cette matiere [...] Où il est à remarquer que l’oeuvre de noircir accomplie, il faut venir à l’oeuvre de blanchir<sup>1437</sup>.

Autolycus’s song, with its reference to the white sheet that bleaches on the hedge, can be interpreted as an allusion to the rebirth, the so-called *albedo*, that follows the ablution in the *opus alchymicum*. As already noticed, the third act of *The Winter’s Tale* ends with a world that is reduced into chaos, or *prima materia*, a scene that is reminiscent of the alchemical *ablutio*, a phase of dissolution by means of water. The symbolism of time becomes particularly important in this phase of the *opus* since the alchemist is required to bring the *rota alchemica* back to the primeval and chaotic state of the cosmos. By means of an inversion of time, the alchemical wheel is turned backwards, thus imitating the destroying, and paradoxically healing, action of Saturn-Time. Maier actually observes that

<sup>1434</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 847.

<sup>1435</sup> Camillo helps Florizel and Perdita to go to Leontes’s court, in Sicily: “Then list to me. / This follows, if you will not change your purpose / But undergo this flight: make for Sicilia, / And there present yourself and your fair princess, / For so I see she must be, ’fore Leontes; / She shall be habited as it becomes / The partner of your bed. Methinks I see / Leontes opening his free arms and weeping / His welcomes forth”. (IV, iv, 546-54)

<sup>1436</sup> See ‘uroboros’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 207.

<sup>1437</sup> Bernhardus Trevisanus, *La parole délaissée*, in *Divers traitez de la philosophie naturelle*, cit., pp. 155-156.

Saturn “carries a scythe because, like time, he mows everything he produces”<sup>1438</sup>. The image of Saturn-Time carrying a scythe appears in a number of alchemical plates precisely because it indicates that alchemical re-creation is consequent upon destruction and death (see plates 14, 43 and 44). As will be discussed below, the *opus achymicum*, as a number of initiatory rituals, presupposes the retrieval of the origins of Creation by means of a retrograde and destructive movement in order to propitiate regeneration<sup>1439</sup>. Interestingly enough, Perdita’s sheep-shearing festival, that displays a world where everything is “preposterous” (V, ii, 145), i.e. upside-down, and that follows the speech of Father Time, who announces a reversal, recalls the ancient saturnalia rites that, like the *opus alchymicum*, implied the recovery of the pristine state of the cosmos in order to reproduce the *coincidentia oppositorum* and promote new life. The classical and the alchemical symbolism of Saturn-time merge in *The Winter’s Tale*.

6.5. ‘I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing  
As you had slept between’.

The Inversion of Time and the *opus contra naturam*

As already said, the symbolism of time is central in alchemical imagery. In the parable entitled *Blomfields Blossoms*, a treatise that takes the form of a vision and possibly dates from 1557<sup>1440</sup>, the *opus alchymicum* is described as a journey during which Father Time leads the alchemist to the so-called “Campe of Philosophy”:

Lying in my bed an old Man to me came,  
Laying his hand on my buisy head slumbering;  
I am, said he, *Tyme*, The *Producer of all thing*:  
Awake and rise, prepaire thy selfe quickly,  
My intent is to bring thee to *the Campe of Philosophy*<sup>1441</sup>.

Time accompanies the alchemical adept through twelve gates that represent the phases of the *opus alchymicum*. Number twelve is particularly significant because it alludes to the

<sup>1438</sup> Michael Maier, Discourse accompanying Emblem XII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 120.

<sup>1439</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Il mito della reintegrazione*, a cura di Roberto Scagno, Jaca Book, Milano, 1989, pp. 17-26. (or. ed. *Mitul reintegrării*, Editura Vremea, București, 1942).

<sup>1440</sup> As Schuler remarks, “This work, which circulated widely in manuscript, certainly contributed to Blomfield’s reputation among the adepts”. Robert M. Schuler, “William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist”, cit., p. 80.

<sup>1441</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 305.

union of contraries, i.e. three and four, that symbolise the heavenly and the earthly dimension respectively. The practitioner is immediately warned that “Each thing hath his Tyme”, suggesting that nature’s pace should be respected:

Towards the *Campe* (we went) of *Philosophy*:  
The wonderfull sights ther for to see;  
To a large greate Gate father *Tyme* brought me,  
Which closed was then he to me said,  
Each thing hath his Tyme, be thou then nothing dismaid<sup>1442</sup>.

The protagonist of the alchemical parable is explicitly required to follow constantly the steps of his guide, *Tyme*, if he wants to succeed in the work of transmutation: “if thou wilt enter this Campe of Philosophy / With thee take Tyme to guide thee in the way”<sup>1443</sup>. The role of Father Time as a leader and mentor to the alchemist in his quest towards material and philosophical gold is particularly significant for the alchemical reading of *The Winter’s Tale*, a play in which Time accompanies the characters in their redemptive journey. As Time in *Blomfields Blossoms* brings the reader to the “Campe of Philosophy”, where there are “Bloomes and Blossomes plentifully [...] flourishing [...] with Collour gay” and birds “Mellodiously singing”<sup>1444</sup>, so Time in *The Winter’s Tale* guides the audience to “th’ freshest things now reigning” (IV, i, 13), in “fair Bohemia” (IV, i, 21), sixteen years after Perdita was abandoned by her father, King Leontes. As will be considered below, in Shakespeare’s romance Time is a healing, and obliquely alchemical, figure who leads to the final *coniunctio* and to the restoration of truth and goodness through the necessary phases of suffering, expiation, and rebirth.

The first gate the alchemist has to open in *Blomfields Blossoms* is that of the *Prima materia*:

What is the first Lock named tell me then  
I pray thee, said I, and what shall I it call?  
It is said he *the Seacret of all wise Men*;  
*Chaos* in the bodyes called the *first Originall*:  
*Prima materia*<sup>1445</sup>.

After trespassing this initial threshold, the adept sees a group of eminent philosophers, among whom are Hermes Trismegistus, Aristotle, Morienus, Albert the Great, Roger Bacon, and George Ripley, all busily discussing about the *Materia Prima*:

---

<sup>1442</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1443</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 308.

<sup>1444</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 305.

<sup>1445</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 307.

At this Gate opening even in the entry  
 A number of *Philosophers* in the face I met,  
 Working all one way the secrets of *Philosophy*  
 Upon *Chaos* darke that among them was set,  
 [...]  
 They buisily disputed the *Materia Prima*,  
 [...]  
 Here I saw the Father of Philosophers, *Hermes*,  
 Here I saw *Aristotle* with cheere most jocund;  
 Here I saw *Morien*, and *Senior in Turba* more or lesse;  
 Sober *Democritus*, *Albert*, *Bacon* and *Ramund*,  
 The *Monke* and the *Chanon of Bridlington* so profound<sup>1446</sup>.

Since primal matter, also defined as *Corpus confusum*<sup>1447</sup> or “the regimen of Saturn”<sup>1448</sup>, denotes the starting point of the alchemical creation, or the foundation of the *opus*, it is placed at the beginning of the alchemist’s journey towards the “Campe of Philosophy”. As a matter of fact, it is from primeval chaos, “from Saturn’s belly”<sup>1449</sup>, that the quintessence is extracted:

It is a *privy Quintessence*; keepe it well in minde.  
 This is not in sight, but retest invisible;  
 Till it be forced out of *Chaos* darke,  
 Where he remaineth ever indivisible,  
 And yet in him is the foundation of our warke<sup>1450</sup>.

As already said, Time-Saturn both helps and hinders the operations of the *opus alchymicum*: in a paradoxical way, the alchemist tries to overcome the effects of all-destroying time by creating the philosopher’s stone, a kind of substance that shares the virtues of heaven<sup>1451</sup>, but he is simultaneously expected to honour time. The two aspects of time, both destroyer and healer, are perfectly fused in alchemical symbolism, as can be inferred from the plates that show Saturn-Time with a scythe standing beside the ‘chemical’ couple, suggesting that the stage of *nigredo* is essential to attain the *coniunctio*. Alchemists actually argue that Saturn represents the metal lead, the *prima materia*, and the

---

<sup>1446</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 308.

<sup>1447</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 318.

<sup>1448</sup> “that which has been stripped of every form by putrefaction so that a new form can be introduced, that is, the black matter in the regimen of Saturn”. Isaac Newton, *Index chemicus*, quoted in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, p. 153.

<sup>1449</sup> “For below the blackness the true whiteness is hidden and the latter is taken out, i.e. taken out of the small belly of Saturn”. Michael Maier, Discourse accompanying Emblem XII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 120.

<sup>1450</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 313.

<sup>1451</sup> Alchemists often define the philosopher’s stone as ‘heaven’ since it is a substance, a quintessence, that can resist temporal decay. Basil Valentine, for instance, describes the stone as “a heavenly thing that has its habitation in the highest region of the firmament”. Basilius Valentinus, *Twelve Keys*, “Eight Key”, HM 172.

*nigredo*, i.e. the phase of sterility from which the *opus alchymicum* begins, and, therefore, the key of their work: “Saturn, who is called the greatest of the planets, is the least useful in our Magistry. Nevertheless, it is the chief Key of the whole Art, howbeit set in the lowest and meanest place”<sup>1452</sup>.

Mircea Eliade remarks that the majority of initiatory rituals imply the retrieving of the primordial condition of the cosmos, a state when everything was confounded, with the aim to propitiate the regeneration of the natural world:

Doveva essere realizzato (‘sperimentato’) lo stato primordiale, pre-formale, caotico – lo stato che, sul piano cosmico, corrispondeva alla situazione indifferenziata, caotica, precedente alla creazione – al fine di promuovere, per mezzo della virtù della magia imitativa, la fusione dei germi nella stessa matrice tellurica e l’atto della fertilità<sup>1453</sup>.

Taking into account that, as the celebrated historian of religions observes, the *opus alchymicum* is itself a sort of rite of initiation, aimed at a complete change of the human condition<sup>1454</sup>, it is not surprising that alchemists themselves insist on the importance of the dissolution of matter into the *prima materia* as the starting point of the alchemical process of transmutation. In *The Winter’s Tale*, as already pointed out, the scene of the sea-storm in the third act displays a situation of destruction and confusion, a state of death and chaos that nevertheless will promote new life. As if following the rhythm of the alchemical *opus*, the new phase of the drama begins only after a stage of dissolution that brings the wheel of time back to primeval chaos. Alchemists define this part of the work as *opus contra naturam* since they conceive of it as an action that seemingly goes ‘against’ nature and time<sup>1455</sup>: in order for the alchemical work to progress, time has to be reversed. It is possibly not a chance, then, that in the healing journey of *The Winter’s Tale* Time appears as an actual character and as a guide. After a phase of disorder and death, Father Time appears and announces an inversion, as if to suggest that a regeneration, the *albedo*, is beginning:

---

<sup>1452</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, cit., “Ninth Key”, HM 173. Latin text: “Summus planetarum coelestium Saturnus vocatus in magisterio nostro vilissimae autoritatis est: nihilominus praecipua est clavis totius artis, at in infimo gradu positus, et minimae aestimationis in arte nostra habetur”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, IX Clavis, MH 415.

<sup>1453</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Il mito della reintegrazione*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>1454</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 137: “il [l’alchimiste occidental] accède à des expériences initiatiques qui, au fur et à mesure du progrès de l’*opus*, lui forgent une autre personnalité, comparable à celle que l’on obtient après avoir affronté victorieusement les épreuves d’une initiation”. A few words below, Eliade remarks that the alchemical experience can be associated with other mystical traditions: “L’expérience alchimique et l’expérience magico-religieuse partagent donc des éléments communs ou analogues. [...] L’*opus alchymicum* avait des analogies profondes avec la vie mystique”. *Ibidem*, p. 141.

<sup>1455</sup> See ‘opus contra naturam’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 139.

*I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing  
As you had slept between. Leontes leaving –  
Th'effects of his fond jealousies so grieving  
That he shuts up himself – imagine me,  
Gentle spectators, that I now may be  
In fair Bohemia.  
(IV, i, 16-21, italics mine)*

Garber remarks that “the play is framed by time, and is in effect itself a kind of hourglass, waiting to be turned once more, and to begin anew”<sup>1456</sup>. Since the *opus alchymicum* consists in a series of reversals of state, the concept of ‘inversion’ is of paramount importance in alchemical literature, as already noticed<sup>1457</sup>. In a text attributed to the legendary alchemist known as ‘Maria the Jewess’, the adept is explicitly suggested to “invert nature”: “Invert nature and you will find that which you seek”<sup>1458</sup>. It can be argued that in *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare dwells on the alchemical conception of time, especially if considering that the latter is first ‘inverted’, i.e. brought back to a state of disorder that mirrors the condition existing at the outset of Creation, in order to start again. Time, that until the fourth act has been a destroying and ‘wintry’ force, is now turned into a renewing one, leading the characters to the final *coniunctio*.

Given that Saturn represents the beginning of the alchemical work of transformation and healing and a phase of destruction followed by a renewal, the fact that Father Time, usually identified with the god Saturn-Cronus, appears precisely after the stage of ablution recounted in the scene of the storm suggests that *The Winter’s Tale* can be read in the light of the phases of the *opus alchymicum*. Among the initiatory rituals and fertility rites that, as documented by Eliade, were believed to reproduce the origins of the cosmos in order to propitiate the most benign features of time and a rebirth of nature, are precisely the Saturnalia, the ancient Roman celebrations organised in honour of the god Saturn. Recalling the structure of the *opus alchymicum*, devised as a journey that should go backwards before progressing, during the Saturnalia festivities the wheel of time was symbolically brought *ab initio* in order to go forward:

Il tutto diventava come all’inizio, *ab initio*, o, se vogliamo ricordare il termine sanscrito, *agre*, – *in principio*. E tale ‘totalizzazione’ era realizzata attraverso il ‘rovesciamento di tutti i valori’ e la *coincidentia oppositorum*<sup>1459</sup>.

---

<sup>1456</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 842.

<sup>1457</sup> See section 6.3. “*The white sheet bleaching on the hedge*. The Reborn World of Bohemia and the Alchemical Stage of *albedo*”, pp. 269ff.

<sup>1458</sup> Maria the Jewess, “Discourse of the Most Sage Maria About the Philosopher’s Stone”, quoted by Raphael Patai, “Maria the Jewess – Founding Mother of Alchemy”, cit., p. 180.

<sup>1459</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Il mito della reintegrazione*, cit., p. 24.

It is interesting to remark that Pernety conflates alchemical imagery and the symbolism of the Saturnalia, noticing that these festivals were established to pay homage to Saturn, from which, Pernety continues, alchemists draw their tincture:

Ces fêtes étaient instituées en l'honneur de Saturne, d'où les Philosophes extraient leur mercure [...] pendant le temps du règne de Saturne, c'est-à-dire pendant le temps de la couleur noire où de la putréfaction<sup>1460</sup>.

The Saturnalia were fertility rites that fostered a renewal of the natural world, in the same way as the *opus alchymicum* is conceived of as an initiatory process beginning with the so-called “reign of Saturn” and leading to the redemption of both man and nature. Given that the pastoral scene of the sheep-shearing in *The Winter's Tale* immediately follows the speech of Father Time, who announces a ‘reversal’ and a movement towards rebirth after the phase of chaos displayed at the end of Act III, the identification of Perdita’s festival with a saturnalian kind of ritual seems at least plausible. If interpreting the sheep-shearing feast as a saturnalian festivity, the symbolism of Saturn-Time, and its role in the healing and transformative process of the play, become even more evident.

The main characteristics of the Saturnalia were inversion and topsy-turviness. All sorts of rules, values, and boundaries were abolished in order to reproduce the state of confusion that mirrored the unformed mass, the *prima materia*, from which the cosmos was shaped:

I Saturnali costituivano un formidabile rovesciamento dei valori. Ciò che era vietato durante l'anno, era permesso e addirittura promosso durante i Saturnali. [...] Utilizzando una terminologia moderna, potremmo parlare di un rovesciamento di tutti i valori<sup>1461</sup>.

As Woodbridge points out, “the deep structure of all saturnalian topsy-turviness – inversions of class, gender, age – derives from inverting generations through the action of Time<sup>1462</sup>. Celebrating Saturn, usually confounded with Chronos, was also a way of celebrating time and propitiating positive transformation. At the beginning of the fourth act of *The Winter's Tale*, Time announces an inversion and, in the following scene, the audience witnesses a world that is “preposterous” (V, ii, 145), turned upside-down, with royal characters dressed like peasants and vice versa. Garber actually claims that “[t]he Bohemia world is a version of ‘carnival’, the low become high, the hierarchy of order and

---

<sup>1460</sup> See ‘Saturnales’ in Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., p. 326.

<sup>1461</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Il mito della reintegrazione*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>1462</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, cit., p. 277.

power inverted”<sup>1463</sup>. The shepherdess Perdita, a “poor lowly maid, / Most goddess-like pranked up” (IV, iv, 9-10), dances with Florizel, the son of the King of Bohemia and, therefore, a prince, who has “obscured” his true, royal essence with “a swain’s wearing” (IV, iv, 9), as the girl herself notices: “Your high self, / The gracious mark o’th’ land, you have obscured / With a swain’s wearing” (IV, iv, 7-9). Also King Polixenes and lord Camillo disguise themselves as peasants in order to participate to the sheep-shearing celebrations and discover the reason why Florizel has been spending a considerable amount of time at a shepherd’s house:

Thou [Camillo] shalt accompany us to the place, where we will, not appearing what we are, have some question with the shepherd, from whose simplicity I think it not uneasy to get the cause of my son’s resort thither. (IV, iii, 46-50)

Another element on which the Saturnalia festivities rested was precisely the contrast among generations, thus further alluding to the mythological story of Saturn. As already said, the clash between the old and the young, winter and spring, is especially evident in the opposition between Polixenes and Florizel, a conflict that, in the light of the myth of Saturn and of alchemical imagery, is nonetheless propitious because it allows the interchange of the generations.

As Eliade notices, throughout the Saturnalia rituals the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the fusion of contraries, had to be achieved<sup>1464</sup>. The topic related to the reconciliation of opposites, that is also one of the main precepts of alchemy, is exactly what Perdita and Polixenes allude to during their celebrated discussion in Arcadian Bohemia. As will be further considered, the shepherdess and the king debate whether it is art or nature that should have pre-eminence: Perdita complains about the practice of grafting, a kind of “art which in their piedness shares / With great creating Nature” (IV, iv, 87-8), whereas Polixenes argues that “This is an art / Which does mend Nature – change it rather – but / The art itself is Nature” (IV, iv, 95-7). By opposing art and nature, the dialogue condenses the essence of the play, that, as already said, strives for the union of contraries from the beginning to the very end. While discussing about a sort of art that does not rival nature but, rather, “mends” it, Polixenes employs horticultural metaphors to illustrate the harmonious coexistence of the artistic and of the natural dimensions:

---

<sup>1463</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., 843.

<sup>1464</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Il mito della reintegrazione*, cit., p. 24: “Il tutto diventava come all’inizio, ab initio, o, se vogliamo ricordare il termine sanscrito, *agre*, – *in principio*. E tale ‘totalizzazione’ era realizzata attraverso il ‘rovesciamento di tutti i valori’ e la *coincidentia oppositorum*”.

You see, sweet maid, we marry  
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,  
And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
By bud of nobler race.  
(IV, iv, 92-95)

Indirectly referring to the union between his son Florizel, a “bud of nobler race”, and Perdita, “a bark of baser kind”, Polixenes evokes that synthesis of opposites that is at the basis of the alchemical philosophy. The ‘chemical wedding’, the symbol of the *coniunctio oppositorum*, is actually one of the most significant emblems of the alchemical art since it epitomises the main purpose of the *opus alchymicum*: the recovery of the Adamic condition of androgyny and undivided unity that existed before the human Fall, a state when microcosm and macrocosm were in perfect harmony. The *coincidentia oppositorum* symbolises both the beginning of the alchemical work, the *prima materia*, a phase where all the elements were blended, and its end, the condition of perfection alchemists try to achieve. Eliade points out that the symbolism of the *coniunctio* represents that primary principle of wholeness and perfection that allows man to experience God’s sacredness:

Nous retrouvons ici le très vieux symbolisme de la *coincidentia oppositorum*, universellement répandu, attesté déjà aux stades archaïques de culture, et qui servait à définir tant bien que mal à la fois la réalité fondamentale, l’*Urgrund*, et l’état paradoxal de la totalité, de la perfection, et par conséquent la sacralité et Dieu<sup>1465</sup>.

Interestingly enough, the temporal setting of the sheep-shearing scene is ambiguous: it has been defined as a “minicycle of the seasons”<sup>1466</sup>, comprehending and denying all of them at once, thus evoking the fusion of opposites that was at the beginning of Creation. Even though Florizel associates Perdita with “Flora / Peering in April’s front” (IV, iv, 2-3), the girl gives “flowers of winter” (IV, iv, 78) to Polixenes and Camillo, thus contributing to heighten the confusion concerning the time of the year in which the scene occurs. A few words below, complaining about the lack of “flowers o’th’ spring” (IV, iv, 114), Perdita offers “flowers / Of middle summer” (IV, iv, 106-7). Moreover, noticing that “the year is growing ancient, / Not yet on summer’s death, nor on the birth / Of trembling winter” (IV, iv, 79-81), the girl seems to suggest that the season of the year is late summer or autumn. However, the sheep-shearing was usually celebrated in June<sup>1467</sup> and, therefore, at the end of spring. Again, Autolycus’s reference to daffodils at the beginning of Act IV is in contrast

---

<sup>1465</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 142.

<sup>1466</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 847.

<sup>1467</sup> “the scene isn’t in March, but takes place immediately after sheep-shearing, i.e. June or July”. See John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 249n.

to the references to late summer, autumn, and winter that recur in the scene of the sheep-shearing.

Reading the sheep-shearing scene of *The Winter's Tale* as a kind of saturnalian rite allows us to see it as a starting point along an initiatory journey in which Saturn-Time plays a paramount role, thus recalling the symbolism of the *opus alchymicum*. As Eliade remarks in his discussion concerning alchemy and initiation, all kinds of initiatory death, both real and symbolical, and, therefore, also the alchemical phase of *nigredo*, or *putrefactio*, imply an imitation of cosmogony: “pour bien faire quelque chose, ou refaire une intégrité vitale menacée par la maladie, il faut d’abord retourner *ad originem*, puis répéter la cosmogonie”<sup>1468</sup>. In the attempt to re-create the so-called *prima materia*, Eliade points out, alchemists evidently dwell upon the cosmogonic myth: “A cet égard, l’alchimiste n’innovait pas: en cherchant la *materia prima*, il poursuivait la réduction des substances à l’état pré-cosmogonique”<sup>1469</sup>. Alchemical philosophers are aware of the fact that the transmutation cannot be attained without a return to the origins, a release from time: “Il [l’alchimiste] savait qu’il ne pouvait obtenir la transmutation à partir des ‘formes’ déjà usées par le Temps; il fallait d’abord ‘dissoudre’ ces ‘formes’”<sup>1470</sup>. It is precisely by regularly regenerating time, repeating the myth of cosmogony, that alchemists believe to be able to defeat temporal decay: “l’alchimiste ‘maîtrisait le Temps’ lorsqu’il réitérait symboliquement [...] le chaos primordial et la cosmogonie, lorsque [...], en outre, il subissait la ‘mort et la résurrection’ initiatiques”<sup>1471</sup>. The cosmos, consumed and corrupted by time, has to be dissolved in order to be created anew, as it happens in Shakespeare’s romance, a play that displays a world “destroyed” and one “ransomed” (V, ii, 15), and in a number of rites of initiation, such as the Saturnalia.

Nature and Time, the main protagonists of the *opus alchymicum*, play a central role in the healing process of *The Winter's Tale*. Perdita herself might be identified with ‘the daughter of Time’, reunited with her parents after “a wide gap of time” (V, iii, 154), and with the ‘philosophical child’, the product of the chemical wedding between the king and the queen, a stage that is achieved only at the end of the *opus alchymicum*, when the *rota alchemica* has accomplished a complete rotation. As scholars observe, “Time allows Perdita to grow and to mature, and time allows for the final magic of reunion”<sup>1472</sup>. Even though acknowledging Time as a guide, the dramatist also seems to hasten its course, as

---

<sup>1468</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 133.

<sup>1469</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>1470</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1471</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.

<sup>1472</sup> Scott Colley, “Leontes’s search for wisdom in *The Winter's Tale*”, cit., p. 43.

alchemists themselves do. Father Time flies over the wide gap (IV, i, 7) of sixteen years that separates Acts III and IV<sup>1473</sup>, as if the way towards the final *coniunctio* had been shortened:

Impute it not a crime  
To me or my swift passage that I slide  
O'er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried  
Of that wide gap.  
(IV, i, 4-7)

Leaving “the growth untried / Of that wide gap”, Shakespeare somehow accelerates time. While imitating the operations of nature, alchemists were also required to quicken the process bringing to alchemical gold. In a paradoxical way, as Pereira observes, one of the most important qualities the adept is expected to possess is patience since it enables him to work in accordance with the rhythms of nature:

il processo alchemico richiede prima di ogni altra una dote del carattere, la pazienza, che dona all'artefice la capacità di inserirsi con rispetto e senza violenza nel tempo della natura<sup>1474</sup>.

In *Blomfields Blossoms* the alchemist is explicitly told that “Each thing hath his Tyme”<sup>1475</sup>. Time, therefore, should be considered as a friend of the alchemical adept: “*Tyme* should be my frend”<sup>1476</sup>. It follows that the statement according to which the alchemist does in a few days what nature does in many years is not to be intended as a superficial attitude towards time and nature, but rather, as a form of awareness that the responsibility of the *opus alchymicum* is entirely in man's ability to accurately imitate nature<sup>1477</sup>. Only he who has perfectly understood the inner mechanisms that regulate the natural world can reproduce them in the microcosm of his laboratory and create the philosopher's stone, the product of the collaboration between man, nature, and time<sup>1478</sup>. Some critics have suggested that the voice of Time in *The Winter's Tale* is that of the playwright himself:

the intrusion of the figure of Time, we might contend, draws attention to this gap

---

<sup>1473</sup> It should be noticed that Time's statement that sixteen years have passed from when Perdita was found, on the coast of Bohemia, is in contrast with Camillo's account of the events. According to the lord, he has left the court of Sicily fifteen years before: “It is fifteen years since I saw my country”. (IV, ii, 4)

<sup>1474</sup> Michela Pereira, *Arcana sapienza*, cit., p. 117.

<sup>1475</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 305.

<sup>1476</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 306.

<sup>1477</sup> Michela Pereira, *Arcana sapienza*, cit., p. 117.

<sup>1478</sup> “the Philosopher's Stone is none other than a fiery and perfect Mercury extracted by Nature and Art; that is the artificially prepared and true hermaphrodite Adam, and the microcosm”. Paracelsus, *Concerning the Universal Matter of the Philosopher's Stone*, HAWP 1: 66.

rather than naturalizes it. Why then does Shakespeare choose to employ it? [...] It does not take much to see that this is the voice of a playwright talking, an artist introducing and describing a work of art<sup>1479</sup>.

If accepting the thesis according to which Father Time is the dramatist, then Shakespeare displays a sort of alchemical approach to time: by revering time, the dramatist also controls it. Flying over a wide gap and accelerating the process leading to ‘perfection’, the playwright makes the play end with the chemical wedding between the king and the queen of Sicily and the return of the ‘daughter of time’, Perdita. *The Winter’s Tale* exhibits an approach to time that is completely different from the one Shakespeare displays in the sonnets: if, in the sonnets, the poet reveals a constant fear of time passing, in *The Winter’s Tale*, conversely, the dramatist seems to have understood how to master it. Alchemists themselves, as Eliade remarks, aim at controlling time because they are afraid of it:

tout en se substituent au Temps, l’alchimiste se gardait bien de l’assumer; il rêvait de précipiter les rythmes temporels, de faire de l’or plus vite que la Nature, mais, en bon ‘philosophe’ ou mystique qu’il était, l’alchimiste avait peur du Temps [...] et rêvait à l’éternité, il poursuivait l’immortalité, *l’Elixir Vitae*<sup>1480</sup>.

By assigning such a prominent role to time, as both destroyer and healer, Shakespeare undoubtedly celebrates the natural, and possibly alchemical, cycle of dissolution and rebirth.

Making “conscious alterations of time” was actually one of the main tasks of alchemists: alchemical practitioners directly act on time, “either shortening it (in the case of the artificial production of metals), lengthening it (in the case of life-prolonging elixirs), or, in the case of redemption, removing the subject from time’s sway entirely”<sup>1481</sup>. Eliade argues that the alchemist considers himself as a creator, able to perfect nature and master time: “Pour l’alchimiste, l’homme est un créateur: il régénère la Nature et maîtrise le Temps”<sup>1482</sup>. It is worth quoting also the enlightening words by Sheppard on the alchemical concept of time: “Alchemy is the art of liberating parts of the Cosmos from temporal existence and achieving perfection which, for metals is gold, and for man, longevity, then immortality and, finally, redemption”<sup>1483</sup>. Considering that *The Winter’s Tale* is closed by the seeming ‘resurrection’ of the queen of Sicily and with the recovery of Perdita, thus

---

<sup>1479</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 842.

<sup>1480</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, cit., p. 155.

<sup>1481</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>1482</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le Mythe de l’alchimie*, cit., p. 165.

<sup>1483</sup> H. J. Sheppard, “European Alchemy in the Context of a Universal Definition”, in Christoph Meinel (ed.), *Die Alchimie in der europäischen Kultur*, Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, vol. 32, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1986, pp. 16-17, quoted in Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, cit., p. 11.

displaying life restored, it can be assumed that Shakespeare widely draws on the alchemical idea of time, showing that death can be overcome thanks to a collaboration of art and nature. As will be considered in chapter VIII, nature is “mended” thanks to the way Paulina, acting as a dramatist, manages Time and employs her art in the service of the regenerative pattern of the drama. As an alchemist, she perfects nature and masters Time, creating life anew. In an alchemical way, in *The Winter’s Tale* “time has at last in its triumph brought about its own defeat”<sup>1484</sup>. As Mino Gabriele remarks, alchemy is the art that, by teaching how to unite the end with the beginning, microcosm and macrocosm, allows man to vanquish death: “l’alchimia è l’Arte di non morire, giacché insegna ad unire il principio con la fine, l’alto con il basso e viceversa, investigando la processione degli esseri nell’unità del tutto”<sup>1485</sup>. Outstripping time, as it is written in the *Corpus Hermeticum*<sup>1486</sup>, and simultaneously following the steps of nature, alchemists believe that they can re-create that state of golden perfection that reigned before the human Fall – a state when temporal decay did not exist. Overcoming death and, therefore, removing man from time’s sway, was the main goal alchemists tried to achieve:

we perceive *Nature* is so courteous to some kind of *Creatures*, as the *Hart*, *Eagle*, and *Serpent*, that she affords them means to obtaine the benefit of *Renovation* (here Nature teaches them *Naturall Magick*, for tis no other) and why then may it not be granted to Man if sought after? Nay the consideration of this *Favourable Blessing* afforded to *Animalls* has been the principall ground whence many *Philosophers* have addicted themselves to the search ‘of this *Mystery*, hoping that might not be denied to Man, upon his search, ‘which is bestowed gratis upon the Creature’<sup>1487</sup>.

In *The Winter’s Tale*, temporal references are evidently ambiguous and often contradictory, as in the case of Camillo’s statement that fifteen years have passed from when he fled Leontes’s court, a comment that is in contrast with Father Time’s claim that sixteen years have elapsed between Acts III and IV, and of the equivocal temporal setting of the sheep-shearing scene. As if time had become fluid, Shakespeare’s romance seems to be set in a timeless and spaceless dimension, a world where man is able to triumph over death. Whether this is to be believed or not, Shakespeare himself does not offer any definite answers. Before making the statue of Queen Hermione come to life, Paulina asks the audience to awake their faith, evoking that kind of “suspension of disbelief” that Samuel Taylor Coleridge would theorise centuries later: “It is required / You do awake your faith”

<sup>1484</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank “The Triumph of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 153.

<sup>1485</sup> Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>1486</sup> “outstrip all time, become eternity and you will understand god”. Hermes Trismegistus, “Mind to Hermes”, XI: 20, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>1487</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses*, cit., TCB 448.

(V, iii, 94-5). The statue scene points to the very core of early modern English drama, the interconnection between mimesis and illusoriness<sup>1488</sup>. Innocenti points out that the concept of “illusionistic” entails a consideration of the audience’s awareness, claiming that it should decrease before credible mimesis and, conversely, increase when the dramatic fiction is clearly expressed<sup>1489</sup>. As Shakespeare’s romance, the *opus alchymicum* itself is a dream, an illusory quest for immortality and redemption, a sort of ‘tale of winter’ that is to be voluntarily believed if it is to become true.

---

<sup>1488</sup> See Loretta Innocenti, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Il teatro elisabettiano*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1994, pp. 12-15.

<sup>1489</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13: “Parlare di ‘illusionistico’ implica comunque che si consideri la consapevolezza del pubblico che, davanti alla mimesi ‘verosimile’ deve ridursi, essere ‘sospesa’, e che invece sarà sempre vigile quando si tratti di palese finzione teatrale”.



## Chapter 7

### *‘The art itself is nature’.*

### **The Alchemical Conception of Art and Nature in *The Winter’s Tale***

#### 7.1. *‘This method of perfection is called Alchemy’.* Alchemy within the Art-Nature Debate

When alchemy entered Western Europe, in the early Middle Ages, it was immediately perceived as an art that, in the attempt to create gold, aimed either at surpassing or helping nature. As Crisciani and Pereira remark, celebrated thinkers, such as Albert the Great, Roger Bacon, and Arnald of Villanova, engaged in discussions concerning the legitimacy of alchemical practices<sup>1490</sup>. Most importantly, the scholar William Newman points out that “[t]he Scholastic theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages appropriated alchemy as a point of reference for determining the power of human art in general”<sup>1491</sup>. Three categories, Newman observes, were employed by alchemists and their detractors alike to assess the role of alchemy before nature: “perverting nature, perfecting nature, and creating nature anew”<sup>1492</sup>. Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Newman continues, “alchemy provided a uniquely powerful focus for discussing the boundary between art and nature”<sup>1493</sup>. In his essay on the *studiolo* of Francesco I dei Medici, Romano highlights that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries alchemy was essential for the understanding of the complex relationship between the natural and the artificial dimensions<sup>1494</sup>. As already said, the *studiolo* of the Duke is the room where he devoted himself to alchemical studies and collected the products created in the *fonderia*<sup>1495</sup>. The *studiolo* was decorated by a number

---

<sup>1490</sup> See Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L’arte del sole e della luna*, cit., pp. 3-105.

<sup>1491</sup> William Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>1492</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>1493</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>1494</sup> “l’alchimia costituisce nei due secoli che precedono il ‘700, un punto chiave nella comprensione pratica – al di là degli indiscussi motivi di ermetismo, di esperienze mistiche – del complesso rapporto tra naturale e artificiale”. Ruggiero Romano, “Una certa idea dell’‘industria’ nello studiolo di Francesco I dei Medici a Firenze”, cit., p. 384.

<sup>1495</sup> See section 3.4. “King James’s Relationships with John Dee, Walter Raleigh, Arthur Dee, Michael Maier, Cornelis Drebbel, and Tycho Brahe”.

of frescoes that mainly deal with the art/nature theme seen from the perspective of alchemy: on the ceiling vault are paintings that show the four Aristotelian elements (earth, air, water, fire), a theory on which alchemists base their assumptions about transmutation<sup>1496</sup>, and at the centre of the series is Nature offering precious stones to Prometheus, emblem of the alchemical art, as will be further discussed<sup>1497</sup>. In an exchange of letters between Giorgio Vasari e Vincenzo Borghini, occurred between August and September 1570, the two discuss about the criterion to employ in the arrangement of the frescoes in the *studiolo*. With reference to the most important painting of the room, the one portraying Nature and Prometheus, Borghini reflects upon the way art and nature mutually help each other. He observes that art refines nature as, for instance, when the former brings to perfection the rough and shapeless matter produced by the latter:

simil cose non sono tutte della natura nè tutte dell'arte, ma vi hanno ambedue parte, aiutandosi l'una l'altra – come, per dare un esempio, la natura da il suo diamante ò carbonchio ò cristallo et simile altra materia rozza et informe, et l'arte gli pulisce, riquadra, intaglia etc<sup>1498</sup>.

As Riva observes, Francesco's 'cabinet of wonders' actualised the alchemical dream to unite microcosm and macrocosm: "In quella piccola stanza, microcosmo e macrocosmo si fondono in una perfetta corrispondenza"<sup>1499</sup>. His passion for alchemy made him renowned also in the European courts: he was described as a Duke who explored the admirable effects of both art and nature, "delle cose più ammirabili de l'arte o de la natura investigando in esse le occulte ragioni e riconoscendo l'eccellenza dell'humano ingegno"<sup>1500</sup>.

The issue concerning the respective scopes of art and nature is one of the most important ones in alchemical treatises<sup>1501</sup>. Petrus Bonus of Ferrara argues that "this Art is the minister and follower of Nature"<sup>1502</sup>. Alchemy, then, assists nature in attaining its right

<sup>1496</sup> See 'elements' in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 68-69.

<sup>1497</sup> On the frescoes in Francesco I dei Medici's *studiolo*, see, among others, Luciano Berti, *Il principe dello studiolo*, cit., pp. 61ff. and Ruggiero Romano, "Una certa idea dell' 'industria' nello studiolo di Francesco I dei Medici a Firenze", cit., pp. 379-389. On the alchemical significance of the studiolo and its frescoes, see "La Grande Opera in Palazzo Vecchio", in *Lo stanzino del principe in Palazzo Vecchio: i concetti, le immagini, il desiderio*, a cura di Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, Le Lettere, Firenze, 1980, pp. 72-86.

<sup>1498</sup> The excerpt from the letter from Vincenzo Borghini to Giorgio Vasari is quoted by Luciano Berti, *Il principe dello studiolo*, cit., p. 63.

<sup>1499</sup> Costanza Riva, *Il sogno alchemico di Francesco I de' Medici*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>1500</sup> Luciano Berti, *Il principe dello studiolo*, cit., p. 96. See also Costanza Riva, *Il sogno alchemico di Francesco I de' Medici*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>1501</sup> "il problema arte-natura è forse tra i più intricati e discussi nella tradizione alchemica". Chiara Crisciani, "L'alchimia nella cultura scolastica", in Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira (eds.), *L'arte del sole e della luna*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>1502</sup> Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 88. Latin text: "Notandum quod ars ista est ministrans

end, i.e. gold:

Now the perfection of metals, and the final intention of Nature in regard to them, is gold. [...] Nature would always change quicksilver that has within itself its own sulphur into gold, if she were not often hindered by some outward impediment<sup>1503</sup>.

The conception of alchemy as an art that can amply ameliorate the works of nature is evident in Roger Bacon's *The Mirror of Alchimy*, whose first English translation from Latin was published in London in 1597:

Some there are that aske whether of these twaine bee of greatest force, and efficacie, Nature, or Art, whereto I make aunswere, and say, that although Nature be mightie and marvailous, yet Art using Nature for an instrument, is more powerfull than natural virtue<sup>1504</sup>.

Bacon devotes a large part of his treatise to “An excellent discourse of the admirable force and efficacie of Art and Nature”<sup>1505</sup>, thus attesting to the importance of the topic in alchemical literature. Alchemists insist on the idea that their art improves nature because it discloses the latter's secrets and “might”:

*Nature* and *Arte* the Parents first begonne:  
By *Nature* 'twas, but *Nature* perfects not.  
*Arte* then what *Nature* left in hand doth take,  
And out of *One* a *Twofold* worke doth make.  
[...] Lo here the *Primar Secret* of this *Arte*,  
Contemne it not but understand it right,  
Who faileth to attaine this formost part,  
Shall never know *Artes force* nor *Natures might*<sup>1506</sup>.

In *The Practise of Chymical, and Hermetical Physicke*, a treatise published in London in 1605, *Halchymie* is defined as “Gods created handmaid” precisely because it has been

---

naturae et eam consequens”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita*, cit., p. 20r.

<sup>1503</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 7. Latin text: “Quare quotidie videmus, quomodo ipsa natura continuo de eorundem mortificatione et perfectione sit sollicita, donec in aurum, quod naturae finalis est intentio, perficiantur. Omnia etenim metalla ostendunt, naturam in iis nonnihil ad ulteriorem perfectionem vergendo suisse operatam; siquidem nec ullum reperitur metallum a perfectione adeo diminitum, quin auri aut argenti granum contineat. Et quidem cum metallis ita comparatum est, ut natura ex argento vivo suum sulphur secum habente propediem aurum gignere fatagat et potis etiam fit, nisi extraneu aliquod impedimentum inteveniat”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, cit., MH 15.

<sup>1504</sup> Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchimy*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>1505</sup> See Roger Bacon, “An excellent discourse of the admirable force and efficacie of Art and Nature”, *Ibidem*, pp. 49ff.

<sup>1506</sup> William Bedman, *Aenigma philosophicum*, TCB 423.

devised as a *ministra naturae*, having “a chyrurgical hand in the anatomizing of euery veine of whole nature”:

For *Halchymie* tradeth not alone with transmutation of metals (as ignorant vulgars thinke: which error hath made them distaste that noble Science) but shee hath also a chyrurgical hand in the anatomizing of euery veine of whole nature: Gods created handmaid, to conceiue and bring forth his Creatures. For it is proper to God alone to create something of nothing: but it is natures taske to forme that which he hath created<sup>1507</sup>.

Linden points out that alchemy is “a means of gaining knowledge and understanding of nature, visible creation, and God” and, therefore, “it deserves to be regarded as ‘Gods created handmaid’”<sup>1508</sup>.

The alchemist, being “Artefice prudente, e buon ministro / Della Natura”<sup>1509</sup>, as argued by Antonio Allegretti, masters the hidden mechanisms that regulate the natural world. However, as Paracelsus maintains, “before all things else, a consideration of principles is absolutely necessary; and also of the manner in which Nature proceeds from imperfection to the end of perfection”<sup>1510</sup>. The alchemist has to learn at nature’s school in order to serve and imitate her correctly: “Att least if thou in nature’s schoole be taught / With learned Skill and therto well arte fraught”<sup>1511</sup>. Alchemy, being a faithful imitation of the workings of nature and providing mankind with the general principles for the understanding of the macrocosm, is regarded by its practitioners as a model for all the other arts: “L’alchimie devient un principe général d’explication du monde [...]. L’alchimie fournit donc une méthode universelle qui fait d’elle le modèle de tous les arts”<sup>1512</sup>. Unravelling the obscure processes of the cosmos, unknown to those who are not initiated to the sacred art, the alchemist is both a humble servant and an essential collaborator of nature.

As far as the relevance of alchemy to the philophysical art-nature debate is concerned, it is worth mentioning the thirteenth-century allegorical poem known as *Roman de la rose*, by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, the latter finishing the uncomplete version written by the former. The text, who widely circulated in France, Germany, and England

---

<sup>1507</sup> Thomas Tymme, “To the Right Honorable, Sir Charles Blunt, Earle of Deuonshire”, in Joseph du Chesne, *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke*, cit., sig. A3v and ff.

<sup>1508</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>1509</sup> Antonio Allegretti, *De la trasmutatione de metalli*, cit., ll. 74-5, p. 70.

<sup>1510</sup> Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, cit., HAWP 1: 65.

<sup>1511</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher’s Stone*, cit., ll. 109-10, AP 15.

<sup>1512</sup> Jean-Marc Mandosio, “L’alchimie dans les classifications des sciences et des arts à la renaissance”, cit., p. 222.

throughout the Middle Ages, contains a section devoted to the art-nature controversy. Jean de Meun employs precisely alchemy to illustrate the relationship between the world of art and the world of nature<sup>1513</sup>. The author first argues that art in general can only counterfeit nature:

Si garde coment Nature euvre,  
E la contrefait come singes;  
Mais tant est ses sens nuz e linges  
Qu'el ne peut faire choses vives,  
Ja si ne sembleront naïves<sup>1514</sup>.

A few lines below, however, Jean de Meun acknowledges that there is only one kind of art that can imitate nature properly, i.e. alchemy, a discipline from which all the other arts should draw inspiration:

Ou d'alkimie tant apreigne  
Que touz metauz en couleur teigne,  
Qu'el se pourrait anceis tuer  
Que les espieces transmuer,  
Se tant ne fait qu'el les rameine  
A leur matire prumeraine;  
Euvre tant come ele vivra,  
Ja Nature n'aconsivra<sup>1515</sup>.

As Newman remarks, in the above-quoted excerpt the author is suggesting that the visual arts, that only limit themselves to an “apelike counterfeiting of nature”, should learn that the species cannot be transmuted unless they are first reduced to “leur matire prumeraine”, i.e. their *prima materia*<sup>1516</sup>: this is how, Jean de Meun claims, alchemists successfully emulate nature. Since alchemy operates respecting the latter’s guidelines, the author finally argues that it is a true art: “Nepourquant, c'est chose notable, / Alkimie est art veritable”<sup>1517</sup>.

Due to the positive depiction of alchemy he displays in *Roman de la rose*, Jean de Meun came to be regarded as an adept of the sacred art. Schuler notices that he “was hailed

---

<sup>1513</sup> “In questa abbondante letteratura [alchemica] figuravano anche numerose ricette, trattati completi tradotti dal latino, alcune opere originali trascritte in lingua volgare e soprattutto un interessante poema didattico che iniziò a circolare contemporaneamente in Germania, in Inghilterra e in Francia: il *Roman de la rose* di Jean de Meun, la cui sezione alchemica (vv. 16045-16148) integrò l'alchimia in un'antitesi generale che opponeva l'arte alla Natura”. Robert Halleux, “L'alchimia nel medioevo latino e greco”, *Storia della scienza* 4: 549.

<sup>1514</sup> Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, Librairie Édouard Champion, Paris, 1922, Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York, 1965, ll. 16029-16034, pp. 129-30.

<sup>1515</sup> *Ibidem*, ll. 16065-16072, p. 131.

<sup>1516</sup> William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, cit., p. 80.

<sup>1517</sup> Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, cit., ll. 16083-16084, p. 132.

by many later writers as a master of the arcane science, and this reputation grew as more texts bearing his name appeared”<sup>1518</sup>. As a matter of fact, the passage devoted to alchemy included in *Roman de la rose* was extrapolated and started to circulate separately along with other alchemical writings attributed to Jean de Meun. Two works in particular were ascribed to him: *Les remontrances de la nature à l’alchimiste errant* and *La réponse de l’alchimiste à la nature*. Both poems, devised as a complaint of Nature against the alchemist who does not follow her rules and as a response from the repentant alchemist, were translated into English in the mid-seventeenth century with the following titles: *Planctus Naturae: The Complaint of Nature against the Erronious Alchymist* and *The Alchymyst’s Answere to Nature*. As documented by Schuler, when William Backhouse translated them the two treatises were already well known among Renaissance alchemists since they had been published at least four times between 1557 and 1618<sup>1519</sup>. They were also translated into Latin prose and included in the *Musaeum Hermeticum* under the collective title *Demonstratio Naturae: quam errantibus chymicis facit, dum de sophista et stolido spiratore carbonario conqueritur*<sup>1520</sup>.

What emerges both from *The Complaint of Nature* and *The Alchymyst’s Answere to Nature* is the recurrent theme according to which the alchemical adept is first required to learn the principles of Mother Earth in order to reproduce them accurately in his laboratory. In the first one of the two texts, Nature, at first angry at the alchemist’s “folly”<sup>1521</sup>, urges him to operate following her instructions diligently:

But if thou come into my forge,  
Mettall & earthly minerall  
Soe finde thou maist the manner all,  
And howe I worke, in what manner<sup>1522</sup>.

Nature explicitly asserts that the alchemist has to work in the same way as she does in her “forge”. Alchemists constantly remark that the alchemical work is a microcosmic reproduction of the operations occurring within the “Mine of Nature”: “then he [the alchemist] will run through a Plate of Copper, and make it perfect Silver or perfect Gold,

---

<sup>1518</sup> Robert M. Schuler, Introduction to Pseudo-Jean de Meun, *The Complaint of Nature against the Erronious Alchymist*, AP 124.

<sup>1519</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

<sup>1520</sup> See Joannem A. Mehung, *Demonstratio Naturae: quam errantibus chymicis facit, dum de sophista et stolido spiratore carbonario conqueritur*, MH 147-171. See also the English translation in *The Hermetic Museum: John A. Mehung, A Demonstration of Nature, Made to the Erring Alchemists, and Complaining of the Sophists and Other False Teachers*, HM 59-68.

<sup>1521</sup> “And in short, I tell thee truly, / Angry I am att thy folly”. Pseudo-Jean de Meun, *Planctus Naturae: The Complaint of Nature against the Erronious Alchymist*, ll. 24-5, AP 134.

<sup>1522</sup> Pseudo-Jean de Meun, *Planctus Naturae*, cit., ll. 51-4, AP 134.

better than ever was produced out of the Mine of Nature”<sup>1523</sup>. In *The Alchymyst’s Answere to Nature*, the adept apologises and acknowledges her to be “mother & mistresse” and “God’s instrument and governess of the macrocosm”<sup>1524</sup>.

Now my most sweete mother Nature  
(Farr the most excellent Creature  
Which God, next Angells, created),  
To you praise & thanks be rendred.  
I here acknowledge & confesse  
That you are mother & mistresse,  
Governesse of that Macrocosme  
Created for the Mycrocosme<sup>1525</sup>.

Alchemists regard nature as “that renowned Dame [...] Who much ought to be honored”<sup>1526</sup>. In the Prolegomena to *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, Elias Ashmole announces that he will disclose “the Language in which they [our Hermetique Philosophers] woo’d and courted Dame Nature”<sup>1527</sup>. One of the plates that best illustrate the alchemical approach to nature is the one accompanying emblem XLII in Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens*. The epigram to the emblem exhorts the alchemist to follow nature’s pace: “Nature be your guide; follow her with your art willingly, closely, / You err, if she is not your companion on your way”<sup>1528</sup> (see plate 63). Maier’s plate evidently condenses what alchemists most regularly repeat in their writings, i.e. that “Evermore Arte must serve Nature”<sup>1529</sup>.

The alchemical and Hermetic conception of the relationship between Art, Nature, and God is well exemplified in the frontispiece to Robert Fludd’s *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica atque technical historia* (1617-19). The illustration, entitled *Integrae Naturae speculum Artisque imago*, shows Nature, depicted as a woman, in the very centre of the engraving, chained to both God and the world of man (see plate 70). Dame Nature is defined by Fludd as “the proximate minister of God, at whose behest she governs the subcelestial world”<sup>1530</sup>. In the illustration, she is clearly depicted as the direct link between the earthly and the heavenly dimensions: she is joined to God by the *catena aurea* and, at the same time, is joined to an ape that, placed in the centre of the earth,

<sup>1523</sup> Francis Anthony, Eirenaeus Philalethes, George Ripley et al., *Collectanea chymica*, cit., p. 43.

<sup>1524</sup> Robert M. Schuler, Introduction to Pseudo-Jean de Meun, *The Alchymyst’s Answere to Nature*, AP 131.

<sup>1525</sup> Pseudo-Jean de Meun, *The Alchymyst’s Answere to Nature*, ll. 1-8, AP 171.

<sup>1526</sup> Jean de la Fontaine, *The Pleasant Founteine of Knowledge*, ll. 199-200, AP 88.

<sup>1527</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena, TCB sig. B4v.

<sup>1528</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem XLII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 266.

<sup>1529</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 18.

<sup>1530</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd. Hermetic Philosopher and Surveyor of Two Worlds*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979, p. 22.

symbolises human art. The plate, that evidently dwells on the metaphor of art as the ‘ape’ of nature, suggests that art, being closely connected with nature, is also a reflection of the heavenly world. According to the Hermetic world-view, in order to take care of the macrocosm, Nature needs the assistance of the alchemical art: “Nature aforehand hath put the matter into the Hand of the Son of Wisdom”<sup>1531</sup>. As a matter of fact, alchemists believe that God, Nature, and Art work in perfect cooperation, the alchemist being “nature’s scholar”:

Then God and nature worketh all in all,  
Next nature’s scholar; art is principall.  
As instrument, man putteth to his hand  
Through God to worke, that makes him understand  
What is to doe and how he should proceed,  
Soe all in God is the hope of his good Speed<sup>1532</sup>.

Alchemy falls within the discussions concerning the boundaries between the artistic and the natural spheres precisely because it allegedly discloses “the final intention of nature”<sup>1533</sup>. Philalethes argues that gold, i.e. the philosopher’s stone, is “the period of the perfection of art and nature” and is produced not by the alchemist alone, but, rather, by nature and “a discreet Artist”:

Whoever desires to enjoy the secret *Golden-Fleece* let him know, That our Gold-making POWDER (which we call our *Stone*) is only Gold digested unto the highest degree of purity and subtile fixity, whereto it may be brought, by Nature and a discreet Artist; which Gold thus essensificated, is called *our Gold* (and no more vulgar) and is the period of the perfection of Nature and Art<sup>1534</sup>.

As might be expected, however, alchemical practices were not always seen as a perfection of God’s Creation but, rather, as a form of perversion. In Ben Jonson’s masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, the alchemist is depicted as an impostor who acts “against the excellence of the sun and Nature”. Mercury, addressing Vulcan, intended as a personification of the alchemical art, complains about the alchemists’ attempt to perfect nature: “Art thou not ashamed, Vulcan, to offer in defence of thy fire and art, against the

---

<sup>1531</sup> William Salmon, *Polygraphices*, cit., p. 527.

<sup>1532</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher’s Stone*, cit., ll. 263-68, AP 19.

<sup>1533</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 7. Latin text: “Quare quotidie videmus, quomodo ipsa natura continuo de eorundem mortificatione et perfectione sit sollicita, donec in aurum, quod naturae finalis est intentio, perficiantur. Omnia etenim metalla ostendunt, naturam in iis nonnihil ad ulteriorem perfectionem vergendo suisse operatam; siquidem nec ullum reperitur metallum a perfectione adeo diminitum, quin auri aut argenti granum contineat. Et quidem cum metallis ita comparatum est, ut natura ex argento vivo suum sulphur secum habente propediem aurum gignere fatagat et potis etiam fit, nisi extraneu aliquod impedimentum inteveniat”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, cit., MH 15.

<sup>1534</sup> Eiraneaus Philalethes, *Secrets Reveal’d*, cit., p. 2.

excellence of the sun and Nature, creatures more imperfect than the very flies and insects that are her trespasses and scapes?”<sup>1535</sup>. Recalling the *Complaint of Nature* attributed to Jean de Meun, at the end of Jonson’s masque Nature herself descends warning Prometheus, emblem of the alchemical disposition to go beyond the limits imposed by Mother Earth, that “Nature here no stepdame, but a mother”<sup>1536</sup>. In a similar way, in Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* the alchemical adept, played by Subtle, is ironically described as the one who will make nature ashamed of her long sleep:

He will make  
Nature asham’d, of her long sleepe: when art,  
Who’s but a step-dame, shal doe more, than shee,  
In her best loue to man-kind, euer could.  
(I, iv, 25-28)

As already noticed, in the attempt to defend their practices from accusations, alchemists argue that their art is not only a helper of nature but, above all, a sacred activity. Thanks to alchemy, man purportedly accomplishes the task assigned by God to humankind: revering things above and taking care of things on earth<sup>1537</sup>, as it is written in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

It was especially in the Renaissance, thanks to Paracelsus’s writings, that the ancillary role of alchemy towards nature was further emphasised. Pereira points out that Paracelsus made explicit a conception that recurs in its early stages in the writings of previous alchemists: the idea that nature always tends to achieve its highest degree of excellence and that the human intellect should serve as its instrument to attain that objective<sup>1538</sup>. The Swiss physician, in particular, defines alchemy as “a method of perfection” since it leads nature to its final end: “She [nature] brings nothing to the light that is at once perfect in itself, but leaves it to be perfected by man. This method of

---

<sup>1535</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 138-40, p. 440.

<sup>1536</sup> *Ibidem*, l. 156, p. 441.

<sup>1537</sup> “[God] noticed that he [man] could not take care of everything unless he was covered over with a material wrapping [...]. Thus god shapes mankind from the nature of soul and of body, from the eternal and the mortal, in other words, so that the living being so shaped can prove adequate to both its beginnings, wondering at heavenly beings and worshipping them, tending earthly beings and governing them”. Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 71. Latin text: “cum itaque eum [...] <fecisset> et animaduerteret eum non posse omnium rerum esse diligentem, nisi eum mundane integimento contegeret, textit eum corporea domo talesque omnes esse praecepit ex utraque natura in unum confundens miscensque, quantum satis esse debuisset. itaque hominem conformat ex animi atque corporis id est ex aeterna atque mortali natura, ut animal ita conformatum utraeque origini suae satisfacere possit, et mirari atque adorare caelestia et incolere atque gubernare terrena”. *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., pp. 304-306.

<sup>1538</sup> Michela Pereira, “Paracelso e l’alchimia”, in Id. (ed.), *I testi della tradizione*, cit., p. 846.

perfection is called Alchemy”<sup>1539</sup>. He argues that several disciplines may be termed ‘alchemical’ precisely because they help nature to achieve its completion. The baker, the wine merchant, and the weaver operate in an alchemical way since they assist nature in her journey towards her ultimate fulfilment:

the Alchemist is a baker, in that he bakes bread; a wine merchant, seeing that he prepares wine; a weaver, because he produces cloth. So, whatever is poured forth from the bosom of Nature, he who adapts it to that purpose for which it is destined is an Alchemist<sup>1540</sup>.

In the *Aurora of the Philosophers*, Paracelsus explicitly maintains that alchemists imitate the “manner in which Nature proceeds from imperfection to the end of perfection”<sup>1541</sup>. As a consequence, the products deriving from alchemical transmutation do not differ from those created by nature. Paracelsus evidently conflates art and nature also when claiming that “[b]ecause you are ignorant of Alchemy, you are on that account ignorant also of Nature”<sup>1542</sup>. Revealing what is *in potentia* within the natural world, the alchemist acts in the same way as summer does, bringing forth what is seemingly dead:

it is just as if one should see a tree in winter and not recognise it, or be ignorant what was in it until summer puts forth, one after another, now branches, now flowers, now fruits, and whatever else appertains to it. So in these matters there is a latent virtue which is occult to men in general. And unless a man learns and makes proof of these things, which can only be done by an Alchemist, just as by the summer, it is not possible that he can investigate the subject in any other way<sup>1543</sup>.

As will be discussed below, *The Winter’s Tale* presents a vision of the relationship between art and nature highly reminiscent of the alchemical theories widespread at the time. In his dialogue with Perdita, in Bohemia, Polixenes discusses the ‘perfecting’ of nature by means of human art and exclaims that “Nature is made better by no mean / But Nature makes that mean” (IV, iv, 89-90), thus enigmatically suggesting that this kind of art that improves nature is itself ‘natural’. Considering that in the late sixteenth century alchemical beliefs reached their utmost diffusion in both England and Europe, one is prompted to wonder whether the conception of art and nature expounded by Perdita and Polixenes in the fourth act of the drama might have been influenced by the notions

---

<sup>1539</sup> Paracelsus, *Alchemy: the Third Column of Medicine*, HAWP 2: 148.

<sup>1540</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1541</sup> Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, cit., HAWP 1: 48.

<sup>1542</sup> Paracelsus, *Alchemy: the Third Column of Medicine*, cit., HAWP 2: 154.

<sup>1543</sup> *Ibidem*, HAWP 2: 156.

deriving from alchemical literature.

## 7.2. 'This is an art / Which does mend Nature'

### Alchemy and the Art-Nature Debate in *The Winter's Tale*

*The Winter's Tale*, as remarked by Tayler, exhibits an "explicit interest in the philosophical problem of Nature versus Art"<sup>1544</sup>. In Act IV, during the sheep-shearing scene, King Polixenes and Perdita engage in a debate concerning the respective roles of art and nature. Perdita, in particular, refuses to grow any "carnations" and "streaked gillyvors" in her "rustic garden":

Sir; the year growing ancient,  
Not yet on summer's death, nor on the birth  
Of trembling winter, the fairest flowers o'th' season  
Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors,  
Which some call Nature's bastards; of that kind  
Our rustic garden's barren, and I care not  
To get slips of them.  
(IV, iv, 79-85)

Streaked gillyflowers, natural hybrids created by means of grafting, symbolise the interference of human art into the natural dimension, what Perdita firmly opposes. Polixenes, conversely, supports the possibility of a mutual cooperation between man and nature and believes that the natural world can be "mended" by human art:

Nature is made better by no mean  
But Nature makes that mean. So over that art,  
Which you say adds to Nature, is an art  
That Nature makes. [...] This is an art  
Which does mend Nature – change it rather – but  
The art itself is Nature.  
(IV, iv, 89-92 and 95-7)

As already anticipated, in the Renaissance alchemy represented a point of reference for the discussion of the boundaries between art and nature. In this respect, Linden notices that, although "it has not generally been considered in this context, alchemy was an important manifestation of the Renaissance debate on the relative powers of 'art' versus 'nature'"<sup>1545</sup>.

---

<sup>1544</sup> Edward William Tayler, *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1964, p. 121.

<sup>1545</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, cit., p. 19.

As already said, a substantial section of Roger Bacon's *The Mirror of Alchimy*, defined by Nicholl as "an Elizabethan digest of basic alchemical theories"<sup>1546</sup>, is devoted precisely to a consideration of the relationship between alchemical art and nature. What is of particular interest is that alchemy was employed as an example to illustrate the contest of nature versus art even outside of alchemical literature. George Puttenham, in the celebrated treatise *The Arte of English Poesie*, published in 1589, deals with the art-nature controversy by arguing that art "is not only an aide and coadiutor to nature in all her actions, but an alterer of them, and in some sort a surmounter of her skill"<sup>1547</sup>. Puttenham, in particular, turns to Paracelsian language and imagery to describe the response a literary complaint should elicit in the reader. The good poet, Puttenham observes, should act as a Paracelsian physician, purging one's pain and sorrow not by means of a contrary feeling, but, rather, by "making one dolour to expell another", a theory defined by Paracelsus as *similia similibus*:

Lamenting is altogether contrary to reioising, euery man saith so, and yet is it a peece of ioy to be able to lament with ease, and freely to poure forth a mans inward sorrowes and the greefs wherewith his minde is surcharged. This was a very necessary deuise of the Poet and a fine, besides his poetrie to play also the Phisitian, and not onely by applying a medicine to the ordinary sicknes of mankind, but by making the greef is selfe (in part) cure of the disease [...] not with any medicament of a contrary temper, as the *Galenistes* vse to cure [*contraria contrarijs*] but as the *Paracelsians*, who cure [*similia similibus*] making one dolour to expell another, and in this case, one short sorrowing the remedie of a long and grieuous sorrow<sup>1548</sup>.

Puttenham's words, besides testifying to the widespread diffusion of Paracelsian beliefs in Renaissance England, are also evidence of the role played by alchemical symbolism in the art-nature debate.

In his endeavour to persuade Perdita, who refuses every form of artistic intrusion into the realm of "great creating Nature" (IV, iv, 88), King Polixenes argues that "Nature is made better by no mean / But Nature makes that mean" (IV, iv, 89-90), thus alluding to that close collaboration between art and nature that alchemists long for. *Splendor solis* majestically illustrates the conflation of the artistic and of the natural dimensions that is at the core of alchemical theory:

Nature serves Art with matter, and Art serves Nature with suitable Instruments and

---

<sup>1546</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>1547</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, edited by Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [1936] 1970, p. 303. (or. ed. *The Arte of English Poesie*, London, 1589).

<sup>1548</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 47-8.

method convenient for Nature to produce such new forms; and although the before mentioned Stone can only be brought to its proper form by Art, yet the form is from Nature<sup>1549</sup>.

Trismosin argues that art and nature reciprocally help each other: the former offers to the latter the right instruments to attain the highest degree of excellence, and nature, in its turn, serves art with the matter on which to work. As a consequence, the philosopher's stone is not to be regarded as a mere artificial product but, rather, as the result of nature being properly assisted by human art. Paracelsus remarks that "the Philosopher's Stone is none other than a fiery and perfect Mercury extracted by Nature and Art"<sup>1550</sup>. The above-quoted words by Trismosin bear a certain relevance to the lines spoken by Polixenes. In particular, Polixenes's idea according to which "Nature is made better by no mean / But Nature makes that mean" (IV, iv, 89-90) is evocative of alchemical theories since, according to alchemists, it is nature itself that teaches the adept how to proceed: "Nature, indeed, of herself teaches you on these subjects, and you should give her your chief attention"<sup>1551</sup>. Nature, therefore, is only helped by art: in the case of the transmutation of metals, the alchemist limits himself to hasten the process leading to gold, which, without any human assistance, would last several years. It is, therefore, nature that tends to reach its own perfection and that has predisposed that all her creatures should attain the condition of 'gold': "For all metals show that Nature has done something for them towards ultimate perfection; no metal is so base as not to contain a single grain of gold or silver"<sup>1552</sup>. Nature, Paracelsus continues, "has within herself the proper separator who again joins together what he has put asunder, without the aid of man"<sup>1553</sup>. In a similar way, Roger Bacon argues that "nature alwaies intendeth and striveth to the perfection of Gold: but many accidents comming between, change the mettals, as it is evidently to be seene in divers of the Philosophers bookes"<sup>1554</sup>. Alchemists, therefore, do not wish to overcome or diminish the powers of God and nature since they realise that, in the words of Polixenes, "Nature is made better by no mean / But Nature makes that mean" (IV, iv, 89-90).

Acknowledging the relevance of alchemy to the dialogue between Perdita and the king of Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale*, Linden observes that alchemists "might well have

---

<sup>1549</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>1550</sup> Paracelsus, *Concerning the Universal Matter of the Philosopher's Stone*, HAWP 1: 66.

<sup>1551</sup> Paracelsus, *Alchemy. The Third Column of Medicine*, cit., HAWP 2: 149.

<sup>1552</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 7. Latin text: "Omnia etenim metalla ostendunt, naturam in iis nonnihil ad ulteriorem perfectionem vergendo fuisse operatam; siquidem nec ullum reperitur metallum à perfectione adeo diminutum, quin auri aut argenti granum contineat". J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus Aureus*, cit., MH 15.

<sup>1553</sup> Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, cit., HAWP 1: 67.

<sup>1554</sup> Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchimy*, cit., p. 4.

gone on to agree with Polixenes that the very means by which man ‘improves’ Nature result from the operations of God and Nature”<sup>1555</sup>. Paracelsus, among others, remarks that the credit of the alchemical work should not be given to the alchemist alone but, rather, to nature and God since it is “the motion of the heaven” that “teaches the motion and regimen of the fire in the Athanor”:

although the artificer may be disposed to rate highly both himself and his work [...] heaven, in an equally wonderful way, decocts, digests, imbibes, dissolves, and reverberates, while the alchemist does the same. The motion of heaven, too, teaches the motion and regimen of the fire in the Athanor<sup>1556</sup>.

Polixenes concludes by saying that there exists an art that does not violate or surpass nature but, rather, mends it, by reproducing its mechanisms: “This is an art / Which does mend nature – change it rather – but / The Art itself is Nature” (IV, iv, 95-7). If alchemy is “a method of perfection”<sup>1557</sup>, an art that has been created to lead nature to its “highest standard of purity and excellence”<sup>1558</sup>, then one can read Polixenes’s lines as an allusion to the alchemical conception of the relationship between the artificial and the natural, alchemy being precisely “Nature co-operating in a wonderful manner by a witty Art”<sup>1559</sup>.

Focusing on the mutual correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, the world of man and the world of nature, Polixenes concludes that “over that art, / Which you say adds to Nature, is *an art / That Nature makes*” (IV, iv, 90-92, italics mine). Again, I believe that the conceptual apparatus related to alchemical philosophy is important to throw light on the words pronounced by the king of Bohemia. An excerpt from the celebrated treatise *Pretiosa margarita novella*, by the Italian alchemist and physician Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, illustrates the widespread idea of alchemy as a perfect synthesis of art and nature:

The substance of Alchemy – though called by a perplexing variety of names – is the substance of Nature, and the first substance of metals, from which Nature herself evolves them. Were it otherwise, it would be impossible for Art to imitate Nature<sup>1560</sup>.

---

<sup>1555</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>1556</sup> Paracelsus, *Alchemy. The Third Column of Medicine*, cit., HAWP 2: 153.

<sup>1557</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

<sup>1558</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 8. Latin text: “secundum puritatem et subtilitate subjecti emendationem et perfectionem suae naturae quaerere et deposcere”. J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus aureus*, cit., MH 17.

<sup>1559</sup> Eiraneus Philalethes, *Secrets Revealed*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>1560</sup> Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl*, cit., p. 117. Latin text: “Quia ergo materia huius lapidis est unica tantum, sed in arte, magisterioque alchimiae, est infinitis nominibus variata, et modus operandi est solum unus, sed a philosophis multipliciter variatus. [...] Quia ergo non nisi unica res reperitur, quae sit origo et materia metallorum et de ipsorum substantiam, ut diximus, ideo sola una materia erit alchimiae. Quia materia alchimiae est solum illud quod est materia naturae, aliter enim ars non poterit imitari naturam, et ipsa est materia metallorum”. Petrus Bonus, *Pretiosa margarita novella*, cit., p. 34v.

Arguing that “the substance of Alchemy [...] is the substance of Nature” Bonus clearly equates alchemical art with nature. Alchemists actually maintain that their art is a microcosmic reproduction of the metamorphoses performed by nature, i.e. the transmutation of metals occurring within the womb of Mother Earth and the constant alternation of the seasons, in a never-ending cycle of death and rebirth: in Polixenes’s words, alchemy is “an art / That Nature makes” (IV, iv, 91-2). The Elizabethan alchemist Edward Kelly, among others, affirms that the *opus alchymicum* is a reflection of the marvellous palingenesis displayed in the natural world: “That the aspiration of our Art is no Utopian dream, is proved by the innumerable and stupendous metamorphoses which Nature daily exhibits on every side”<sup>1561</sup>. Shakespeare himself, in Sonnet 33, praises the alchemical virtues of the sun that, “Kissing with golden face the meadows green” and “Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy” (Sonnet 33, ll. 3-4), accomplishes daily transmutations. Taking into consideration that the *opus alchymicum* is a process “in which Art assists Nature and Nature assists Art”<sup>1562</sup>, Polixenes’s speech about an art that cooperates with nature is highly reminiscent of alchemical concepts. When *The Winter’s Tale* was performed, alchemy was known precisely as “the true and sublime Art of Nature herself”<sup>1563</sup>. A plate belonging to a sixteenth-century manuscript collected in the Rylands University Library, in Manchester, showing a lady representing ‘Nature-Alchemy’, testifies to the close connection between art and nature that characterises alchemical imagery: with her feet resting on some alchemical equipment and her head made of thriving boughs, the lady symbolises the perfect accord between nature’s and alchemy’s objectives (see plates 65 and 66).

In his debate with Perdita, Polixenes remarks that this art that mends nature does not add anything alien to it: “over that art, / Which you say adds to Nature, is an art / That Nature makes” (IV, iv, 90-92). It should be noticed that alchemy was most frequently associated with horticulture and grafting because, according to its adepts, it is an art that does not pervert nature, but helps the latter to attain the highest degree of completion. As claimed by the sixteenth-century French alchemist Robert Duval, also known as Robertus Vallensis, if the art of grafting is licit, then alchemists do nothing illicit<sup>1564</sup>. The alchemist allows new forms to grow from the matter that nature herself provides him with and,

<sup>1561</sup> Edward Kelly, *The Alchemical Writings*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>1562</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

<sup>1563</sup> Paracelsus, *The Labyrinthus Medicorum*, HAWP 2: 167.

<sup>1564</sup> Robertus Vallensis, *De veritate et antiquitate artis chemicae*, 1561, in Michela Pereira (ed.), *I testi della tradizione*, cit., p. 1014: “Poiché dunque l’arte imita la natura, per esempio nell’innesto, allora, se è lecito fare innesti, nemmeno gli alchimisti fanno qualcosa di illecito”.

therefore, creates something that already exists *in potentia*: “our Artist does not claim to create anything, but only to evolve new things from the seed made ready to his hand by the Creator”<sup>1565</sup>. Since alchemy is precisely “an art / That Nature makes” (IV, iv, 91-2), as King Polixenes would say, alchemists regard the natural world as a model for his work. Thanks to alchemical art, man can grow trees, plants, and flowers “not onely at an instant”, as remarked by Ashmole, “but Daily, Monethly, Yearly, at any Time, at any Season; yea, in the depth of Winter”<sup>1566</sup>. Paracelsus notices that, by means of alchemy, man can imitate the very processes of nature, thus making what is barren fruitful:

None can deny that the earth is rendered fruitful by the rain, and all must confess that every kind of fruit is ripened by the sun. Since, then, by the Divine institution, this is possible to Nature, who will deny or refuse to believe that man possesses this same power by a prudent and skilful pursuit of the Alchemical Art, so that he shall render the fruitless fruitful, the unripe ripe, and make all increase and grow?<sup>1567</sup>

Polixenes himself employs horticultural metaphors in order to exemplify the way art is placed at the service of nature:

You see, sweat maid, we marry  
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,  
And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
By bud of nobler race. This is an art  
Which does mend Nature – change it rather – but  
The art itself is Nature.  
(IV, iv, 92-7)

Interestingly enough, alchemists constantly associate alchemy with grafting, as, for instance, in the following passage from Basil Valentine’s *Twelve Keys*:

When a tree is found to bear sour and unwholesome fruit, its branches must be cut off, and scions of better trees grafted upon it. The new branches thereupon become organically united to the trunk<sup>1568</sup>.

---

<sup>1565</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, “Fourth Key”, HM 164-65. Latin text: “quod prudentes hujus mundi stultitiam vocant, proque pugnīs reputant, appellantes id novum creatum, quod peccatori a Deo non concessum est, at nec ipsi intelligunt quod creatum illud ante fuerat, et artifex saltem per semen naturae augmentationem ejus et magisterium comprobet”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, IV Clavis, MH 401.

<sup>1566</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Prolegomena*, TCB sig. B 1r.

<sup>1567</sup> Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*, HAWP 1: 128.

<sup>1568</sup> Basil Valentine, *Twelve Keys*, “First Key”, HM 160. Latin text: “Cum arbor quaedam insalubres ac ingratos fert fructus, abscinditur circa truncum, atque ei alia fructus species inferitur: tum germen se conjungit cum trunco, ita ut ex trunco et radice cum suo surculo bona arbor proveniat, quae ad nutum sui insitoris salubres et placitos ferat fructus”. Basilius Valentinus, *Practica cum duodecim clavibus*, I Clavis, MH 395.

The comparison of alchemy and horticulture regularly recurs in the alchemical writings of all ages. In *Opus Aureum*, a sixteenth-century alchemical text attributed to Francesco Pico della Mirandola, the author suggests that grafting, as well as alchemy, is a good example of the way man learns from nature by means of direct observation. As a matter of fact, in creating grafts the farmer patiently imitates nature's creative action:

idem cum incumbit insitioni, non qualis sit utriusque arboris, quam ipse committit, natura, non qualis habeatur forma glutinis, non quo modo liber mollescat libro curiose sciscitatur, at cuneis adactis: at infertis oculis sobolescentem prolem inspectat qua flores fructusque promuntur<sup>1569</sup>.

In the alchemical allegory that closes *The Golden Tract*, alchemical practices are described in terms of "horticultural labors"<sup>1570</sup>. Distilling beauty by means of grafting is a metaphor that is to be found also in Shakespeare's sonnet 15. In the same way as the alchemist refines matter against corruption and death by means of several operations that recall the art of grafting, the poet desires to preserve the Fair Youth's essence against "wasteful time" by 'engrafting' him:

Then the conceit of this inconstant stay  
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,  
Where wasteful time debateth with decay  
To change your day of youth to sullied night,  
And all in war with Time for love of you,  
As he takes from you, I engraft you new.  
(Sonnet 15, ll. 9-14)

The object of the poet's love will be thus exempted from temporal decay. The Fair Youth, who was described in sonnet 5 as the philosophical child "pent" within the alchemical alembic, is now refined by means of grafting, thus further evoking the creation of the philosopher's stone: the latter is actually produced within the alembic in the same way as the gardener creates new grafts, constantly perpetuating and renewing nature's excellence.

The king of Bohemia, discussing about an art that refines the lower world by marrying "A gentler scion to the wildest stock" (IV, iv, 93) and making conceive "a bark of baser kind / By bud of nobler race" (IV, iv, 94-5), alludes to the reconciliation of contraries as a condition for the perfecting of matter, a concept that alchemists usually represent by

---

<sup>1569</sup> Joannes Franciscus Picus Mirandulae Dom, *Opus Aureum*, cit., BCC 2: 573.

<sup>1570</sup> J. Grasshoff, *The Golden Tract*, cit., HM 20-21: "Others murmured, and said: 'Look, this fellow presumes to approach the gate of the garden, and we who have spent so many years in these horticultural labors, have never gained admittance!'" Latin text: "alii vero murmurantes dicebant: En iste bonus vir horti januae appropinquare praesumit, et nos, qui tot annos in hortaceis hisce laboribus insumpsimus, nunquam in illum intromissi sumus". J. Grasshoff, *Tractatus aureus*, MH 45.

means of the imagery of the chemical wedding, as already said. The audience no doubt associated Polixenes's words with the union between prince Florizel, the "bud of nobler race" (IV, iv, 95), and the shepherd's daughter Perdita, the "bark of baser kind" (IV, iv, 94). Remarking how "the difference forges dread!" (IV, iv, 17), Perdita, who is in truth Leontes's legitimate daughter, further highlights the distance that lies between her, "a poor lowly maid, / Most goddess-like pranked up" (IV, iv, 9-10), and King Polixenes's son, the "gracious mark o'th' land [...] obscured / With a swain's wearing" (IV, iv, 8-9). In a world that can be mended by art, however, previous differences are finally reconciled, thus achieving a perfect *coniunctio* between all opposites, that in the play are symbolised by Perdita and Florizel, Leontes and Hermione, Sicily and Bohemia, winter and spring, old age and youth, life and death, tragedy and comedy, and, above all, art and nature. The *opus alchymicum* itself is usually described by alchemists as the result of a *coniunctio* between the two seemingly opposing dimensions of art and nature: "in this Philosophical Work, *Nature and Art ought so lovingly to embrace each other*, as that Art may not require what Nature denies, nor Nature deny what may be perfected by Art"<sup>1571</sup> (italics mine).

Trying to convince Perdita that art can cooperate with nature without necessarily distorting it, Polixenes invites the girl to grow gillyflowers in her garden: "Then make your garden rich in gillyvors, / And do not call them bastards" (IV, iv, 98-9). The image of the garden is particularly significant in alchemical imagery since the alchemist is most regularly compared to a gardener:

We help the metals to arrive at maturity, just as a gardener may assist fruit, which by some accident is prevented from ripening, or as a seed or grain of corn may easily be multiplied by being sown in the ground<sup>1572</sup>.

Alchemists actually believe that "the *Garden* is the *Vessel* or *Glasse*"<sup>1573</sup> where the philosopher's stone, usually identified with a flower, grows thanks to the cares of the alchemist-gardener. In the aforementioned treatise by William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, the *opus alchymicum* is devised as a journey towards the "Campe of

<sup>1571</sup> Arthur Dee, "To the Candid Reader", *Fasciculus Chemicus: or Chymical Collections, Expressing The Ingress, Progress, and Egress, of the Secret Hermetick Science, out of the choicest and most Famous Authors [...] Whereunto is added, The Arcanum or Grand Secret of Hermetick Philosophy*, Both made English by James Hasolle, Published in Latin at Basle, 1629, London, Printed by J. Flesher for Richard Mynne, 1650, sig. a4v. James Hasolle is, in fact, the anagram of Elias Ashmole, the true translated of the treatise.

<sup>1572</sup> Johann Ambrosius Siebmacher, *The Sophic Hydrolith*, cit., HM 56. Latin text: "quae tum in augmentatione metallorum similimodo procedit, ac si alicui fructui, qui, accidentali quodam casu impeditus ad maturitatem justam pervenire haud potuerit, auxilium praestare, vel ex uno granulo, vel semine, multifariam augmentationem consequi coneris, quod exiguo sumptu laborari atque perfici potest". *Hydrolithus sophicus seu Aqvarium Sapientum*, MH 138.

<sup>1573</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations*, cit., TCB 467.

Philosophy”, a meadow where there are “Bloomes and Blossomes plentifully [...] flourishing [...] with Collour gay” and birds “Mellodiously singing”<sup>1574</sup>. The alchemical symbolism of the garden, in which the alchemist cultivates his plants and flowers, recurs in the pseudo-Arnaldian *Rosarium philosophorum* and in Michael Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens*. The epigram to emblem XXVII dwells upon the imagery of the rosegarden: “The Rosegarden of Wisdom has an abundance of various flowers, / But the gate is always closed with strong bolts”<sup>1575</sup>. Paracelsus himself compares the art of alchemy to the production of “green herbs, flowers, and fruits” in the middle of winter:

Since, then, we see with our eyes, and are taught by daily experience, that the oftener and the more plentifully the rain moistens the earth, and the sun dries it again with its heat and glow, the sooner the fruits of the earth come forth and ripen, [...] let none wonder that the alchemist, too, by manifold imbibitions and distillations, can produce the same effect. [...] Wherefore I say that it is possible by such co-optation in the middle of winter to produce green herbs, flowers, and fruits<sup>1576</sup>.

Since alchemy aimed at reproducing the way nature works, it was often conceived of as a form of counterfeit and an aberration of nature. The art-nature debate was actually central in alchemical culture and the art of alchemy, as well as grafting, was at the centre of lively discussions concerning the limits of human art before nature. The apothecary John Parkinson rejected the possibility to use art in order to create flowers “of contrary or different colours or sents”:

the rules and directions, to cause flowers to bee of contrary or different colours or sents, from that they were or would be naturally, are meere fancies of men, without any ground of reason or truth. [...] there is no power or art in man, to cause flowers to shew their beauty diuers moneths before their naturall time, nor to abide in their beauty longer then the appointed naturall time for euery one of them<sup>1577</sup>.

Shakespeare evidently deals with a topic that was a salient one in Renaissance culture. It is not without reason that *The Winter’s Tale* has been defined as a work “into which many a trend of Renaissance literary imagination flows”<sup>1578</sup>.

Perdita, considering art and nature as rival, complains about the existence of an art that “in their piedness” competes with “great creating Nature”:

---

<sup>1574</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 305.

<sup>1575</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem XXVII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 201.

<sup>1576</sup> Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*, cit., HAWP 1: 129.

<sup>1577</sup> John Parkinson, *Paradisi in Sole. Paradisus Terrestris*, Printed by Humphrey Lownes and Robert Young, London, 1629, p. 25. See also Milena Romero Allué, “What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., pp. 54-5.

<sup>1578</sup> Soji Iwasaki, *Nature Triumphant. Approach to The Winter’s Tale*, Sanseido, Tokyo, 1991, p. vii.

For I have heard it said  
There is an art which in their piedness shares  
With great creating Nature.  
(IV, iv, 86-8)

If taking into account that “piedness” means “variety of colour”<sup>1579</sup>, then Perdita’s claim might be interpreted not only as a general remark on the widespread practice of grafting but also as an allusion to the alchemist’s attempt to imitate and, above all, reproduce nature’s processes. As a matter of fact, colours assume a peculiar significance in alchemical symbolism. By indicating the three main phases of the alchemical work, namely *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo*, they guide the alchemist throughout the *opus alchymicum*, as suggested, among others, by Edward Kelly: “These colours the Sages have used as a kind of cytosure to steer their course throughout Nature, and especially in the investigation of the secret Medicine”<sup>1580</sup>. Crisciani points out that the action of ‘seeing’ is fundamental in the course of the *opus alchymicum* and colours are the most important *signa demonstrativa* that help the alchemist to discern between the manifold phases of the alchemical work<sup>1581</sup>. To black, white, and red, a larger range of shades is added and the ‘peacock’s tail’, or *cauda pavonis*, specifically represents the moment preceding the *albedo* (see plate 75). It is not surprising, then, that the flower, thanks to its variety of colours, is a particularly suitable symbol for the stone, as suggested by Paracelsus himself: “the matter of the Stone shews most beautiful colours in the production of its flowers”<sup>1582</sup>. All this considered, Perdita’s reference to a kind of art that “in their piedness”, i.e. in its deployment of various colours, “shares / With great creating Nature”, can legitimately be read as a metaphor about alchemy, an art whose main ordering criterion for distinguishing the several stages of the *opus* is provided precisely by colours.

The considerations presented so far do not imply that the conception of art and nature developed in *The Winter’s Tale* rests exclusively on alchemical notions. However, taking into account that Shakespeare’s romance is an expression of the “great Renaissance

---

<sup>1579</sup> See John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 264n.

<sup>1580</sup> Edward Kelly, *The Alchemical Writings*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>1581</sup> “il vedere è essenziale nel corso dei processi alchemici, dove l’intuitus visus è il solo strumento in grado di percepire i più importanti ‘signa demonstrativa’, cioè i colori, che indicano il succedersi delle fasi della trasmutazione e il verificarsi di modificazioni nella materia lavorata. Se infatti i colori possono assumere valenze simboliche, il cromatismo alchemico è in primo luogo un concreto criterio ordinatore di fasi del processo, e una forma di misurazione sia di gradi [...] sia di durata della lavorazione. Non stupisce quindi la specifica enfasi posta sul vedere nel senso più tecnico”. Chiara Crisciani, “Esperienza, comunicazione e scrittura in alchimia (secoli XIII-XIV)”, in *Le forme della comunicazione scientifica*, a cura di Massimo Galuzzi, Gianni Micheli e Maria Teresa Monti, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1998, p. 90.

<sup>1582</sup> Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*, cit., HAWP 1: 54.

debate on the relative importance of these two forces [art and nature]”<sup>1583</sup>, it can be assumed that his audience might have interpreted the debate *also* in the light of the alchemical background of the time. It is undeniable that the issue of nature versus art received special emphasis in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century alchemical and scientific writings, as pointed out by Abraham<sup>1584</sup>. Moreover, the fact that the art-nature debate occurs precisely in Bohemia is highly significant in terms of the alchemical reception of the play. As a matter of fact, the Bohemian court of Rudolf II, in Prague, was a renowned centre for alchemical and Hermetic research. Evan observes that “[a]lchemy was the greatest passion of the age in Central Europe” and “[l]ike the pursuit of magic in general it embraced at one and the same time a direct attitude to nature”<sup>1585</sup>. The Habsburg court was actually the place where the Renaissance issue of nature versus art was deeply investigated by means of Hermetic disciplines of all kinds. If considering that *The Winter’s Tale* is structured as a circular journey from chaos and hostility to order and harmony, somehow following the steps of the alchemical *opus*, then Polixenes’s words about “an art / Which does mend Nature” (IV, iv, 95-6) might be read as an allusion to the Renaissance alchemical dream of perfecting the world. In an alchemical way, the antithesis between the world of art and that of nature is evidently transcended at the end of the romance, when Paulina displays a sculptural work of art, the statue of Queen Hermione, that seemingly comes to life. Alchemists themselves aim at outstripping the opposition between art and nature, the philosopher’s stone being conceived of as an emblem of the *coniunctio oppositorum*.

---

<sup>1583</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>1584</sup> See ‘art and nature’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>1585</sup> Robert J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, cit., p. 199.

### 7.3. 'What you do / Still betters what is done'. Perdita as the 'philosophical child'

Wilson Knight defines the celebrated art-nature debate between Perdita and Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale* as a "microcosm" of the whole play since it condenses some of its most important topics<sup>1586</sup>. At the simplest level, the young shepherdess and the old king embody two seemingly irreconcilable points of view about the issue of nature versus art. However, as will be considered below, Perdita is depicted in a much more complex way: although objecting to the artificial intervention into the natural world, the girl herself is, rather surprisingly, a personification of that synthesis of art and nature that Polixenes supports and that is at the core of alchemical philosophy and symbolism.

As already said, Prince Florizel praises Perdita's candour by defining her as "Flora / Peering in April's front" (IV, iv, 2-3), thus highlighting the connection between the girl, whom the other participants to the sheep-shearing celebrations believe to be a humble shepherdess, and the natural world. Perdita, however, is, in fact, a princess, and, therefore, does not belong entirely to the pastoral world of "fair Bohemia" (IV, i, 21): the girl's true birthplace is the court of Sicily since she is the legitimate daughter of King Leontes and Queen Hermione. Sicily and Bohemia symbolise the contrast between court and countryside, or culture and nature, the former being a "place of formality and rank" and the latter, conversely, "a place where there are no 'gentlemen born'"<sup>1587</sup>. In line with Shakespeare's tendency to overturn the sources on which he draws, the traditional association Sicily-Arcadia, first established by the Greek poet Theocritus, is reversed so that the pastoral scene is unexpectedly set in Bohemia<sup>1588</sup>. As Garber notices, "Sicilia is inhabited by lords and ladies, kings, and queens, princes, and courtiers, while the citizens of Bohemia, when we meet them, will be shepherds and shepherdesses, clowns, and other rustics"<sup>1589</sup>. The "great difference" between the two countries is immediately drawn by the lords Camillo and Archidamus in the opening scene. Discussing about the visit Leontes will pay to Polixenes "this coming summer" (I, i, 5), the Bohemian lord Archidamus highlights the distance that lies between the two courts: "you shall see, as I have said, great difference betwixt our Bohemia and your Sicilia" (I, i, 3-4). Archidamus, in particular,

---

<sup>1586</sup> Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life. Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays*, Methuen & Co., London, 1965, p. 105.

<sup>1587</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 829.

<sup>1588</sup> The pastoral setting of Theocritus's *Idylls* is mainly Sicily, the poet birthplace. The Sicilian landscape is constantly evoked also in the idealised Arcadia of Virgil's *Bucolics*. See Frederick Jones, *Virgil's Garden. The Nature of Bucolic Space*, Bristol Classical Press, London, 2011, esp. pp. 47-51.

<sup>1589</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 828.

focuses on the superiority, in terms of hospitality and “magnificence”<sup>1590</sup>, of Leontes’s court over his friend’s: “Wherein our entertainment shall shame / us, we will be justified in our love” (I, i, 8-9). The two lands are “opposed” also from a geographical point of view, being located on a north-south axis and separated by “the ends of opposed winds” (I, i, 28-31)<sup>1591</sup>. Perdita, princess and shepherdess at the same time and, therefore, belonging to both the lavish and ‘artificial’ reign of Sicily and to the idyllic and Arcadian dimension of Bohemia, overcomes the “great difference” that exists between the two realms and embodies the *coniunctio oppositorum* that will be accomplished at the end of the romance.

Perdita is even more explicitly associated with the artificial dimension by Florizel and Polixenes during the sheep-shearing scene. King Polixenes remarks that the girl’s presence is so notable that it “smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place” (IV, iv, 158-59). As it has been observed, “[t]he child has grown up without the benefit of Art, and yet her demeanor [...] reflects the irrefragable excellence of royal blood”<sup>1592</sup>. Perdita, however, ignoring her real status, complains about the “borrowed flaunts” (IV, iv, 23) she is wearing, some clothes that make her seem a goddess, whereas she is, instead, only a shepherdess. Consistent with her refusal to accept any form of artifice, Perdita declares that she would not wish Florizel to love her only for her outward look, thus further focusing on the contrast between art and nature or, more specifically, essence and appearance:

I'll not put  
The dibble in earth to set one slip of them;  
No more than, were I painted, I would wish  
This youth should say 'twere well, and only therefore  
Desire to breed by me.  
(IV, iv, 99-103)

The shepherdess decidedly abhors the possibility of wearing cosmetics in the same way as she objects to growing any “streaked” flowers in her garden. The girl, however, is herself like the flower she despises: she is a “double”, as the gillyflower is, i.e. a product of art and culture transplanted into the realm of “great creating Nature” (IV, iv, 88). The adjective ‘double’, signifying “to make a copy or duplicate”<sup>1593</sup>, most regularly appears in

---

<sup>1590</sup> Archidamus further highlight the “difference” between the two courts: “Verily, I speak it in the freedom of my knowledge. *We cannot with such magnificence* – in so rare – I know not what to say”. (I, i, 11-13, italics mine)

<sup>1591</sup> See John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 145n.

<sup>1592</sup> Edward W. Taylor, “Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature. Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Maurice Hunt (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale. Critical Essays*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>1593</sup> See ‘double’, OED entry 3a.

Renaissance treatises to indicate those flowers that were produced by means of grafting. The aforementioned herbalist John Parkinson denies that art is able to make “double” what nature has created “single”:

As first, that all double flowers were so found wilde, being the worke of nature alone, and not the art of any man, by planting or transplanting, at or before the new or full Moone, or any other obseruation of time, that hath causeth the flower to grow double, that naturally was single<sup>1594</sup>:

George Puttenham explicitly mentions the gillyflower as an example of “double” flower and, unlike Parkinson, believes that human art can effectively make “the single gillifloure, or marigold, or daisie, double”:

the Gardiner by his arte wil not onely make an herbe, or flower, or fruite, come forth in his season without impediment, but also will embellish the sae in vertue [...] as to make the single gillifloure, or marigold, or daisie, double<sup>1595</sup>.

The term “bastard” further identifies Perdita with the flowers she disdains: the princess, who defines the carnations and streaked gillyflowers as “Nature’s bastards” (IV, iv, 83), is herself considered a “bastard”<sup>1596</sup> by her father, King Leontes. When Polixenes suggests that the girl should not call the gillyflowers ‘bastards’, Shakespeare is somehow foreshadowing what the audience already knows, i.e. that Perdita is not a ‘true’ product of nature: “Then make your garden rich in gillyvors, / And do not call them bastards” (IV, iv, 97-8). As Tayler notices, “[a]t the time when she [Perdita] takes her stand on the question of Nature versus Art, she is by Nature what she conceives herself to be by Art”<sup>1597</sup>.

The Bohemian prince, Florizel, describing Perdita as “a piece of beauty” (IV, iv, 32), further contributes to identify her with the artistic dimension. As a matter of fact, in *The Winter’s Tale* the term “piece” also carries the meaning of “work of art” and “masterpiece”<sup>1598</sup>. In Act V, when the Steward describes the statue of Queen Hermione, he defines it as “*a piece* many years in doing and now newly performed by that rare Italian

---

<sup>1594</sup> John Parkinson, *Paradisi in Sole. Paradisus Terrestris*, cit., p. 25. On the art-nature debate in Elizabethan and Jacobean England and in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, see Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., pp. 49-59.

<sup>1595</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, cit., pp. 303-4. See also Milena Romero Allué, “*What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 55.

<sup>1596</sup> Leontes defines Perdita “a female bastard” when ordering lord Antigonus to abandon her in a remote place: “We enjoin thee, / As thou art liegeman to us, that thou carry / *This female bastard* hence, and that thou bear it / To some remote and desert place, quite out / Of our dominions; and that there thou leave it, / Without more mercy, to it own protection / And favour of the climate” (II, iii, 171-77, italics mine).

<sup>1597</sup> Edward W. Tayler, “Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature. Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 133.

<sup>1598</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 261n.

master Gulio Romano” (V, ii, 93-5, italics mine). Polixenes himself, amazed by Perdita’s virtue, labels her “*a fresh piece / Of excellent witchcraft*” (IV, iv, 427-28, italics mine), somehow echoing the Gentleman’s description of the princess in terms of “*the most peerless piece of earth*” (V, i, 94, italics mine) he has ever encountered. It is fairly evident that Perdita, associated with Flora and Proserpina, represents, in fact, the same paradox that she cannot accept: the conflation of human art and nature. Most interestingly, she is not compared to art in general but, rather, to a kind of art that “betters” or, in the words of Polixenes, “mends” nature. In this respect, it is worth quoting some lines Florizel addresses to her beloved: “What you do / Still betters what is done” (IV, iv, 135-36). By associating her with the perfective role performed by art with regards to nature, Shakespeare seems to suggest that Perdita is not a counterfeit, or a “bastard”, a product of the illegitimate intrusion of human art within the natural world, but a refined synthesis of art and nature. As it has been pointed out, “Perdita is converted to Polixenes’s (Puttenham’s) definition of art”<sup>1599</sup>. According to my study, the conception of art illustrated by the king of Bohemia corresponds also with the idea of alchemy that was known at the time. Paracelsus, as already said, amplified the significance of alchemy by arguing that every kind of art that ‘betters’ nature is alchemical and that he who leads nature to perfection is an alchemist: “She [nature] brings nothing to the light that is at once perfect in itself, but leaves it to be perfected by man. This method of perfection is called Alchemy”<sup>1600</sup>. Florizel’s assertion that Perdita “betters what is done” (IV, iv, 136) implies that her role in the romance is to ‘perfect’ what has been left ‘imperfect’. Indeed, as will be shown, the girl leads the redemptive, and obliquely alchemical, cycle of the play to its right completion.

The fact that the debate between Perdita and Polixenes is set in a garden is particularly significant from the point of view of alchemical symbolism. Taking into account that in the course of the *opus alchymicum* “art and nature [...] lovingly [...] embrace each other”<sup>1601</sup>, the alchemical “garden”, intended as the alembic where transmutation occurs, is the place where art and nature meet. The very philosopher’s stone is conceived of as the product of the cooperation between the human and the natural dimensions, being, as Paracelsus writes, “none other than a fiery and perfect Mercury extracted by Nature and Art”<sup>1602</sup>. As already said, the philosopher’s stone is also described

---

<sup>1599</sup> Margaret Jones-Davies, “‘Suspension of Disbelief’ in *The Winter’s Tale*”, *Études anglaises*, vol. 63, Part 3, 2013, p. 268.

<sup>1600</sup> Paracelsus, *Alchemy: the Third Column of Medicine*, HAWP 2: 148.

<sup>1601</sup> Arthur Dee, “To the Candid Reader”, *Fasciculus Chemicus*, cit., sig. a4v.

<sup>1602</sup> Paracelsus, *Concerning the Universal Matter of the Philosopher’s Stone*, HAWP 1: 66. As Michela Pereira remarks, the philosopher’s stone, or quintessence, is a perfect synthesis of art and nature because it is made of the same primordial matter of which the cosmos is composed. This primordial matter, or

as a flower, distilled in the alembic by the skilfull alchemist who works following nature's rules, as a number of alchemical illustrations show (see plates 67, 68, and 69). Perdita, who is indirectly associated with the gillyflower, is herself a personification of that fusion of art and nature that is embodied by the alchemical stone, also known as 'flower' and 'philosophical child'. Shakespeare, as already noticed, dwells upon the symbolism of the philosophical child in sonnet 5, when employing the image of the "the liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass" (Sonnet 5, l. 10), thus alluding to those emblems that display the philosophical child within the "vessell or glass" (see plates 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11) and suggesting that his contemporaries were familiar with alchemical iconography. As a "liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass", Perdita has been 'distilled' in order to achieve perfection; she is the "blossom"<sup>1603</sup> that has bloomed in the alchemical garden of Bohemia, where the artistic and the natural realms are conjoined. As the philosophical child is said to transform all imperfect substances to a state of perfection<sup>1604</sup>, so Perdita, who "has unified nature and art"<sup>1605</sup>, represents the *coniunctio oppositorum* that alchemists aim at achieving in their 'garden'-alembic. In the aforementioned parable *Blomfields Blossoms*, by the Elizabethan alchemist William Blomfield, the set of the *opus alchymicum* is the so-called "Campe of Philosophy", a garden with an abundance of various flowers. Most interestingly, the protagonist of the vision, accompanied by "Father Tyme", meets "A Lady most excellent"<sup>1606</sup>, whose "Beauty was surmounting" and "Her speech was decorate with such aureat sentence, / Far excelling famous *Tullies* Eloquence"<sup>1607</sup>. Time reveals to his disciple that she is "Lady Philosophy", who lives in "a field pleasant large and wide", a place where, the narrator recounts, they "satt to heare the sweete Harmony / Of divers Birds in their sweete Notes singing, / And to receive the Savour of the flowers springing"<sup>1608</sup>. When Time leaves the alchemist to complete his allegorical journey, the Lady leads the latter into a "Garden planted deliciously"<sup>1609</sup>.

As noticed above, Perdita, being herself perfect, "betters what is done" (IV, iv, 136). The girl's refining role is highlighted by Florizel when he notices that all her actions bring

---

*prima materia*, with which the philosopher's stone is produced, is created by means of some artificial procedures that imitate the natural process through which the cosmos was shaped: "La quinta essenza è considerata una perfetta identità di artificio e natura, in quanto il prodotto della distillazione è identificato proprio con la materia primordiale del creato, riprodotta mediante operazioni artificiali identiche, in piccolo, a quelle naturali da cui il cosmo ha avuto origine". Michela Pereira, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, cit., p. xxv.

<sup>1603</sup> When abandoning Perdita in Bohemia, lord Antigonus says: "Blossom, speed thee well!" (III, iii, 45).

<sup>1604</sup> See 'philosophical child', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 148-50.

<sup>1605</sup> Margaret Jones-Davies, "'Suspension of Disbelief' in *The Winter's Tale*", cit., p. 269.

<sup>1606</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 310.

<sup>1607</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 311.

<sup>1608</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 310.

<sup>1609</sup> *Ibidem*, TCB 311.

perfection:

Each your doing,  
So singular in each particular,  
*Crowns* what you are doing in the present deeds,  
That all your acts are queens.  
(IV, iv, 143-46, italics mine)

With the meaning of “brings to completion”<sup>1610</sup> and “triumphant culmination”<sup>1611</sup>, the verb ‘to crown’ perfectly applies to Perdita’s function within the romance. Interestingly enough, it is not before Perdita is recovered that Queen Hermione’s transformation from stone to living woman is completed. Frye actually remarks that the queen of Sicily “doesn’t come to life [...] until Perdita, whose name means the lost maiden, is said to be found”<sup>1612</sup>. It is worth noticing that when Paulina commands the statue to “descend” and “be stone no more” (V, iii, 99), Hermione does not speak: “it appears she lives, / Though yet she speak not” (V, iii, 117-18). However, when the lady reveals to Hermione that her daughter, Perdita, has been found, the queen finally breaks the silence, thus becoming truly ‘human’: “Turn, good lady, / Our Perdita is found” (V, iii, 120-21). The alchemy of reunion and the alchemy of transformation are finally accomplished. The ‘reborn’ queen explains to Perdita that she has preserved herself only to be reconciled with her, highlighting the princess’s healing role in the drama:

Tell me, mine own,  
Where hast thou been preserved? Where lived? How found  
Thy father’s court? For thou shalt hear that I,  
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle  
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved  
Myself to see the issue.  
(V, iii, 23-28)

The recovery of the girl, at the end of the romance, evidently corresponds with the symbolical rebirth of the queen of Sicily and with the consequent reconciliation or, in alchemical terms, ‘chemical wedding’ between Leontes and Hermione, what alchemists define as a “happy end to winne”<sup>1613</sup>. Alchemists conceive of the ‘chemical wedding’ as the moment when ‘perfection’ is achieved:

Even so the Man our *Stone* is said to sleepe,

---

<sup>1610</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 269n: “*Crowns* could also mean ‘bring to completion’”.

<sup>1611</sup> See ‘crown’, OED entry 7a.

<sup>1612</sup> Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, cit., p. 161.

<sup>1613</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher’s Stone*, cit., l. 412, AP 23.

Untill such time his Wife be fully wrought;  
Then he awakes, and joyfully doth keepe  
His new made Spouse, which he so dearely bought,  
And *when to such perfection they be brought,*  
Rejoyce the beauty of so faire a bride,  
Whose worth is more then halfe the world beside<sup>1614</sup>.  
(italics mine)

Perdita, allowing the *coniunctio* between the king and the queen to occur, seems to embody the features of the philosophical child, defined by alchemists as “A goodly child”<sup>1615</sup> who represents the triumphant culmination of the alchemical journey. Several engravings actually depict the *rubedo*, the last phase of the *opus alchymicum*, as the union of the king, the queen, and their philosophical child (see especially plates 3, 4, 6 and 15).

At this point it is worth quoting some words by Paracelsus: “Only when the time has been fulfilled, and not before, does the course of nature and art set in”<sup>1616</sup>. Alchemical philosophers believe that the practitioner should wait with patience for the “true conjunction”, the union of husband, child and wife, to be attained:

Ripley doth bid you take it for no scorne,  
*With patience to attend the true Coniunctcion,*  
[...] For after death reviv'd againe to lyfe,  
This all in all both Husband Child and Wife<sup>1617</sup>.  
(italics mine)

As already noticed, time is fundamental in alchemical imagery since it is a guide for the adept during the *opus*<sup>1618</sup>. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita, the ‘daughter of time’, is actually reunited with her parents, the king and the queen, only when the right time has come. In like manner, Hermione, as will be considered, is restored to life when “’Tis time”: “’Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach” (V, iii, 99), Paulina says to the sculptural work of art before astonishing the bystanders with the seeming resurrection of the dear queen. As Taylor remarks, at the end of *The Winter's Tale* “the imitation or ‘mock’ of Nature turns out finally to be Nature after all”<sup>1619</sup>. By showing that “the art itself is Nature” (IV, iv, 97), the scene of the statue coming to life concretely displays the conflation of art and nature that Perdita herself embodies. In an alchemical way, the return of Perdita, the philosophical

---

<sup>1614</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle's Worke*, cit., TCB 325.

<sup>1615</sup> Edward Cradock, *A Treatise Touching the Philosopher's Stone*, cit., l. 511, AP 26.

<sup>1616</sup> Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>1617</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle's Worke*, cit., TCB 328.

<sup>1618</sup> See sections 6.4. “*For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale*. The Alchemical Symbolism of Saturn-Time in *The Winter's Tale*” and 6.5. “*I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing / As you had slept between*. The Inversion of Time and the *opus contra naturam*”

<sup>1619</sup> Edward W. Tayler, “Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature. Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*”, cit., p. 135.

child, is also the accomplishment of the final *coniunctio*, the reconciliation of all contraries: husband and wife, Sicily and Bohemia, death and life, art and nature.

Taylor points out that Shakespeare extracts “from various and conflicting interpretations the full dramatic value of the philosophical division [of nature and art]”<sup>1620</sup>. Since one of these “various and conflicting interpretations” was provided by alchemical thought, it is not surprising that alchemy offers an important perspective from which to read the art-nature debate in *The Winter’s Tale*. Alchemy, moreover, functions as an apt metaphor for drama: as Linden observes, “[a]urification is merely aurification”<sup>1621</sup>. Shumaker remarks that alchemical theory “approximated the behavior of metals [...] to relationships and processes which [...] had something of the quality of drama”<sup>1622</sup>. A number of plates in Trismosin’s *Splendor solis* show the phases of the *opus alchymicum* “elevated on a stage”<sup>1623</sup> (see plates 18, 61, 75 and 76). Considering that “[p]laying is a counterfeiting, a continual pretence”, an illusion that “had to be acknowledged openly”<sup>1624</sup>, the connections between drama and alchemy are fairly evident. Ben Jonson himself, in *The Alchemist*, depicts the alchemical dream as a mere pretence, as pointed out by Holland and Sherman:

the true alchemy of the play is doubly the work of a stage, the stage on which *The Alchemist* is performed and the stage on which the con artists perform to their clients. It is on both that the play creates true (if temporary) transformations<sup>1625</sup>.

It is not a chance that, after the tricksters agree with Face to use his master Lovewit’s house as an alchemical laboratory, they “all begin to act”<sup>1626</sup>: in the same way as acting is a fantasy, actors merely playing a role on stage, the art of alchemy is a delusion. Interestingly enough, the set of Jonson’s satire is located “in the Friars” (I, i, 17), in “a building somewhere a street or two from the Blackfriars theatre where the King’s Men were likely to have been performing the play in November 1610”<sup>1627</sup>. The Blackfriars, a district of criminality, with brothels and taverns, was also renowned for its chemical experts, scientific instruments makers, and surgeons<sup>1628</sup>, and for the new indoor playhouse that was

---

<sup>1620</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

<sup>1621</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>1622</sup> Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, cit., p. 197.

<sup>1623</sup> See ‘theatre’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 199.

<sup>1624</sup> Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Fourth Edition, 2009, pp. 221-22.

<sup>1625</sup> Peter Holland and William Sherman, Preface to Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, cit., p. 548.

<sup>1626</sup> Ben Jonson, “The Argument”, l. 8, in Id., *The Alchemist*, cit., p. 561.

<sup>1627</sup> Peter Holland and William Sherman, Preface to Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, cit., p. 547.

<sup>1628</sup> *Ibid.* On the Blackfriars as an area renowned for scientific and chemical experimentation, see also Deborah Harkness, “‘Strange’ Ideas and ‘English’ Knowledge. Natural Science Exchange in Elizabethan

acquired by Shakespeare's company in 1608<sup>1629</sup>. The fact that Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* is so close, in terms of time of composition and performance, to *The Winter's Tale* raises questions concerning the possible connections between the two plays: it suggests, at least, that Shakespeare's audience was used to see the illusion of alchemy displayed on stage. As Dillon remarks, seeing the parallels between *The Alchemist* and *The Winter's Tale* "depends upon recognizing the closeness in time of the two plays and the fact of their performance by the same company in the same theatre for the same fashionable and knowing audience"<sup>1630</sup>. It is especially the possibility to unite nature and art that Shakespeare explores in *The Winter's Tale* and, for all the reasons I have suggested so far, alchemical imagery and language perfectly serve the dramatist's purpose. By putting on stage a statue that seems to come to life, the dramatist is particularly close to the concerns alchemists deal with in their writings. As one can read in a text by Ashmole, to "awaken the sleeping spirit which lyes bound up in the straight prison of the body" is to conjoin nature with art:

it is no ordinary speculation to awaken the sleeping spirit which lyes bound up in the straight prison of the body; to invite and allure that propitious spirit to descend from Heaven, and unite it selfe with that which is Internall; and there withall to convey a Vinculum thereinto, that is of power to hold fast and fix the Celestiall Influences. [...] This is *the Series and Order of Nature conjoyn'd with Art*: and this, and all this must be effected, before one true Magicall Operation can be performed<sup>1631</sup>. (italics mine)

Shakespeare, very likely alluding to the Egyptian rituals of statue animation recounted in the treatise *Asclepius*, dwells upon the Hermetic and alchemical philosophy known at the time, a kind of culture his public was highly familiar with, as testified also by Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*.

---

London", cit.

<sup>1629</sup> On the playhouses in the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, see Loretta Innocenti (ed.), *Il teatro elisabettiano*, cit., pp. 128-207. James Burbage, father to Richard Burbage, acquired the properties of the former Blackfriars monastery in 1596 from William Moore, with the intent to allow the Chamberlains' Men to act there in the winter season. However, a petition was signed by some inhabitants of the Blackfriars area and addressed to the Privy Council against the possibility to use the former priory as a theatre. The petitioners mainly focused on the serious troubles and disorder that the presence of actors would cause to both the noblemen living next to the property and to the whole area. The signers of the petition also complained about the noise that a theatre would have provoked. However, since no indoor playhouses were operating at the time, the noise of trumpets and drums the petitioners referred to suggests that they feared that the same loud instruments employed in the open theatres would be used in the indoor ones as well. Given the success of the petition, the Blackfriars was not employed as a theatre until 1608, when Richard Burbage acquired it. Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, cit., pp. 191-92. See also David Lindley, "Blackfriars, music and masque: theatrical contexts of the last plays", in Catherine M. S. Alexander (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, cit., pp. 29-30: "Though the theatre was acquired in 1608, the incidence of the plague kept theatres closed until 1610. Nonetheless it would seem at least likely that, while composing *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare would have been aware of the planned future winter home for the company".

<sup>1630</sup> Janette Dillon, "Scenic Memory", cit., p. 207.

<sup>1631</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses*, cit., TCB 465.

## Chapter 8

### *‘What were more holy Than to rejoice the former queen is well?’ Alchemy and Hermeticism in the Statue-Scene*

#### 8.1. *‘That rare Italian master Giulio Romano’.*

##### The Lifelike Art of Giulio Romano and His Breathing Statues

The theme pertaining to the art and nature debate, a central topic in the sheep-shearing scene, as already anticipated, is concretely staged at the end of the play, when “Paulina re-creates art as life, and life as art”<sup>1632</sup>. In Act V, while narrating the encounter between Leontes and Perdita, a scene that takes place off-stage, Paulina’s Steward reveals that his lady retains a statue of Queen Hermione<sup>1633</sup>. In a prose passage, the gentleman Rogero argues to have oftentimes seen the lady visiting a chapel after the queen’s supposed death, sixteen years before: “I thought she [Paulina] had some great matter there in hand, for she hath privately twice or thrice a day, ever since the death of Hermione, visited that removed house” (V, ii, 102-105). Paulina’s Steward also recounts that the sculpture has been created by “that rare Italian master Giulio Romano” (V, ii, 94-95). The latter has produced such a life-like copy of the queen that, the Steward continues, “had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape” (V, ii, 95-97). Hermione’s statue, whose verisimilitude makes it seem alive, is evidently “a blend of nature and art”<sup>1634</sup> and, therefore, the public is required, again, to reflect upon the ancient philosophical controversy of nature versus art, a topic that was at the core of lively discussions in Shakespeare’s time. As Garber notices, when the couples formed by Hermione and Leontes and Perdita and Florizel leave the stage, questioning what they have seen, “the debate of Nature and Art is restaged as the age-old problem of dramatic ‘reality’, where Polixenes’ phrase may prevail. The art itself is nature”<sup>1635</sup>. The doubts and questions

---

<sup>1632</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 851.

<sup>1633</sup> The Steward reveals to the gentleman that Perdita has discovered that a statue of her mother is “in the keeping of Paulina” (V, ii, 93).

<sup>1634</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 851.

<sup>1635</sup> *Ibid.*

raised by the final scene of the play are anything but solved, as Leontes remarks when asking the other characters to exit the stage, each one “demanding and answering to his part”:

Good Paulina,  
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely  
Each one demand and answer to his part  
Performed in this wide gap of time since first  
We were dissevered.  
(V, iii, 151-55)

Rogero himself, when illustrating the final encounter between the king of Sicily and his supposedly lost daughter, Perdita, and the fulfilment of the oracle<sup>1636</sup>, focuses on the seemingly fanciful nature of the events they have all witnessed: “This news which is called true is so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion” (V, ii, 27-9).

Before considering the possible influences of Hermetic and alchemical culture on the scene displaying Hermione’s transformation from stone to living woman, I believe it is worth dwelling on the different assumptions made by scholars to explain the seeming “awkwardness of the play’s conclusion”<sup>1637</sup>. According to Tatspaugh, the statue scene and Leontes’s jealousy are “two of the topics that have provoked the most intense debate of a play much debated in the rehearsal room and the study”<sup>1638</sup>. In Simon Forman’s *Booke of Plaies and Notes thereof per formans for Common Policie*, in the record of the performance of *The Winter’s Tale* he saw at the Globe theatre in May 1611, there is no mention of the astonishing ending of the play: “In his oft-quoted diary entry of 15 May 1611 Forman records his visit to see *The Winter’s Tale* but does not mention the bear, Time, or the statue”<sup>1639</sup>. This detail, along with the references to Hermione’s death that recur throughout the romance<sup>1640</sup>, has led some critics to believe that the queen’s return at the end of the drama is very likely a later addition, possibly devised on the occasion of some court performances of *The Winter’s Tale* that were organised during the 1612-13 winter

---

<sup>1636</sup> Rogero: “Nothing but bonfires. The oracle is fulfilled, the king’s daughter is found. Such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour that ballad-makers cannot be able to express it” (V, II, 22-25).

<sup>1637</sup> See Grace Ioppolo, “Shakespeare: from author to audience to print, 1608-1613”, in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare*, cit., p. 152.

<sup>1638</sup> Patricia Tatspaugh, “*The Winter’s Tale*: shifts in staging and status”, cit., p. 114.

<sup>1639</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1640</sup> As will be further considered, Paulina persuades the characters on stage and the audience members that Queen Hermione is really dead: “I say she’s dead – I’ll swear it” (III, ii, 200). Later on, Antigonus provides one of the clearest references to the queen’s death. As a matter of fact, the Sicilian lord claims that the ghost of Hermione has visited him in a dream. As Frye remarks, “by Jacobean dramatic conventions [this was] a pretty reliable sign that she’s really dead”. See Northrop Frye, “Shakespeare’s Romances: *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 11. Antigonus, before abandoning Perdita in Bohemia, says: “Come, poor babe. / I have heard, but not believed, the spirits o’th’ dead / May walk again. If such thing be, thy mother / Appeared to me last night, for ne’er was dream / So like a waking”. (III, iii, 14-18).

season to celebrate the royal wedding between Princess Elizabeth Stuart and Frederick, the Elector Palatine<sup>1641</sup>. It has also been suggested that the astounding ending of the romance signals “Shakespeare trying to suit the fantastical style now demanded by audiences accustomed to seeing masques and other stylised private entertainments”<sup>1642</sup>. If taking into account that one of the main features of court masques is the lack of any division between the players and the audience, to the extent that they have been defined as rituals rather than theatrical performances<sup>1643</sup>, then it is evident that *The Winter’s Tale*, a play in which the characters on stage constantly converse with the public, bears important similarities with the entertainments that were so popular at the Jacobean court. Perdita herself highlights that she is playing a part – “I see the play so lies / That I must bear a part” (IV, iv, 658-9) – and Leontes, in a jealous rage over Hermione, addresses the audience members as if they were part of the show:

There have been,  
 Or I am much deceived, cuckolds ere now,  
 And many a man there is even at this present,  
 Now, while I speak this, holds his wife by th’arm,  
 That little thinks she has been sluiced in’s absence,  
 And his pond fished by his next neighbour, by  
 Sir Smile, his neighbour.  
 (I, ii, 189-95).

It should be recalled that in 1608, Shakespeare’s theatre company, the King’s Men, acquired the new indoor playhouse in the Blackfriars, a theatre that, thanks to its smaller size, offered new possibilities in terms of spectacular and musical effects, thus allowing actors and dramatists to re-create that interaction of several arts that is at the basis of the genre of the masque<sup>1644</sup>. Some scholars have actually assumed that Hermione’s resurrection is an adaptation of a masque-device, even though statues that come to life had not appeared in masques in England before Shakespeare’s romance<sup>1645</sup>. Soon after *The*

---

<sup>1641</sup> See Grace Ioppolo, “Shakespeare: from author to audience to print, 1608-1613”, cit., p. 152.

<sup>1642</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1643</sup> Moving from the fact that during masques the audience members are included in the exhibition, Limon describes these court entertainments as rituals rather than theatrical performances. Jerzy Limon, *The Masque of the Stuart Culture*, University of Delaware Press, Newark, 1990, p. 62: “I stress again that the separation between the fictitious world and the spectators’ reality does not apply to the masque-in-performance. In other words, the masque spectacle is not autonomous after the fashion of a self-contained fiction performed before spectators who ‘belong’ to a different reality, but is, rather, an institutionally autonomous performance of a ritual in which all present take part”. In this respect, it is worth noticing that the audience is clearly part of the ‘recognition scene’ in *The Winter’s Tale*. When Paulina’s Steward recounts the off-stage encounter between Leontes and Perdita, he remarks how the public shared the characters’ feelings, as if it were a ritual: “Who was most marble there changed colour. Some swooned, all sorrowed. If all the world could have seen’t, the woe had been universal”. (V, ii, 87-90)

<sup>1644</sup> See Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, cit., pp. 209ff.

<sup>1645</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank, “The Triumph of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 155.

*Winter's Tale*, however, both Beaumont and Campion used alive statues in their masques composed for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth Stuart and the Elector Palatine<sup>1646</sup>. Among the amendments made to the original performance of *The Winter's Tale* scholars have identified also the figure of Time and the 'Dance of the Satyrs', in Act IV. The former is a non-authorial addition according to Dover Wilson, whereas the latter is a scene that, in Stanley Wells's opinion, is due to some later revisions of the play made by Shakespeare himself<sup>1647</sup>.

Another topic of debate concerning the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale* is Shakespeare's reference to the Italian Giulio Romano, nowadays known primarily as an architect and a painter, rather than a sculptor. As Gombrich remarks, Giulio Romano, who "enjoyed an extraordinary fame among his contemporaries", "received the final accolade of the mention in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*"<sup>1648</sup>. Giulio is actually "the only visual artist appearing in the whole of Shakespeare's works"<sup>1649</sup>. His real name was Giulio di Piero Pippi, the pseudonym 'Romano' being attributed to him because he was born in Rome. Sokol remarks that Giulio Romano was well known in Renaissance England as one in a network of artists and writers such as Parmigianino, Baldassarre Castiglione, Titian, Tintoretto, and Pietro Aretino<sup>1650</sup>. Jacobean audiences, for instance, would have easily associated Giulio Romano with the poet Aretino since the former created the drawings that were later etched by Marcantonio Raimondi and added to the collection of erotic poems composed by the latter, *I modi*<sup>1651</sup>. However, Giulio was mainly renowned for being

---

<sup>1646</sup> *Ibid.* In like manner, Parry observes that "[o]ne wonders also whether the presentation of *The Winter's Tale* at Court in the Christmas season might have suggested the motif of reanimated statues that appeared both in Campion's *Lords' Masque* and in Beaumont's masque for Gray's Inn, for each of these masques uses the device to express the revitalisation of the world by love". Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 102.

<sup>1647</sup> See Grace Ioppolo, "Shakespeare: from author to audience to print, 1608-1613", cit., p. 152.

<sup>1648</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, "'That rare Italian Master...'. Giulio Romano, Court Architect, Painter and Impresario", in Id., *New Light on Old Masters*, Phaidon Press, London, 1986, p. 147.

<sup>1649</sup> See 'Giulio Romano', in Armelle Sabatier, *Shakespeare and Visual Culture. A Dictionary*, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London-New York, 2017, p. 98.

<sup>1650</sup> B.J. Sokol, *Art and Illusion in The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 3. Sokol highlights Romano's reputation in Renaissance England and notices that Ben Jonson himself mentions him in *Timber or Discoveries*: "he was named by Ben Jonson in his *Timber* as one of the 'six famous Painters in Italy who were excellent, and emulous of the Ancients', and is bracketed there together with such Renaissance grandees as Raphael, 'Michel Angelo', and Titian". *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>1651</sup> Gombrich points out that Giulio Romano left Rome to go to Mantua also because of the scandal provoked by his supposed collaboration with Aretino in the composition of *I modi*: "There is no reason to doubt the fact that Giulio's existence in Rome was imperilled by a notorious scandal. He had made a series of pornographic drawings representing various forms of sexual intercourse which had been engraved by Marc Antonio Raimondi and published together with a sequence of descriptive sonnets by Pietro Aretino. Aretino was probably the initiator, though he later claimed that he had merely commented on Giulio's inventions. According to Vasari it was only the engraver who got it in the neck, but Giulio may have found it prudent to remove himself from the scene, having been promised a safe haven in Mantua". See Ernst H. Gombrich, "'That rare Italian Master...'", cit., p. 149. As recounted by Vasari, it was thanks to Pietro Aretino that Federigo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, met Giulio Romano and wanted the

Raphael's "favourite helpmate"<sup>1652</sup>. Giorgio Vasari attests that the former's artistic skills were so excellent that he was deservingly considered as Raphael's heir:

fu talmente dotato dalla natura Giulio Romano, che veramente si poté chiamare erede del graziosissimo Raffaello si ne' costumi, quanto nella bellezza delle figure nell'arte della pittura; come dimostrano ancora le maravigliose fabbriche fatte da lui e per Roma e per Mantova, le quali non abitazioni di uomini, ma case degli dèi per esempio fatte dagli uomini ci appariscono<sup>1653</sup>.

Raphael, Vasari continues, appreciated Giulio above all the other pupils: "per la natura di lui mirabile et ingegnosa, meritò più de gli altri essere amato da Raffaello, che ne tenne gran conto, come quello che di [...] tutti i suoi discepoli avanzò di gran lunga"<sup>1654</sup>.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Giulio Romano is especially praised because "He so near to Hermione hath done Hermione that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer" (V, ii, 98-99). Paulina's Steward actually defines "that rare Italian master" (V, ii, 94-5) as the very "ape" of nature (V, ii, 97). If reading the biography of Giulio Romano written by Giorgio Vasari and collected in *Le vite*, then one could see why Shakespeare depicts Giulio's art as incredibly lifelike. It is especially in the so-called Palazzo del Te, in Mantua, that the artist gave expression to his craftsmanship. As a matter of fact, after working with Raphael in Rome, Giulio left for Mantua, where he was employed at the court of Duke Federigo Gonzaga. Giulio Romano became the favourite court artist of the Duke since, as documented by Vasari, the latter only had to suggest an idea in order for Giulio to understand and realise it<sup>1655</sup>. Vasari relates that in one of the ceilings in the rooms of Palazzo del Te, Giulio painted the Fall of Icarus, a fresco whose verisimilitude would make its spectators believe that the protagonist was falling for real:

---

latter to work for him: "Era questo ingegno tanto celebrato di nome e di grado, che la sua fama e dolcezza di natura fu cagione che, sendo per suoi bisogni capitato a Roma Federigo Gonzaga, primo Duca di Mantova, amicissimo di Messer Pietro Aretino, et egli domestico di Giulio, in tanta grazia lo raccolse per essere amatore delle virtù, che non cessò di accarezzarlo, sì che lo condusse in Mantova a' suoi servigi". See Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*, nell'edizione per i tipi di Lorenzo Torrentino, Firenze 1550, a cura di Luciano Bellosi e Aldo Rossi, Einaudi, Torino, 1986, p. 831.

<sup>1652</sup> As Gombrich remarks, "Giulio certainly had a splendid start in life as an assistant, and probably the favourite helpmate, of Raphael in Rome". See Ernst H. Gombrich, "That rare Italian Master...", cit., p. 147.

<sup>1653</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite*, cit., p. 828.

<sup>1654</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 829.

<sup>1655</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 836: "Nessuno fu mai che meglio di lui disegnasse celate, selle, fornimenti di spade e mascherate strane, e quelle con tanta agevolezza espediva, che il disegnare in lui era come lo scrivere in un continuo pratico scrittore. Né pensò mai a fantasia, che aperto la bocca non avesse inteso, e lo animo altrui con la penna subito non esprimesse". As Gombrich recounts, "In Giulio, Federico [Gonzaga] had found an artist to whom (in Vasari's words) 'one only had to mention an idea for him to understand and draw it'". Ernst H. Gombrich, "That rare Italian Master...", cit., p. 150.

Vedevisi ancora in un palco d'una anticamera lavorata a olio, quando Icaro volando da Dedalo suo padre ammaestrato, per gloria del troppo alzarsi, il sole gli strugge la cera et abbrucia l'ale, per il che precipitando in mare si muore; la quale opera fu talmente considerata d'immaginazione e poi si ben condotta, che non pitture o cose imaginate, ma vive e vere si rappresentano, perché qui si ha paura che non ti cada addosso<sup>1656</sup>.

In another passage from *Le Vite*, Vasari describes the most famous work by Giulio Romano, i.e. the frescoes in the Chamber of the Giants, in Palazzo del Te. Again, the room is so masterfully painted that, when entering it, one is deceived by the realism of the figures:

Perché Giulio, che capriccioso et ingegnossissimo era, volse in un canto del palazzo, fare una stanza di muraglia e di pittura unita, tanto simile al vivo, che gli uomini ingannasse, et a quegli nell'entrare facesse paura<sup>1657</sup>.

Further praising Giulio Romano's ability to perfectly reproduce nature, Vasari concludes that one will never see a work of art that is more frightful and, at the same time, more natural.

Given the centrality of the art-nature debate in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare's decision to choose an artist acclaimed for his ability to create some works of art that were so 'natural' to deceive those who looked at them is not surprising. Stephen Orgel remarks that the name Giulio Romano is particularly meaningful since it is "the name of an artist renowned for his skill at producing the illusion of life"<sup>1658</sup>. As Paulina herself will say at the end of the play, before she makes Hermione's statue come to life, "prepare / To see the life as lively mocked as ever / Still sleep mocked death" (V, iii, 18-20). What scholars point out, however, is that Giulio Romano was principally a painter and an architect rather than a sculptor. According to Orgel, Shakespeare "knew so little about him that he made him a sculptor"<sup>1659</sup>. A possible explanation for Shakespeare's supposed 'mistake' is provided, again, by Vasari. In the first edition of *Le Vite*, published in 1550, Vasari quotes a Latin epitaph that was allegedly written in honour of Giulio Romano by an anonymous Humanist and originally placed on the artist's tomb in Mantua:

VIDEBAT IVPPITER CORPORA SCVLPTA PICTAQUE  
SPIRARE, ET AEDES MORTALIVM AEQVARIER COELO,  
IVLII VIRTUTE ROMANI. TVNC IRATVS,  
CONCILIO DIVORVM OMNIVM VOCATO,

<sup>1656</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite*, p. 833.

<sup>1657</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1658</sup> Stephen Orgel, *Spectacular Performances: Essays on Theatre, Imagery, Books, and Selves in Early Modern England*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011, p. 240.

<sup>1659</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

ILLVM E TERRIS SVSTVLIT, QVOD PATI NEQVIRET  
VINCI AVT AEQVARI AB HOMINE TERRIGENA<sup>1660</sup>.

Jupiter himself, the epitaph reads, could not bear being vanquished or equalled by Romano's great art:

Jupiter saw sculpted and painted bodies breathe and the dwellings of mortals equal heaven through the skill of Giulio Romano. Hence he was angered and having summoned a council of all the Gods carried him off from the earth, since he could not tolerate being vanquished or equalled by an earthborn man<sup>1661</sup>.

The epitaph reports that Jupiter was angered at Giulio Romano's ability to make "sculpted and painted bodies breathe". Even though Vasari did not quote the same eulogy in the second edition of *Le Vite*, dating from 1568, it is nonetheless true that Shakespeare might have read it and inferred that Giulio was also a sculptor whose statues "deceptively resembled life"<sup>1662</sup>. As already noticed, in *The Winter's Tale* all the characters are surprised by the impressive verisimilitude of Queen Hermione's sculpture, so mimetically devised that it seemed to be able to breathe: "that rare Italian master Giulio Romano, who, had he himself eternity and *could put breath into his work*, would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape" (V, ii, 94-97, italics mine). As the Steward suggests, "[i]f Nature had not made Romano mortal, and if he instead had eternity to create great works of art, then Romano would usurp the power of the divine"<sup>1663</sup>.

Gombrich points out that a plausible source that might have inspired the anonymous author of Romano's epitaph is the inscription that is on Raphael's tomb and that was composed by Pietro Bembo<sup>1664</sup>: "Ille hic est Raphael, timuit quo sospite vinci / rerum magna parens, et moriente mori". Nature, the "great mother of all things", feared being defeated by Raphael, while the artist was alive, and dying, when he himself was dying<sup>1665</sup>.

---

<sup>1660</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite*, cit., p. 837.

<sup>1661</sup> The English translation of the Latin epitaph reported by Vasari is from Ernst H. Gombrich, "That rare Italian Master...", cit., p. 159.

<sup>1662</sup> "If Shakespeare had seen the epitaph in Vasari, moreover, he might well have inferred from it that Giulio was a sculptor whose statues deceptively resembled life (*Videbat Iuppiter corpora sculpta pictaque spirare*)". Ernst H. Gombrich, "That rare Italian Master...", cit., p. 160.

<sup>1663</sup> Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>1664</sup> "Whoever wrote these lines skilfully fused two motives appropriate to the artist. The first stems from the real epitaph of Giulio's master Raphael in the Pantheon in Rome, penned by Bembo: 'This is Raphael's tomb, when he lived it was mother nature's fear to be vanquished by him, and when he died, to die too'. The second, of course, alludes to Giulio's most famous work, the Sala dei Giganti, which, after all, represents the theme of Jove calling the council of the Gods to punish the giants for attempting to scale heaven". *Ibidem*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>1665</sup> See also Milena Romero Allué, "What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter's Tale*", cit., pp. 56-57: "Dato che, come già osservato da Vasari, Giulio Romano è l'erede e il continuatore di Raffaello al punto che è tuttora arduo stabilire con certezza la paternità di alcune loro opere, mi sembra lecito accostare il distico finale dell'epitaffio di Bembo all'opera di Giulio Romano e, di

If taking into account that in *The Winter's Tale* “Romano is put forward as the ingenious artist capable of outwitting Nature, where he only free from the confines of her laws”<sup>1666</sup>, then Bembo’s lines in honour of Raphael, Giulio’s master, might have inspired Shakespeare as well. Gombrich argues that Giulio Romano’s artistic skills had already been praised by Pietro Aretino in the comedy *Il Marescalco* (1533), published in London in 1588<sup>1667</sup>. In the theatrical world, whoever wanted to find some information about the artists mentioned by Aretino could have read the Latin epitaph quoted by Vasari in the 1550-edition of *Le Vite*:

Any member of the theatrical world whose curiosity was aroused by Aretino’s references might have come across the eulogy in Vasari’s edition of 1550 and combined them into the image of ‘that rare Italian Master’ – or could it have been Shakespeare himself?<sup>1668</sup>

Gombrich concludes that Shakespeare, as a number of his contemporaries, was very likely influenced by that epitaph that celebrated Giulio Romano’s ability to create ‘breathing statues’.

Further evidence attesting that Giulio Romano’s reputation as a sculptor was not alien to his contemporaries is provided by Giovan Battista Armenini. In *De’ very precetti della pittvra*, Armenini remarks that Giulio’s manner was incredibly close to that of the Roman statues the latter saw when he worked there as a young artist:

Fu parimente Giulio Romano copioso, e facile, che chi lo conobbe affermaua, che quando egli dissegnava da se qualcosa si fosse, che si potea più presto dire, che egli imitasse, e che hauesse inanzi à gli occhi ciò che faceua, ch’egli componesse di suo capo, percioche era la sua maniera tanto conforme, e prossimana alle Scolture antiche di Roma, che per esserui stato studiosissimo sempre mentre era giouine, che ciò che deponnea, e formaua, pareua esser proprio cauato da quelle<sup>1669</sup>.

---

conseguenza, a uno dei temi centrali di *The Winter's Tale*”.

<sup>1666</sup> Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>1667</sup> “What appears not to have been noticed is the fact that *The Winter's Tale* is not the first play in which high praise is lavished on Giulio Romano. A precedent was set by Pietro Aretino’s comedy *Il Marescalco* which was published in Giulio’s lifetime in 1533. Aretino was fond of boosting the reputation of his friends by having them mentioned on the stage. [...] What makes these precedents particularly suggestive is the fact that *Il Marescalco* was reprinted in London in 1588, together with three other comedies by Aretino, by that busy Elizabethan printer John Wolf”. Ernst H. Gombrich, ““That rare Italian Master...””, cit., p. 160.

<sup>1668</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1669</sup> Giovan Battista Armenini, *De’ veri precetti della pittvra*, in Ravenna, Appresso Francesco Tebaldini, ad instantia di Tomaso Pasini Libraro in Bologna, 1587, p. 76. On the sources that attest to Giulio Romano’s reputation as a sculptor in the Renaissance and on those that made the artist renowned in Shakespeare’s time, see Rita Severi, “Art in Shakespeare: Giulio Romano and Giovan Paolo Lomazzo”, *Journal of Drama Studies. An International Journal of Research on World Drama in English*, vol. 7, January-July 2013, pp. 41-68.

Interestingly enough, the Earl and Countess of Arundel owned a number of artworks by Giulio Romano. According to Orgel, the model for Shakespeare's Paulina is precisely the Countess of Arundel<sup>1670</sup>. The Earl Thomas Howard and her wife possessed "the greatest collection of art works in Jacobean England"<sup>1671</sup>. Most importantly, the two owned numerous drawings by Giulio Romano, namely some preparatory sketches for the frescoes of Palazzo del Te, though the latter were acquired only in 1610<sup>1672</sup>. Through the intercession of the Earl of Arundel, Charles I would eventually purchase the collection of the Gonzaga family.

As will be discussed below, another source that was available in Jacobean England and that possibly inspired the playwright in the depiction of a sculptural work of art that comes to life by means of musical sounds is the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius*, where Hermes Trismegistus recounts how ancient Egyptian priests infused life into the statues representing their divinities. The magical 'resurrection' of Queen Hermione, whose very name links her with the god Hermes, might be read as an allusion to the Hermetic culture of the time.

## 8.2. 'Had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work'. Hermetic Symbolism in the Statue Scene

As already pointed out, alchemical and hermetic symbolism can offer an enlightening perspective from which to read the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale*. In his study of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Sacerdoti quotes Chastel in relation with the idea of art promoted by Hermetic philosophy. As Chastel remarks, the Hermetic tradition fostered a new celebration of human art: along with the ability to worship God and know the divine, Hermes Trismegistus includes among man's privileges the invention of the daedalic arts, namely the creation of statues provided with a divine breath, that kind of illusion of life that makes art a form of magic<sup>1673</sup>. The Hermetic conception of art, Sacerdoti observes,

---

<sup>1670</sup> Stephen Orgel, *Spectacular Performances*, cit., p. 240.

<sup>1671</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1672</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1673</sup> "è la tradizione ermetica che porta alla nuova celebrazione dell'arte; assieme alla capacità di contemplare il cielo e di conoscere il divino, Ermete annovera tra i privilegi dell'uomo l'invenzione delle arti dedaliche, cioè la fabbricazione di 'statue animate dotate di *soffio*', quell'illusione della vita che fa

implies the existence of a man-demiurge who, in God's likeness, is provided with creative powers and with the ability to give demiurgic 'breaths'<sup>1674</sup>. It is precisely in England, Sacerdoti continues, that the Hermetic philosophy is conflated with the alchemical and Paracelsian traditions, in their turn connected with Neoplatonism and Gnosticism<sup>1675</sup>.

In the seventeen treatises that compose the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the divine nature of man, who "deserves admiration, as the greatest of all beings"<sup>1676</sup>, is constantly praised. It is especially in the dialogue *Asclepius* that the celebration of human powers is most evident. While disclosing "great things" and "divine mysteries"<sup>1677</sup> to his disciple Asclepius, Hermes Trismegistus argues that "[n]ot only is mankind glorified; he glorifies as well. He not only advances toward god; he also makes the gods strong"<sup>1678</sup>. Man, previously defined as a "mortal god"<sup>1679</sup>, has to fulfil the task of preserving the cosmos by means of art: "Learning the arts and sciences and using them preserves this earthly part of the world; god willed it that the world be incomplete without them"<sup>1680</sup>. At a certain point in his dialogue, Hermes relates the ability of some ancient Egyptian priests to infuse life into the statues that represented their gods by means of various rituals: "Always mindful of its nature and origin, humanity persists in imitating divinity, representing its gods in semblance of its own features, just as the father and master made his gods eternal to resemble him"<sup>1681</sup>.

---

dell'arte una vera e propria magia. L'associazione sarà decisiva per tutta la speculazione del Rinascimento". A. Chastel, *Marsilio Ficino et l'art*, "Archivio di filosofia", 1953, n. 1, p. 143, quoted in Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra*, cit., p. 60. See André Chastel, *Marsilio Ficino et l'art*, preface de Jean Wirth, Librairie Droz, Genève, 1996, p. 69: "C'est la tradition hermétique qui porte la nouvelle célébration de l'art; avec le pouvoir de contempler le ciel et de connaître le divin, Hermès place parmi les privilèges de l'homme 'l'invention des arts dédaléens', c'est-à-dire la fabrication de 'statues animées, pourvues de souffle', cette illusion de la vie qui fait de l'art une véritable magie".

<sup>1674</sup> Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>1675</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>1676</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 80. Latin text: "Nec inmerito miraculo dignus est, qui est omnium maximus". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 334.

<sup>1677</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 77. Latin text: "Magna tibi pando et diuina nudo mysteria". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 324.

<sup>1678</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 80. Latin text: "et non solum inluminatur uerum etiam inluminat. nec solum ad deum proficit, uerum etiam conformat deos". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 334.

<sup>1679</sup> "the human rises up to heaven and takes its measure and knows what is in its heights and its depths, and he understands all else exactly and – greater than all of this – he comes to be on high without leaving earth behind, so enormous is his range. Therefore, we must dare to say that the human on earth is a mortal god but that god in heaven is an immortal human". Hermes Trismegistus, "Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus: the Key", in Brian B. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>1680</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 71. Latin text: "quae pars terrena mundi artium disciplinarumque cognitione atque usu seruatur, sine quibus mundum deus noluit esse perfectum". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 306.

<sup>1681</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 81. Latin text: "ita humanitas semper memor naturae et originis suae in illa diuinitatis imitatione perseuerat, ut, sicuti pater ac dominus, ut sui similes essent, deos fecit aeternos, ita humanitas deos suos ex sui uultus similitudine figuraret". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavone (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 336.

Before Asclepius's astonishment, Hermes explains that he is talking about "statues ensouled and conscious":

I mean statues ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means; statues that make people ill and cure them, bringing them pain and pleasure as each deserves<sup>1682</sup>.

It is worth noticing that the same excerpt from the *Asclepius* is quoted in one of Giordano Bruno's *Dialoghi filosofici italiani*, published in London between 1584 and 1585. In *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, a dialogue that, like *De gli eroici furori*, is dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney<sup>1683</sup>, Sofia, who personifies wisdom, cites precisely the passage where Hermes illustrates the rites of statue-animation performed by priests in ancient Egypt<sup>1684</sup>. Bruno's quotation of the *Asclepius* suggests that the treatise was renowned in Renaissance England. As a matter of fact, the Latin version of the *Asclepius* attributed to Apuleius was already circulating at the time of the publication of Ficino's Latin translation of the Hermetic *Corpus*, a work that had seen "two dozen editions" by the mid-sixteenth century<sup>1685</sup>.

As first pointed out by Frances Yates, by staging the theme of the bringing to life of a woman who is seemingly dead, a topic that recurs already in *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*<sup>1686</sup>,

---

<sup>1682</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*, in Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 81. Latin text: "statuas animatas sensu et spiritu plenas tantaque facientes et talia, statuas futurorum praescias eaque sorte, uate, somniis multisque aliis rebus praedicentes, inbecillitates hominibus facientes easque curantes, tristitiam laetitiamque pro meritis". *Asclepius*, in Valeria Schiavione (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, cit., p. 336.

<sup>1683</sup> See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>1684</sup> Giordano Bruno, *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, in Id., *Dialoghi filosofici italiani*, edited by Michele Ciliberto, Mondadori, Milano, 2000, p. 637.

<sup>1685</sup> See Brian B. Copenhaver, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., pp. xviii-xlix.

<sup>1686</sup> While sailing towards Tyre, Thaisa and her husband Pericles are caught in a storm. The lady, who is pregnant, dies in childbirth and Pericles, who believes her wife to be dead, puts her body into a coffin that he will throw into the sea. The coffin is later found in Ephesus by the servants of the physician Cerimon. When the latter opens the coffin he discovers that the woman is not really dead and exclaims: "Nay, certainly tonight, / For look how fresh she looks. They were too rough / That threw her in the sea. Make a fire within; / Fetch hither all my boxes in my closet. / Death may usurp on nature many hours / And yet the fire of life kindle again / The o'erpessed spirits. I heard of an Egyptian / That had nine hours lain dead, who was / By good appliance recovered" (III, ii, 77-85). Garber compares the characters of Thaisa and Hermione, claiming that the latter "is of course only *thought* to be dead; she chooses to withdraw into obscurity, out of life and its rhythms. In this she is rather like Thaisa and those other mothers in Shakespeare's plays who, losing their husbands and children, seclude themselves in religious sanctuaries as abbesses or nuns". Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 841. In *Cymbeline*, Princess Imogen, in a similar way to Thaisa, is recovered from a seeming death. In the attempt to be reunited with her husband, Posthumus, sent into exile in Italy by King Cymbeline, Imogen actually flees from court and, disguised as a boy, reaches a cave, in Wales, where Guiderius, Arviragus, and their adoptive father Belarius, a banished lord, live. Guiderius and Arviragus are, in fact, Imogen's legitimate brothers but have been kidnapped by Belarius years before as an act of revenge against his unjust banishment. Coming back from their daily duties, Guiderius and Arviragus find Imogen, whom they call Fidele, dead in their cave. The girl, however, only seems to be dead: she has drunk a potion that was prepared for her by Cymbeline's new wife, the wicked Queen. After the boys and Belarius sing a melody for her, Imogen

“Shakespeare makes [...] a most pointed and precise allusion to deep Hermetic magic”<sup>1687</sup>. Yates remarks that the writings attributed to the so-called Hermes “three times great” had an immense influence on Renaissance culture<sup>1688</sup>. Moving from the fact that also Giordano Bruno mentions the passage about the statues from *Asclepius*, Yates assumes that the moral, religious, and magical reform supported by Bruno might be at the basis of Shakespeare’s romance: “There is perhaps something of this magical religious and moral philosophy in the profundities about ‘nature’ in *The Winter’s Tale*”<sup>1689</sup>. With regards to the statue scene in Shakespeare’s play, Simon Smith has recently noticed that “[i]t is long established that the scene bears strong similarities to the description of animated statues found in a hermetic-chemical text well known in Jacobean England”<sup>1690</sup>. In a similar way, Delsigne acknowledges that “[w]hen Paulina awakens faith in the audience both on-stage and off, she wakens the statue with a ritual strikingly similar to the ancient Egyptian ceremony described in the *Asclepius* for ensouling statues”<sup>1691</sup>.

One of the elements that have led scholars to recognise the possible connections between the statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale* and the practices of statue animation described in the *Asclepius* is music. As Hermes Trismegistus reveals to his disciple, the Egyptian priests infused life into the statues of their gods by means of “hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven’s harmony”:

those gods are entertained with constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven’s harmony: so that the heavenly ingredient enticed into the idol by constant communication with heaven may gladly endure its long stay among humankind<sup>1692</sup>.

Interestingly enough, in Shakespeare’s romance it is precisely by means of music that Paulina awakens Queen Hermione’s sculpture, seemingly breathing life into it:

Music, awake her; strike!  
'Tis time; descend; be stone no more;  
approach.  
[...] Stir – nay, come away;

---

finally recovers. See *Cymbeline*, IV, ii, 257-295.

<sup>1687</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, cit., p. 89.

<sup>1688</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91. See also Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra*, cit., p. 177: “Nella sua a volte apparentemente astrusa complessità, questo eterogeneo sfondo ermetico è tuttavia quello in cui maturano delle esperienze intellettuali che sono tra le più intense dell’epoca”.

<sup>1689</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, cit., p. 91.

<sup>1690</sup> Simon Smith, “‘Pleasing Strains’: the Dramaturgical Role of Music in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Peter Holland (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey. Shakespeare’s Collaborative Work*, vol. 67, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 376-77.

<sup>1691</sup> Jill Delsigne, “Hermetic Miracles in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 104.

<sup>1692</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*: 38, in Brian B. Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 90.

Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him  
Dear life redeems you.  
(V, iii, 98-103).

By staging a ‘magical’ moment when the spirit of life is enticed into entering within a statue through music, Shakespeare seems to allude to the Hermetic rituals described in the *Asclepius*. In this respect, Smith notices that “[t]he statue of Hermione fulfils many of the criteria for being a ‘terrestrial’ god; most significantly here, it comes to life in response to ‘sweet sounds in tune with the celestial harmony’, when Paulina calls for music”<sup>1693</sup>. It should be recalled that music is also central in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: according to the Ovidian myth, Eurydice, who dies because of the bite of a snake, is allowed to return to the realm of the living thanks to the sounds tuned by Orpheus’s lyre, whose melody excited the piety of the infernal gods<sup>1694</sup>. However, failing to honour the agreement according to which Orpheus should precede his wife and not look at her on their journey outside Hades, the woman is lost forever<sup>1695</sup>. Given that Shakespeare constantly drew on the Classics, especially in the romances, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is undoubtedly embedded in the numerous layers of significance of *The Winter’s Tale* along with the myth of Pygmalion, the Ovidian sculptor who falls in love with the statue of a woman he has himself created and that eventually comes to life thanks to Venus’s help<sup>1696</sup>. However, if considering that Paulina herself prompts the bystanders to read the scene as if it were a magical ritual, then it can be argued that the audience might have very likely associated the reawakening of the queen also with the Egyptian magic and art recounted in the *Asclepius*:

---

<sup>1693</sup> Simon Smith, “‘Pleasing Strains’: the Dramaturgical Role of Music in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 377.

<sup>1694</sup> On the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, see Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie*, cit., pp. 332-333: “Le mythe le plus célèbre relatif à Orphée est celui de sa descente aux Enfers pour l’amour de sa femme Eurydice. [...] Orphée, inconsolable, descendit aux Enfers pour y chercher sa femme. Par les accents de sa lyre, il charme non seulement les monstres des Enfers, mais même les dieux infernaux. [...] Hadès et Perséphone consentent à rendre Eurydice à un mari qui donne une telle promesse d’amour. Mais ils y mettent une condition, c’est qu’Orphée remontera au jour, suivi de sa femme, sans se retourner pour la voir avant d’avoir quitté leur royaume. Orphée accepte, et se met en route. Dès, il était presque revenu à la lumière du jour quand un doute terrible lui vint à l’esprit: Perséphone ne s’est-elle pas jouée de lui? Eurydice est-elle réellement derrière de lui? Aussitôt, il se retourne. Mais Eurydice s’évanouit et meurt une seconde fois”.

<sup>1695</sup> On the connections between the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and *The Winter’s Tale*, see A.D. Nuttall, “The Winter’s Tale: *Ovid transformed*”, in Anthony Brian Taylor (ed.), *Shakespeare’s Ovid: the Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 137-38.

<sup>1696</sup> A.D. Nuttall, “The Winter’s Tale: *Ovid transformed*”, cit., p. 141: “In *The Winter’s Tale* the stories of Proserpina, Orpheus, and Pygmalion are woven together in a complex sequence of unrivalled power”. On Shakespeare’s use of Classical sources, see also Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993; Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013; William C. Carroll, *The Metamorphoses of Shakespearean Comedy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985, and Charles Martindale (ed.), *Ovid Renewed. Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [1988] 2009, pp. 121-150.

Either forbear,  
 Quit presently the chapel, or resolve you  
 For more amazement. If you can behold it,  
 I'll make the statue move indeed, descend  
 And take you by the hand. But then you'll think –  
 Which I protest against – I am assisted  
 By wicked powers.  
 (V, iii, 85-91)

Denying to be “assisted / By wicked powers” (V, iii, 90-91), Paulina urges the spectators, i.e. the other characters on stage and the audience members, to attend a magical, possibly Hermetic, transformation. Leontes himself, when beholding the statue of his supposedly dead wife, defines it as a form of magic: “O royal piece! / There’s magic in thy majesty!” (V, iii, 38-9). Furthermore, a few lines below, immediately after the statue moves, the king accepts Paulina’s art as magical and describes it “as lawful as eating”: “O, she’s warm! / If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating” (V, iii, 109-11). It has also been noticed that the verb ‘to proceed’, employed by Leontes to invite Paulina to make the statue “move”, is highly evocative of magical rituals: “Proceed. / No foot shall stir” (V, iii, 98-99)<sup>1697</sup>.

A compelling hypothesis concerning the potential links between the statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale* and the Hermetic and alchemical culture of Jacobean England has been recently proposed by Simon Smith<sup>1698</sup>. The scholar argues that the composition of the statue scene might have been influenced by the hermetic-alchemical philosophy of the German physician and alchemist Michael Maier, who arrived at the Jacobean court in 1611, at the time of *The Winter’s Tale*’s first court performance<sup>1699</sup>. As already said, on his arrival in London Maier greeted the king and his eldest son, Henry, with two Christmas cards<sup>1700</sup>. It is the *Strena natalitia* Maier offered to James that, according to Smith, might provide a possible connection between the former’s philosophy and the hermetic-alchemical “magic” displayed in the statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale*.

Some scholars, as already noticed, argue that the court performances of *The Winter’s Tale* organised in 1612-13 in honour of the wedding between King James’s daughter and Frederick V might have offered Shakespeare a suitable opportunity for

<sup>1697</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, cit., pp. 89-90, and Milena Romero Allué, “What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 84.

<sup>1698</sup> See Simon Smith, “The Sound of Delight”, in Id., *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., pp. 51-62.

<sup>1699</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

<sup>1700</sup> See section 3.4. “King James’s Relationships with John Dee, Walter Ralegh, Arthur Dee, Michael Maier, Cornelis Drebbel, and Tycho”.

revision<sup>1701</sup>. Smith, in particular, highlights the topicality of such a device in honour of the couple:

A play performed for the celebration of this couple's wedding would seem an ideal opportunity to add a living statue recalling the *Asclepius* and a suitable alchemical fugue, similar to that which Maier presented to James the previous year<sup>1702</sup>.

Since Maier's *Atalanta fugiens* was first published in 1617<sup>1703</sup>, it could not have had any influence on *The Winter's Tale* but, as Smith observes, the musical composition of the fugue, and the conflation of music and poetry, was already present in the card Maier gave to King James in 1611<sup>1704</sup>. If the scene of Hermione's magical re-awakening is a revision dating from 1612-13, then "the hermetic-alchemical overtones of the statue's animation are extremely significant"<sup>1705</sup> since, as Smith continues, "Maier could have helped provide music for the 1612/13 performance, emphasizing overtones of *Asclepius* in the statue scene for a guest of honour – Frederick – attuned to such resonances"<sup>1706</sup>.

It is important to notice that Princess Elizabeth Stuart and the Elector Palatine were keen on Hermetic studies. Strong points out that the Heidelberg court, in Germany, where the newly-married couple went to live in 1613, cherished the same interests that were so dear to Prince Henry of Wales and, consequently, to Queen Elizabeth I: "the court under Frederick and James I's daughter, Elizabeth, retained the ethos and intellectual preoccupations of Prince Henry's circle"<sup>1707</sup>. Hermetic culture was actually among Henry's "intellectual preoccupations". Hart attests that "Hermetic arts were themselves studied in the short-lived Court of Prince Henry"<sup>1708</sup>, defined by Strong as "the Prince *par excellence* of Renaissance hermetic science in England"<sup>1709</sup>. Some critics, among whom is Frances

---

<sup>1701</sup> See Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., pp. 59-60. See also Patricia Tatspaugh, "The Winter's Tale: Shifts in Staging and Status", cit., p. 114: "The Winter's Tale was performed not only at the Globe but also at Blackfriars, the King's Men's indoor theatre, and at Whitehall Palace. Court records confirm five performances and suggest the possibility of two other performances at the First and Second Banqueting Houses between November 1611 and January 1633/4, when it was 'lik'd'. The most accidentally topical of these performances took place during winter 1612/13 in the season of fourteen plays in honour of the marriage of Princess Elizabeth and Frederick, the Elector Palatine, a union effectively separating the sixteen-year-old from England and her family and resulting in her becoming Queen of Bohemia in 1619".

<sup>1702</sup> Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>1703</sup> See Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>1704</sup> Maier's music dedicated to King James is reproduced in Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., p. 59. It is transcribed from "MS. Poems and music dedicated to King James VI by Michael Maier (the German alchemist and Rosicrucian), Count Palatine and doctor of medicine and philosophy", National Archives of Scotland, MS GD 241/212.

<sup>1705</sup> Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., pp. 59-60.

<sup>1706</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>1707</sup> Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 110.

<sup>1708</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>1709</sup> Roy Strong, *Henry, Prince of Wales and England's Lost Renaissance*, Thames and Hudson, London,

Yates, have even assumed that Maier was possibly an ambassador sent to England to foster the marriage between Elizabeth Stuart and Frederick<sup>1710</sup>, regarded as “the leader of continental Protestantism”<sup>1711</sup>. Adam McLean, who has first drawn attention to the Greeting Card Maier offered to James I, interprets the rose in the manuscript as a Rosicrucian symbol by means of which Maier was “trying to establish links with the highest political authority in Britain”<sup>1712</sup>. Whether Maier’s arrival to England was due to an attempt to foster an alliance between Protestant Germany and England remains today only a very interesting speculation; nevertheless, his presence at the Jacobean court for four years<sup>1713</sup> and at the time when *The Winter’s Tale* was performed before the king is a remarkable fact. Were the statue scene a later authorial addition, Smith observes, Maier could have influenced its composition since, in 1612-13, when Shakespeare’s romance was played as part of the royal celebrations, he had already spent a year at the court of King James:

By the time of *The Winter’s Tale*’s second known court showing in the winter 1612/13 season, Maier had spent a year in the right company for his conjunction of music and hermetic thought to be known at court and to the King’s Men<sup>1714</sup>.

It is worth recalling that automata, speaking statues, and other technological curiosities, such as mechanical fountains and grottoes, could be marvelled at in the so-called *Hortus Palatinus*, the garden devised by the Renaissance engineer Salomon de Caus for Princess Elizabeth Stuart and the Elector Palatine in Heidelberg<sup>1715</sup>. Salomon de Caus

---

1986, pp. 213-15. As documented by Birrell, a number of ‘esoteric’ books were included in Prince Henry’s library: “It is a commonplace that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was no hard and fast line between mathematics and astronomy on the one hand, and astrology, natural magic and occult science in general on the other. Prince Henry has the standard authors in the esoteric field: Reuchlin, Pistorius, Trithemius – the sort of tradition one associates with Dr John Dee”. See T.A. Birrell, *English Monarchs and their Books: from Henry VII to Charles II*, The Panizzi Lectures, The British Library, London, 1986, 38.

<sup>1710</sup> See Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., pp. 203-204: “Whilst Frances Yates and others have argued that Maier was already part of Frederick’s court circle upon his arrival in England in 1611, travelling explicitly as an ambassador to negotiate the marriage alliance with the English throne, Hereward Tilton has more recently suggested that Maier may only have attached himself to Frederick’s retinue [...] during his time in London”.

<sup>1711</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 95.

<sup>1712</sup> Adam McLean, “A Rosicrucian Manuscript of Michael Maier”, cit., p. 5. See section 3.4. “King James’s Relationships with John Dee, Walter Raleigh, Arthur Dee, Michael Maier, Cornelis Drebbel, and Tycho Brahe”.

<sup>1713</sup> “Maier continua alors son voyage en direction de l’ouest, et avant la fin de l’année 1611, passa en Angleterre où il séjourna les quatre années suivantes”. Karin Figala and Ulrich Neumann, “A propos de Michel Maier: quelques découvertes bio-bibliographiques”, cit., 659.

<sup>1714</sup> Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>1715</sup> Strong points out that “Salomon de Caus’s magical, mechanical wonders, which were to be the focal points of the gardens of Anne of Denmark and her son, Henry, Prince of Wales, bring us into contact, therefore, with a tradition central to late Renaissance garden making, that of automata”. Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 75.

had formerly worked for Queen Anne and her eldest son, Prince Henry, in Somerset House, Greenwich, and Richmond Palace<sup>1716</sup>. It is after the prince's unexpected death that Caus followed Princess Elizabeth Stuart and her husband in Germany. As Strong remarks, "[t]he world of the automata, which arrives in full force in the gardens of Jacobean and Caroline England, is that of late Renaissance occultism"<sup>1717</sup>. As already said, in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance a close correlation between natural magic and technology existed. From the perspective of natural magic and Hermeticism, the magus was a man who, "through knowledge and invention, gains mastery over nature"<sup>1718</sup> and, therefore, Eamon continues, "symbolized Renaissance Europe's confidence in the immense possibilities of science and technology"<sup>1719</sup>. It follows that Salomon de Caus himself, who was able to harness the most secret forces of nature, "partakes of the nature of a late Renaissance magus"<sup>1720</sup>. An important context for the science of automata in Renaissance England was offered by John Dee's "Thaumaturgike", defined as "that Art Mathematicall, which giueth certaine order to make straunge workes, of the sense to be perceiued, and of men greatly to be wondred at. By sundry meanes, this *Wonder-work* is wrought"<sup>1721</sup>. The "Wonder-work" Dee discusses in his preface to *The Elements of Geometrie of Euclid* is brought about "Naturally, Mathematically, and Mechanically"<sup>1722</sup>. John Dee himself, as documented by Hart, visited the palace of the Emperor Rudolf II in Prague, where he could admire wonder rooms of automata:

John Dee visited the palace of Rudolf II in Prague, with its wonder rooms of automata employing a mechanical magic of the kind later displayed in the Stuart Court gardens designed by [...] the de Caus brothers [...], and by Constantino de Servi, the latter having worked for Rudolf<sup>1723</sup>.

The Florentine Constantino de Servi also worked with Caus in the gardens of Prince

---

<sup>1716</sup> "De Caus was in England from 1607-8 to 1613. Initially he was in the service of the new queen, Anne of Denmark, around whom centred this revival of activity in the visual arts, and for whom he laid out gardens both at Somerset House and Greenwich. Subsequent to Anne's eldest son Henry being created Prince of Wales in June 1610, when he was given his own household, de Caus became 'Ingenieur du Serenissime Prince de Galles', as he described himself". Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 74.

<sup>1717</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

<sup>1718</sup> William Eamon, "Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance", cit., p. 198.

<sup>1719</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 203.

<sup>1720</sup> Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 112.

<sup>1721</sup> John Dee, *The Mathematicall Praeface to the Elements of Geometrie of Euclid Megara (1570)*, edited by Allen G. Debus, New York, 1975, quoted by William Eamon, "Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance", cit., p. 200.

<sup>1722</sup> John Dee, *The Mathematicall Praeface to the Elements of Geometrie of Euclid Megara (1570)*, sig. A.i.r., quoted in William Eamon, "Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance", cit., p. 200.

<sup>1723</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 5.

Henry, in Richmond, thus further highlighting the connections existing between European Hermeticism and the English court<sup>1724</sup>. It is especially worth noticing that in Caus's *Hortus Palatinus* there was also "a speaking statue of Hercules-Memnon directly derived from Hero of Alexandria"<sup>1725</sup>. Most interestingly, the 'singing' statue of Memnon, once placed in the area corresponding to ancient Thebes, in Egypt, along with other gigantic statues dedicated to the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep III, was said to be able to produce musical sounds when touched by solar rays<sup>1726</sup>. All this considered, it is not surprising that a statue "magically" coming to life by means of music, such as the one of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, would not only have been perceived as an apt celebration of Frederick's and Elizabeth's Hermetic interests, later materialised in their wondrous gardens, but also as a glorification of man's, in this case the monarch's, ability to harness the most occult forces of nature, as will be discussed.

Music, as already said, might provide some important connections not only with the theories displayed in *Asclepius* but also with alchemical philosophy. That the role of music is essential also in alchemical imagery and in the unfolding of the phases of the *opus alchymicum* is attested by the renowned plate that opens Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*<sup>1727</sup>, an illustration that represents the alchemical *Laboratorium*, a word composed of *labor* and *oratorium*, and that symbolises the twofold nature of the *opus alchymicum*: practical and spiritual<sup>1728</sup> (see plate 88). As a matter of fact, three musical instruments are depicted in the centre of the engraving, thus highlighting the importance of music in the art of alchemy<sup>1729</sup>. In this respect, it is worth quoting some words from *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, an excerpt where Thomas Norton argues that during the stage of *coniunctio* music is fundamental. Reporting "some wise Councill" concerning the

<sup>1724</sup> Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 74: "De Caus was occupied during this period with creating elaborate gardens and waterworks in the grounds of Richmond Palace in association with Inigo Jones and a Florentine architect, Constantino de Servi, a project which came to an abrupt end in November 1612 when the Prince died".

<sup>1725</sup> Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 110: "There is a river god fountain and an aviary on the lines of Greenwich, an orangery as at Somerset House, a Pradolino-style grotto, a water parterre in the manner of St Germain-en-Laye, a speaking statue of Hercules-Memnon directly derived from Hero of Alexandria". See also Milena Romero Allué, "What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter's Tale*", cit., p. 84.

<sup>1726</sup> "In Egypt the name of Memnon was connected with the colossal [...] stone statues of Amenhotep III near Thebes, two of which still remain. The more northerly of these was partly destroyed by an earthquake in 27 BC, resulting in a curious phenomenon. Every morning, when the rays of the rising sun touched the statue, it gave forth musical sounds like the twang of a harp string". See 'Memnon', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Micropaedia*, 6: 778.

<sup>1727</sup> Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* was first published in 1595 and re-published in 1602.

<sup>1728</sup> See Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>1729</sup> "At the centre of this beautifully balanced composition three musical instruments are laid on the writing-table with a hard-to-decipher inscription reading: 'Sacred music puts sadness and malevolent spirits to flight, because the spirit of Jehovah sings happily in a heart filled with holy joy'". See Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game*, cit., pp. 42-3.

alchemical *Conjunction*, Norton remarks that the elements have to be joined also *Musically*:

Joyne your Elements *Musically*,  
For two causes, one is for Melody:  
Which there accords will make to your mind,  
The trewe effect when that ye shall finde.  
And also for like as *Diapason*,  
With *Diapente* and with *Diatesseron*,  
[...] With other accords which in Musick be,  
With their proporcions causen Harmony,  
Much like proportions be in *Alkimy*<sup>1730</sup>.

Alchemical harmony, known as the *coniunctio* or the chemical wedding between all opposing elements, is like musical harmony. Norton actually writes that, in the same way as the Diapason, the Diapente, and the Diatesseron produce harmony with their accords, “Much like proportions be in *Alchimy*”<sup>1731</sup>. John Dee himself, as remarked by Cavallaro, defines alchemy as “the Art of Music”<sup>1732</sup>, arguing that the musician will be “struck with wonder” by the “inexplicable celestial harmonies” which are represented in the alchemical work. The scholar notices that Dee’s words have to be read as “a reference to the idea of alchemy as an ‘art of music’, in so far as it involves an understanding of the harmonic proportions between the weights of materials and durations of processes”. The kind of music Dee talks about “also refers to certain sounds said to be heard during the final stages of heating”<sup>1733</sup>.

Unfortunately, no extant records of the “Music” that was tuned at the moment of Hermione’s transformation exist. Pitcher argues that the melody was possibly played by some lutenists from a gallery above or beneath the stage, in this latter case highlighting that the melody was coming from the heavens since the musicians would have been invisible to the audience<sup>1734</sup>. Smith remarks that a potential clue on the music performed during the statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale* is offered by *Pericles*, when the physician Cerimon, in the attempt to revive Thaisa, calls for a “viol”:

Well said, well said; the fire and cloths.  
The still and woeful music that we have,  
Cause it to sound, beseech you.  
The viol once more; how thou stirr’st, thou block!

---

<sup>1730</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 60.

<sup>1731</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1732</sup> Federico Cavallaro, “The Alchemical Significance of John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*”, in Stephen Clucas (ed.), *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies*, cit., p. 161.

<sup>1733</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1734</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., pp 343n and 383n.

The music there!”  
(III, ii, 89-93).

A lute and a treble viol appear at the centre of the aforementioned engraving by Khunrath, whom Maier himself knew<sup>1735</sup>. As far as this is concerned, Smith notices that the treble viol, that is in Khunrath’s illustration of the alchemical *Laboratorium*, would perfectly lend itself to vocal music, thus allowing for an alchemical fugue or canon, in the model of those Maier created in both the Greeting card to James I and in *Atalanta fugiens*, to be sung during Hermione’s ‘resurrection’ and highlighting the Hermetic and alchemical overtones of the scene<sup>1736</sup>. As a matter of fact, the canons in *Atalanta fugiens* were intended for voice. It follows that a vocal, rather than instrumental, performance would be ideal to sing “hermetic-alchemical words”<sup>1737</sup>. Pitcher admits that the pun on “vials”, that recurs in both *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale* – “vials” indicating both “viols” and “vessels”<sup>1738</sup> –, also suggests that the music at Hermione’s rebirth was played on the viols, “instruments emphatically more refined than the drum and pipe or bagpipe”<sup>1739</sup>.

Given that, as Hart points out, “[o]f all the arts, music was the most perfect reflection of the numerical harmony of the cosmos”<sup>1740</sup>, Paulina, when awakening Hermione by means of some musical sounds, is evidently uniting macrocosm with microcosm, “what is above” with “what is below”<sup>1741</sup>, thus further alluding to Hermetic philosophy. In *Asclepius*, Hermes says to his disciple that knowing music is being part of the heavenly harmony:

Knowing music is nothing more than being versed in the correct sequence of all things together as allotted by divine reason. By divine song, this sequencing or marshalling of each particular thing into a single whole through reason’s craftwork produces a certain concord – very sweet and very true<sup>1742</sup>.

The very name Hermione, Pitcher observes, alludes to ‘Harmonia’, goddess of concord

---

<sup>1735</sup> On the relationships between Heinrich Khunrath and Michael Maier, see Nils Lenke, Nicolas Roudet, Hereward Tilton, “Michael Maier – Nine Newly Discovered Letters”, cit., p. 4.

<sup>1736</sup> Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., pp. 60-61.

<sup>1737</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>1738</sup> In *The Winter’s Tale*, soon after she comes back to life, Hermione addresses her daughter Perdita and says: “You gods, look down, / And from your sacred vials pour your graces” (V, iii, 121-23).

<sup>1739</sup> John Pitcher’s commentary to William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., pp. 383-84. On the new musical resources offered to Shakespeare’s theatre company by the Blackfriars theatre, see David Lindley, “Blackfriars, music and masque: theatrical contexts of the last plays”, in Catherine M. S. Alexander (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, cit., pp. 29-45.

<sup>1740</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 137.

<sup>1741</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula Smaragdina*, cit., in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28: “That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing”.

<sup>1742</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Asclepius*: 13, p. 74.

since in Shakespeare's day the first vowel of 'Hermione' rhymed with 'star'<sup>1743</sup>. The queen's name in *The Winter's Tale* would also have reminded of the god Hermes, the Roman Mercury<sup>1744</sup>. According to Hart, harmony was one of the virtues attributed to the god Mercury, whose symbolism was associated with Queen Elizabeth and, in the Jacobean age, with Prince Henry Stuart<sup>1745</sup>. As the scholar recalls, in Richard Davies's masque *Chester's Triumph in Honor of her Prince*, Henry Stuart was hailed as "the great Mercurian Prince"<sup>1746</sup>. In Renaissance times, the god Mercury-Hermes, traditionally the intermediary between the heavenly and the earthly dimensions, would also have evoked the legendary Hermes "three times great", the founder of alchemy and the patron of all arts and sciences, on the model of the Egyptian Thot. If, as noticed by Frye, the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale* represents a celebration of all the arts, magic included, then the reference to the god Hermes through the name of the Sicilian queen is highly significant<sup>1747</sup>:

The final scene involves all the arts, in the most striking contrast to the Perdita-Florizel recognition: the action takes place in Paulina's chapel; we are presented with what we're told is painting and sculpture; music and oracular language are used at appropriate moments; and *another contemporary meaning of the word 'art', magic, so important in The Tempest, is also referred to*<sup>1748</sup>. (italics mine)

As it has been pointed out, "Hermione's very name links her to the realm of statues [...] and hermeticism"<sup>1749</sup>. If considering that the Latin word *Herma* was used for statues of saints, a usage that, as Pitcher notices, was very likely confined to Roman Catholics<sup>1750</sup>, then it might be assumed that Shakespeare is referring to other statues in the final scene of his romance: not to Catholic effigies of saints but, rather, to the statues described in the *Asclepius*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reports that the so-called *Herma* or *Herm* was a "statue composed of a head, usually that of the god Hermes, placed on the top of a

<sup>1743</sup> John Pitcher, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 141.

<sup>1744</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1745</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 138: "Natural harmony was implicit in the Elizabethan conception of the Mercurian monarch, since harmony was naturally identified as one of the many virtues of Mercury". See also Brooks-Davies, *The Mercurian Monarch*, cit., p. 118 n. 50. See section 3.2. "Queen Elizabeth as a Symbol of Alchemical Art".

<sup>1746</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>1747</sup> See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 3: "Hermes was further identified in Neoplatonic mythology with the Roman god Mercury, and as the supposed founder of all the arts and sciences, including magic, this figure of 'Mercurius Trismagistus' came to personify links between Christian magic and art in the Renaissance".

<sup>1748</sup> Northrop Frye, "Shakespeare's Romances: The Winter's Tale", cit., p. 14.

<sup>1749</sup> Jill Delsigne, "Hermetic Miracles in *The Winter's Tale*", cit., p. 104. See also Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse*, cit., p. 55: "This group of writings [the treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*] were attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, who was revered by alchemists as their founder, and whose name is perhaps even echoed in Hermione's". See also Mitsuru Kamachi, "What's in a Name?: Hermione and the Hermetic Tradition in *The Winter's Tale*", *Shakespeare Studies* (29), 1991, pp. 21-36.

<sup>1750</sup> John Pitcher, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 141.

quadrangular pillar, of the proportions of the human body”<sup>1751</sup>. These statues were “exceedingly numerous in ancient Athens, where they were used as boundary-marks, mile-stones, sign-posts, pillars, pilasters, etc.”<sup>1752</sup>. Queen Hermione, emblem of concord, was possibly read also in alchemical and hermetic terms as a symbol of union and harmony restored.

The very name Leontes might have had alchemical overtones. As a matter of fact, Leontes, like Leonatus in *Cymbeline*<sup>1753</sup>, evokes the Latin word for lion, i.e. ‘Leo’<sup>1754</sup>. If taking into account that, in the language of alchemists, the lion represents the “hot, dry, male seed of metals”, also known as Sol, that has to be united with “feminine mercury or argent vive”<sup>1755</sup>, then it can be argued that the union between queen Hermione-Hermes-Mercury and king Leontes-lion might have been interpreted as an alchemical *coniunctio*. Again, the alchemical and Hermetic implications suggested by Shakespeare’s romance might have been particularly appreciated by Elizabeth Stuart and Frederick V, who were keen on Hermeticism, as already noticed. Their marriage was usually defined as ‘the union of the Thames and Rhine’, a sort of chemical wedding, or, in alchemical terms, a “matrimony pure”<sup>1756</sup>. Parry actually observes that “*The Winter’s Tale* contains elements that acquired a new relevance with the turn of events in the winter of 1612”<sup>1757</sup>.

### 8.3. ‘*The statue is but newly fixed*’.

#### The Alchemical Re-Creation of Queen Hermione

---

<sup>1751</sup> See entry “Herma”, in OED.

<sup>1752</sup> *Ibid.* See also Mitsuru Kamachi, “What’s in a Name?: Hermione and the Hermetic Tradition in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., pp. 21-22.

<sup>1753</sup> In *Cymbeline*, Posthumus Leonatus is the husband of Imogen, the daughter of Cymbeline, king of Britain. As Nosworthy remarks, ‘Leonatus’ implies that he was lion-hearted. See J. M. Nosworthy’s commentary to William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, edited by J. M. Nosworthy, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London, [1955] 2013, p. 5.

<sup>1754</sup> See John Pitcher, Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, cit., p. 140.

<sup>1755</sup> See ‘red lion’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 166-7. See also ‘quicksilver, *Ibidem*, p. 162: “argent vive or mercury. A name mainly applied to philosophical argent vive, the moist, cold, female seed of metals, which the alchemist must united with philosophical sulphur, the dry, hot, male seed, in order to produce the philosopher’s stone”.

<sup>1756</sup> Richard Carpenter, *The Worke of Rich: Carpenter*, TCB 275.

<sup>1757</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 102.

As already said, the revival of Hermetic philosophy in the Renaissance prompted a new celebration of human art<sup>1758</sup>. Man is a demiurge and a co-creator, as one can read in *Asclepius*. Alchemists embrace this vision of humankind and even believe they are able to impart life on matter. Newman observes that already at the time of the Egyptian Zosimos of Panopolis (third century AD), alchemy was associated with theurgy and, in particular, with the rituals of statue animation: “Like ancient alchemy, theurgy claimed to alter matter in a fundamental way, by imparting a principle of activity”<sup>1759</sup>. Zosimos, for instance, conceived of the alchemical processes of distillation and sublimation in soteriological terms since they represented a way to release the *pneuma*, the spirit of life, from the corporal prison of the body<sup>1760</sup>. The *pneuma* was eventually to be rejoined with the body once the latter had been purified, thus resulting in a “physical death followed by a reanimation of the body undergoing treatment”<sup>1761</sup>. Barbara Obrist, further considering the analogy between alchemical practices and divine Creation, attests the presence, in a fifteenth-century Italian manuscript, of a picture portraying an alchemist “in the traditional Promethean posture” with a living statuette in his hands<sup>1762</sup> (see plate 81). According to the Ovidian myth recounted in the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, Prometheus is said to have created man out of earth and water:

Sanctius his animal mentisque capacious altae  
deerat adhuc et quod dominari in cetera posset.  
natus homo est, siue hunc diuino semine fecit  
ille opifex rerum, mundi melioris origo,  
siue recens tellus seductaque nuper ab alto  
aethere cognati retinebat semina caeli,  
quam satus Iapeto mixtam pluuiialibus undis  
finxit in effigiem moderantum cuncta deorum.  
pronaque cum spectent animalia cetera terram,  
os homini sublime dedit caelumque uidere  
iussit et erectos ad sidera tollere uultus.

<sup>1758</sup> See Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>1759</sup> William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>1760</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>1761</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30: “The pneuma is also to be rejoined with the body, presumably after the body has been purified. Elsewhere in his writings, Zosimos explains that this is a physical death followed by a reanimation of the body undergoing treatment. Alchemy, by providing the material key to this operation, reveals the method by which nature itself is not merely mimicked but transformed”.

<sup>1762</sup> Barbara Obrist, *Les débuts de l'imagerie alchimique (XIVe-XVe siècles)*, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1982, p. 45: “Le thème de l'*homo faber* ne sortira de son statut équivoque qu'au XVe siècle, dans les cercles florentins qui remettent en honneur l'*Asclepius*, et font traduire du grec le *Corpus hermeticum* entire auquel il appartient. Ainsi, dans un magnifique manuscrit enluminé autour de 1475 en Italie du Nord, et contenant des oeuvres alchimiques pseudo-lulliens, on voit l'alchimiste dans la pose de Prométhée, tenant en main sa statue animée”. As documented by Obrist, the manuscript is collected the National Library in Florence (MS. BR 52, III, II, 27; fol. CCLXVI). The plate is also reproduced in Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, “Opera chemica. Eine unbekannte Bilderhandschrift der italienischen Frührenaissance”, *Die BASF Aus der Arbeit der Badischen Anilin & Soda Fabrik AG*, heft 3, 10 Jahrgang, 1960, p. 99.

sic modo quae fuerat rudis et sine imagine tellus  
induit ignotas hominum conuersa figuras.  
(*Met.* I: 76-88)

The relevance of the Promethean myth to alchemy is attested by a fresco in the *studiolo* of Francesco I dei Medici, Duke of Tuscany from 1574 to 1613. Francesco dei Medici was a renowned devotee of alchemical studies. His *studiolo*, a sort of *Wunderkammer* placed in Palazzo Vecchio, in Florence, and devised by Giorgio Vasari, displayed a number of objects and works of art related to alchemy and natural magic, none of which is now extant. The room is decorated with several frescoes that mainly deal with the four elements and with the theme of art and nature. As documented by Zanetti, all the paintings are based on the interaction between natural elements and human intervention<sup>1763</sup>. Most interestingly, one of the frescoes painted by ‘Poppi’ (Francesco Morandini) on the ceiling vault of the *studiolo* displays “Nature giving rough stones to a chained Prometheus, who then transforms them into precious stones”<sup>1764</sup>. What Nature offers to the Titan is, in fact, some quartz, as reported by Berti, who defines the painting as the cornerstone of the whole room since it portrays the topic of nature versus art<sup>1765</sup>. Aeschylus was the first to depict Prometheus not as a rebel but, rather, a benefactor, who taught humanity all arts and crafts, among which was precisely the art of extracting precious metals from the caves<sup>1766</sup>. It is especially in the Renaissance that Prometheus became the epitome of the ability to ‘create’, a faculty that only man, among all other creatures, possesses<sup>1767</sup>: not surprisingly, then, the mythical overreacher also emerged as a symbol of the alchemist.

Ben Jonson himself, in the masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, satirises the belief according to which alchemists can imitate God’s creative activity. Mercury ironically argues that alchemists even surpass Deucalion and Prometheus in their ability to create and give life:

For in yonder vessels which you see in their laboratory, they have enclosed materials to produce men, beyond the deeds of Deucalion or Prometheus, – of which one, they say, had the philosopher’s stone and threw it over his shoulder, the other the fire, lost it<sup>1768</sup>.

---

<sup>1763</sup> Cristiano Zanetti, *Janello Torriani and the Spanish Empire*, cit., p. 175.

<sup>1764</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1765</sup> Luciano Berti, *Il principe dello studiolo*, cit., p. 63: “Perciò il riquadro centrale del soffitto [...], la chiave di volta cioè della saletta e della decorazione, raffigurerà appunto la Natura che offre un pezzo di quarzo a Prometeo, primo inventore della lavorazione dei preziosi”.

<sup>1766</sup> See Paolo Rossi, “La nuova scienza e il simbolo di Prometeo”, in Id., *I filosofi e le macchine, 1400-1700*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1984, p. 177.

<sup>1767</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178: “nella coscienza del Rinascimento Prometeo diviene il simbolo della capacità di creazione che, unico fra tutte le creature, l’uomo possiede”.

<sup>1768</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 100-104, pp. 438-39.

According to Classical mythology, Prometheus, as already noticed, was said to have created man and one of his sons, Deucalion, to have “repopulated the world by throwing stones over his shoulder, which turned into people”<sup>1769</sup>. As might be expected, the myths of Deucalion and Prometheus, as a number of other mythological tales, were interpreted by alchemists as allegories concealing alchemical truths<sup>1770</sup>. As a response to Mercury, Vulcan, in the attempt to prove that alchemists are able to ‘create’ as Nature herself does, calls forth “the creatures of the first class”<sup>1771</sup>. Mercury defines these “creatures”, the products of the alchemical transmutation, as “more imperfect than the very flies and insects that are her [Nature’s] trespasses and scapes”<sup>1772</sup>. The antimasque is performed and, as the stage direction reads, “imperfect creatures with helms of limbecks on their heads”<sup>1773</sup> enter. The allusion to imperfect beings wearing “helms of limbecks” is possibly to the many alchemical plates that show human beings enclosed within alembics that function as a female uterus (see plates 2, 3, 5, 6, 11, 12, 15, 18, 23, 24, 46, 60, 61). As a matter of fact, Holland and Sherman observe that the costumes worn by the actors personifying the living beings created by Vulcan “attest that the ‘imperfect creatures’ have been artificially created in the laboratory”<sup>1774</sup>.

The association of the *opus alchymicum* with human generation, a metaphor that constantly recurs in alchemical literature, is to be found in the very first alchemical text that entered Western Europe in the twelfth century, the so-called *Testamentum Morieni*, translated from Arabic into Latin by the English Robert of Chester in 1144. Morienus reveals to King Khalid that “pairing, offspring, pregnancy, and birth” are the pillars of the alchemical art:

For the conduct of this operation, you must have pairing, production of offspring, pregnancy, birth, and rearing. For union is followed by conception, which initiates pregnancy, whereupon birth follows. Now the performance of this composition is

---

<sup>1769</sup> See Peter Holland and William Sherman (eds.), *Mercury Vindicated*, cit., p. 439n.

<sup>1770</sup> For the alchemical interpretation of the myth of Prometheus, see Dom Pernety, *Les Fables Egyptiennes et Grecques dévoilées*, cit., tome second, pp. 440-47. As Pernety remarks in his *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique*, the alchemical secrets have been handed down through several myths, among which is the one of Deucalion and Pyrrha: “Cette matière a été voilée par les Anciens sous diverses fables, mais puis particulièrement sous celles d’Hercule et d’Anthée, de Pyrrha et de Deucalion”. See Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique*, cit., p. 101.

<sup>1771</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated*, cit., l. 131, p. 440. According to Holland and Sherman, the creatures produced by means of alchemical transmutation are called “of the first class” with reference to “some hierarchy within the works of artificial creation supposedly performed by alchemy”. Peter Holland and William Sherman (eds.), *Mercury Vindicated*, cit., p. 440n.

<sup>1772</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated*, cit., ll. 139-140, p. 440.

<sup>1773</sup> *Ibidem*, ll. 136-137.

<sup>1774</sup> Peter Holland and William Sherman (eds.), *Mercury Vindicated*, cit., p. 440n.

likened to the generation of man<sup>1775</sup>.

Alchemists, then, believe to be able to contend with nature the act of generation since, as Long remarks, they place themselves “in a surrogate maternal role”<sup>1776</sup>. As Pereira remarks, next to those treatises that describe the alchemical substances and operations without any cosmological or ontological implications, there is an even higher number of texts that, conversely, present the laboratory as a microcosmic model of the cosmos, a place where the alchemist can even create life<sup>1777</sup>. The numerous engravings and illustrations that display the phases of the *opus alchymicum* within alembics that perform the function of the female womb evidently testify to the affinity between alchemical and human creation (see especially plates 3 and 62), a topic that recurs also in Shakespeare’s sonnet 5, whose “liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass” (Sonnet 5, l. 10) alludes to the alchemical *homunculus*<sup>1778</sup>. Paracelsus went so far as to claim that men could be artificially created in the alchemical laboratory “by a skilfull Alchymist”:

Wee must also know that after this manner men may bee generated without natural Father, or Mother, i.e., not of a Woman in a natural way: but by the Art and industry of a skilfull Alchymist may a Man bee borne and grow<sup>1779</sup>.

If taking into account that alchemists base their theories on the Hermetic belief that man is a “mortal god”<sup>1780</sup>, then it is not surprising that they conceive of themselves as ‘co-creators’, endowed with the god-like ability to infuse life<sup>1781</sup>, an issue with which Goethe deals with in *Faust*. According to Pereira, the creation of the homunculus as it is depicted

---

<sup>1775</sup> Morienus, *A Testament of Alchemy*, cit., p. 29. See also Calid, *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie*, cit., p. 30: “Moreover, lette him consider what is the ground-worke and beginning of the mastery, beeing to it, as the matrice is to living creatures, which are fashioned in the wombe, and therein receive their creation & nourishment”.

<sup>1776</sup> Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, cit., p. 110.

<sup>1777</sup> Michela Pereira, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, cit., p. xxvi: “Accanto ai testi dove viene sobriamente offerta la descrizione delle sostanze e delle operazioni, senza implicazioni (o almeno senza implicazioni visibili) di carattere cosmologico e tanto meno ontologico, come gli scritti di Rāzī e ‘Geber latino’, molto più numerosi sono quelli in cui il laboratorio è chiaramente concepito come un modello ridotto del cosmo, nel quale l’alchimista può ricreare persino la vita: lo affermano già alcuni trattati del corpus giabiriano e questo tema sarà ripreso, dopo Paracelso, nella ricerca della vita artificiale, la cui trasfigurazione simbolica guiderà la creazione di *Homunculus* nel *Faust II*”.

<sup>1778</sup> See section 7.3. “*What you do / Still betters what is done*. Perdita as the ‘philosophical child’”.

<sup>1779</sup> Paracelsus, *Of the Nature of Things*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 152. A few words below Paracelsus writes: “wee must by no means forget the generation of Artificiall men. For there is some truth in this thing, although it hath been a long time concealed, and there have been no small doubts and questions raised by some of the ancient Philosophers, whether it were possible for Nature or Art to beget a Man out[side] of the body of a Woman, and natural matrix? To this I answer, that it is no way repugnant to the Art of Alchymy and Nature”. *Ibidem*, p. 153.

<sup>1780</sup> See Hermes Trismegistus, “Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus: the Key”, in Brian P. Copenhagen (ed.), *Hermetica*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>1781</sup> See Wilfred Theisen, “John Dastin: the Alchemist as Co-Creator”, *Ambix*, vol. 38, part 2, July 1991, pp. 73-78.

in *Faust* undoubtedly alludes to Paracelsian and alchemical theories<sup>1782</sup>. Pietro Citati observes that the birth of the *homunculus* in professor Wagner's laboratory, where he devotes himself to the study of alchemy, is accomplished precisely through an alchemical process: "nel suo laboratorio di alchimista-scienziato, Wagner raccoglie, mescola, distilla gli 'elementi della vita' [...] e spera di generare dei nuovi esseri umani"<sup>1783</sup>.

In *The Winter's Tale* the theme of giving life by means of human art is evidently exploited. Giulio Romano's art is so life-like, as Paulina's Steward observes, that he seemed to be able to put breath into his work: "that rare Italian master Giulio Romano, who, had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom" (V, ii, 94-97). The Steward is suggesting that "[i]f Nature had not made Romano mortal, and if he instead had eternity to create great works of art, then Romano would usurp the power of the divine"<sup>1784</sup>. Leontes himself, when Paulina shows him the statue of his allegedly dead wife, is impressed by its mimetic realism and exclaims: "What a fine chisel / Could ever yet cut breath?"<sup>1785</sup>. The king of Sicily indirectly alludes to *Genesis*, when God creates man by breathing life into him: "And the Lord God formed man of the Dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soule"<sup>1786</sup>. The metaphor of 'breathing life' has been already anticipated by Paulina, in the third act, when she convinces Leontes that his wife is dead:

If you can bring  
Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye,  
Heat outwardly or *breath within*, I'll serve you  
As I would do the gods  
(III, ii, 201-4, italics mine).

The wise lady is saying that, were Leontes able to breathe life within Hermione's supposedly dead body and thus restore her, she would honour him as if he were a god. As pointed out in the section 5.3, the Hermetic and alchemical background of Shakespeare's England might offer an enlightening perspective from which to interpret Paulina's enigmatic lines<sup>1787</sup>. The term "Tincture", for instance, would have reminded Jacobean audiences of alchemical language. In particular, it is worth recalling that alchemists believe

<sup>1782</sup> See Michela Pereira, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, cit., pp. xxvi-xxvii and lx-lxi.

<sup>1783</sup> Pietro Citati, *Goethe*, Adelphi, Milano, 1990, p. 304.

<sup>1784</sup> Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>1785</sup> As Reilly remarks, "The artist's uncanny ability to create versimilitude shocks him [Leontes]; it is as though the artist, Romano, has somehow created life or cut breath just as God in *Genesis* created life through breath". *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>1786</sup> *Genesis*, 2:7.

<sup>1787</sup> See section 5.3. "If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within. Leontes as *Rex Chymicus*".

that the alchemical tincture, or stone, is produced out of a process, known as ‘fixation’, that presupposes the reintegration of the volatile spirit within the purified body by means of external fire:

so that there be Fixacion,  
With temperate hetes of the fyer,  
Tyll he the perfite Elixer,  
Of thilke *Philosophers Stone*,  
Maie gette<sup>1788</sup>.

Since, according to alchemical symbolism, the spirit of life flies from the body during the stage of *nigredo* and descends again at the end of the *opus alchymicum*, the alchemical *coniunctio* does not only stand for the reunion of male and female, but also for the “marriage of Body and Spirit”<sup>1789</sup>. As Abraham highlights, the phase of fixation is “the coagulation or congelation of the volatile spirit into body so that it can endure the fire and not fly away”<sup>1790</sup>. If read in the light of alchemical theories, then, Paulina’s exhortation to Leontes – “Heat outwardly or breath within” (III, ii, 203) – would acquire a specific meaning: since it is precisely by “heating outwardly” that the spirit is breathed into matter during the *opus alchymicum*, Paulina is somehow foreshadowing the final reawakening of the queen, i.e. the reintegration of the spirit of life within Hermione’s body. As documented by Abraham, the real tincture is extracted from the raw matter by the application of outward fire<sup>1791</sup>. Paracelsus actually claims that fire is the “Great Arcanum of the Art”<sup>1792</sup>. Since “[i]t possesses [...] a state and power [...] of vivifying”, Paracelsus continues, the “fire in the furnace may be compared to the sun. It heats the furnace and the vessels, just as the sun heats the vast universe”<sup>1793</sup>. The Arab alchemist known to the Latins as Calid explicitly remarks that the philosopher’s stone “is a conjunction or marriage of the congealed spirit, with the dissolved bodie, and this conjunction or passion is upon the

---

<sup>1788</sup> John Gower, *Concerning the Philosophers Stone*, TCB 370. See also George Ripley, *The Mystery of Alchymists*, cit., TCB 386: “Shut well the Vessell for going forth of the Spirit; / Soe shall you all things the better keepe; / For how to get him againe it is strange to know, / [...] Put into thy Vessell Water cleare, / And set it in Fire full forty dayes, / And then in the Vessell blacknes will appeare, / When that he is black he will change tye / Many Colers in him then will appeare, / From colour to colour till it be white, / [...] Then it is tyme Son to change the Fire, / And melt the heat to your desire; [...] A dry Fire put him till, / And a moyst Fire naturally, / Till he be made fixed”.

<sup>1789</sup> George Ripley, Epistle to King Edward IV, in Id., *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 115. As remarked by Abraham, “[i]n a universe of macrocosmic-microcosmic correspondences, the ‘death’ of a metal and the rising of volatile spirits were seen as analogous to the death of the human body and the release of the vital spirit of life”. See ‘spirit’ in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 188.

<sup>1790</sup> See ‘fixation’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>1791</sup> See ‘fire’, *Ibidem*, p. 76.

<sup>1792</sup> Paracelsus, *Concerning the Spirits of the Planets*, HAWP 1: 74.

<sup>1793</sup> *Ibid.*

fire”<sup>1794</sup>. As Linden remarks, the death-resurrection motif, that is at the core of the spiritual alchemy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is already present in Calid’s text, included in the 1597-English edition of Roger Bacon’s *The Mirror of Alchimy*<sup>1795</sup>. The stone, as Calid writes, “is the life of the dead, and their resurrection, a medicine preserving bodies, and purging superfluties”<sup>1796</sup>.

As the comedy *All’s Well That Ends Well* testifies, Shakespeare seems to be aware of the alchemical notion of ‘fixation’. Lord Lafew, celebrating the medical skills of the physician Gerard de Narbon, argues that the latter has discovered a kind of “medicine / That’s able to *breathe life into a stone*” (II, i, 71-72, italics mine). Given that *All’s Well* is the only Shakespearean play where Paracelsus is explicitly mentioned, it can be assumed that the alchemical overtones of the comedy might have been evident to the audience, as already discussed. Helena, the daughter of Narbon, has oftentimes been seen as a Paracelsian practitioner<sup>1797</sup>. In particular, the line “breathing life into a stone” might have been interpreted as a reference to the alchemical process of ‘fixation’ or ‘sublimation’. Moreover, if taking into account that the protagonist of Helena’s treatment is an ailing king, then the role of alchemical imagery and language in the comedy acquires extra value<sup>1798</sup>. As noticed by Haley, Lafew indirectly associates the king’s healing process with alchemy:

Lafew compares the King’s cure to the alchemical process, describing its end with some precision. The living stone is the *lapis philosophorum*, whose tincture or ‘medicine’ restores the impure alloy or ‘*rex*’ to health<sup>1799</sup>.

In *The Winter’s Tale*, at the end of Leontes’s healing journey, when Paulina shows him a statue of his ‘dead’ wife, Shakespeare seems to draw on alchemical vocabulary. Somehow echoing the notion of ‘fixation’, Paulina warns the king that “The statue is but newly *fixed*” (V, 3, 46-48; italics mine). A few lines below, both Leontes and Polixenes remark that “the fixure of her [Hermione’s] eye has motion in it” and that “the very life seems warm upon her lip” (V, 3, 66-67), possibly alluding to the spirit of life breathing within her. Further highlighting the alchemical context of Hermione’s ‘resurrection’ or, if read in alchemical terms, ‘transmutation’, the statue is several times referred to with the word ‘stone’. It is Leontes who first addresses his wife’s statue with the term “stone”: “Chide me, dear stone,

---

<sup>1794</sup> Calid, *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>1795</sup> Stanton J. Linden, Introduction to Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchimy*, cit., p. xxii.

<sup>1796</sup> Calid, *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie*, cit., p. 45.

<sup>1797</sup> See section 4.1. “Alchemy in Shakespeare’s Plays”.

<sup>1798</sup> See David Haley, *Shakespeare’s Courtly Mirror*, cit., pp. 58-64.

<sup>1799</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

that I may say indeed / Thou art Hermione” (V, 3, 24-25). Later on, gazing at the sculptural work of art, Leontes, “Standing like stone” (V, iii, 42), exclaims: “I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?” (V, 3, 37-38). Also Paulina employs the term “stone” referring to the statue: “for the stone is mine” (V, 3, 57). Not only is Hermione’s sculpture referred to as “stone” but Paulina alludes to the colour red, that in the language of alchemists indicates the tincture, the successful accomplishment of the *opus alchymicum*. “Good my lord, forbear; / The *ruddiness* upon her lip is wet” (V, iii, 81). “Rudde”, as Ripley writes, is the final colour of the alchemical work that indicates that the tincture has been attained<sup>1800</sup>. As Marcello Pagnini notices, Shakespeare creates the meaning of his works by means of the constant reiteration of concepts, words, and semantic units. The critic is, therefore, expected to establish whether these semantic patterns fulfil a mere decorative function or whether, conversely, they are endowed with a specific significance congruent with the semantic structure of the text<sup>1801</sup>. If considering that the completion of the *rota alchemica* consists in the “rejoining of the united soul/spirit with the purified body of the Stone’s matter”<sup>1802</sup>, a conjunction that is also represented as a chemical wedding between the king and the queen, then the recurrence of the word ‘stone’ in a few lines, along with the previous references to the alchemical concepts of ‘tincture’ and of ‘fixation’, might have prompted the public to read the final scene in alchemical terms.

I believe it would be useful to pause again on the lines Paulina addresses to Leontes in the third act of the play: “*If you can bring / Tincture* or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within” (III, ii, 201-3). As already discussed, Leontes, if interpreted as the ‘chemical king’, i.e. as the raw material that has to be transmuted, cannot have any tincture within himself since he is still at the beginning of his healing journey. The alchemical parables that draw on the metaphor of the *rex chymicus* usually describe an initial condition of barrenness, a state that is mended when the king is restored to health. In Ripley’s *Cantilena*, as already noticed, the chemical king, defined as “Barren” and

<sup>1800</sup> George Ripley, *The Vision of Sir George Ripley*, TCB 374.

<sup>1801</sup> “Osservava Roland Barthes, in una considerazione generale del testo letterario, che ‘c’est par le retour régulier des unités et des associations d’unités que l’oeuvre apparaît construite, c’est-à-dire doués de sens’. Così come, ad esempio, una semplice allitterazione è un’iterazione fonica, un vezzo retorico, ma anche un collegamento di lessemi non necessariamente congiunti al livello del senso o a quello sintattico-grammaticale. [...] Shakespeare costruisce mediante opposizioni: o creando delle sinonimie e delle antinomie, o riprendendo parole o concetti già prima enunciati. E tali opposizioni possono essere ora delle frasi, ora dei concetti, ora dei personaggi in quanto nuclei caratteriali, ora delle scene e delle situazioni drammatiche, ora, infine, dei ‘semi’ che sottendono l’intera compagine semantica della *pièce*”. Marcello Pagnini, *Shakespeare e il paradigma della specularità*, cit., pp. 47-8.

<sup>1802</sup> See ‘spirit’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 188.

“Infoecund”<sup>1803</sup>, exclaims that no tincture can be extracted from his sterile body: “No Tincture from my Body can be gain’d”<sup>1804</sup>. It is only at the end of the alchemical journey that the *rex chymicus*, transmuted into tingeing gold, is again able to instil his ‘tincture’ on others. Alchemists actually define as “projection” the moment when the tincture is thrown over matter in order to transmute it, as a plate from the sixteenth-century alchemical treatise *Coronatio naturae* illustrates. The picture shows a king who, after being himself transmuted, projects his tincture upon the other metals<sup>1805</sup> (see plate 27). In like manner, Leontes cannot bring any “Tincture” to Hermione’s body unless he is fully “redeemed”<sup>1806</sup>. Once the king has accomplished his healing and obliquely alchemical journey, he can be reunited with his queen and attain the final moment of the *opus alchymicum*, i.e. the chemical wedding, the achievement of the philosopher’s stone, an emblem of unity and harmony restored.

As Thomas Norton writes in *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, “Our Red Man teyneth not / Tyll he teyned be”<sup>1807</sup>. Since the “Red Man” is another epithet alchemists give to the chemical king, or Sol, it follows that it is only when the *rex chymicus* is himself transmuted that, in Paulina’s words, he can “bring Tincture” to others. Interestingly enough, when Leontes has performed a “saint-like sorrow” (V, i, 2), he can symbolically transmute his queen, ‘tingeing’ and, therefore, reviving her, so that his inner re-creation is mirrored in the outer re-creation of Hermione and in the healing of all divisions. In the anonymous alchemical text known as *The Golden Tract*, the male, or the king, is said to transmit his tingeing seed to the female, the queen:

our prepared material is also called male and female [...]. The male rejoices when the female is brought to it, and the female received from the male a tinging seed, and is colored thereby<sup>1808</sup>.

If, in the third act of *The Winter’s Tale*, no tincture comes from Leontes’s barren self, at the

---

<sup>1803</sup> George Ripley, *Cantilena*, cit., pp. 177-78.

<sup>1804</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>1805</sup> The plate is reproduced in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 158. As already noticed, Shakespeare is aware of the alchemical theory of ‘projection’, as testified by the tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cleopatra draws on this alchemical notion when praising the virtues of her beloved, Mark Antony, in alchemical terms. Antony, himself ‘perfect’, is able to ‘gild’ imperfect matter with his tincture: “How much unlike art thou Mark Antony! / Yet, coming from him, that great med’cine hath / With his tinct gilded thee” (I, v, 34-6).

<sup>1806</sup> As claimed by lord Cleomenes while talking to Leontes: “Sir, you have done enough, and have performed / A saint-like sorrow. No fault could you make / Which you have not *redeemed*” (V, i, 1-3, italics mine).

<sup>1807</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 88.

<sup>1808</sup> Anon., *The Golden Tract*, HM 5. “Hoc etiam modo materia nostra praeparata vocatur mas et foemina [...]. Masculus gaudet suscepta foemina et juvatur ab ea, et foemina suscipit a masculo sperma tingens, et coloratur ex eo”. Anon., *Tractatus Aureus*, MH 12.

end of the romance, conversely, the king defines himself as “more stone than it” (V, iii, 38), possibly alluding to his newly-acquired virtue, a power that allows him to project his “tinging seed” on Hermione’s “stone” and accomplish the chemical wedding. The statue-scene does not only display the re-awakening of the queen of Sicily but also, as Kamachi observes, “the ‘second marriage’ between Leontes and Hermione”<sup>1809</sup>.

At the end of the *opus alchymicum*, when “Sublimation” occurs thanks to “temperate hetes of the fyer”<sup>1810</sup>, the soul is re-incorporated within the body:

[...] when these to *Sublymacyon* continuall  
 Be laboryd so, wyth hete both moyst and temperate,  
 That all ys Whyte and purely made spirituall;  
 Than Hevyn uppon Erth must be reitterate,  
 Unto the Sowle wyth the Body be reincorporate<sup>1811</sup>.

Since the body is “spiritualised” and, at the same time, the spirit is made “Corporall”, the alchemical ‘sublimation’ is usually a twofold process:

And Sublymacyon we make for causys thre,  
 The fyrst cause ys to make the Body Spirituall;  
 The second that the Spryt may Corporall be,  
 And becom fyx wyth hyt and substancyall:  
 The Thyrd cause ys that fro hys fylth orygnall  
 He may be clensyd<sup>1812</sup>.

The Arab alchemist Calid argues that the spiritualisation of the body is reflected in the transformation of the spirit into body: “We have taught how a Body is to be changed into a Spirit; and again how the Spirit is to be turned into a Body, viz. how the fixed is made volatile, and the volatile fixed again”<sup>1813</sup>. Leontes’s redemption, in alchemical terms a ‘spiritualisation’, corresponds precisely with the actual transformation of Queen Hermione, her spirit being made into body, thus completing the cycle of the *rota alchemica*, a process that ends with the marriage between the body and the spirit:

First Calcine, and after that Putrefye,  
 Dyssolve, Dystill, Sublyme, Descende, and Fyxe,

<sup>1809</sup> Mitsuru Kamachi, “What’s in a Name?: Hermione and the Hermetic Tradition in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 34.

<sup>1810</sup> John Gower, *Concerning the Philosophers Stone*, cit., TCB 370.

<sup>1811</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 172.

<sup>1812</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1813</sup> Calid, *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie*, cit., p. 121. In another passage, Calid claims that “[W]hosoever therefore can convert the soule into the bodie, the bodie into the soule, and therewith mingle the subtile spirites, shall be able to tinct any body”. *Ibidem*, p. 38. See also ‘fixation’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 78.

With Aquavite of times, both wash and drie.  
And make a marriage the Body and Spirit betwixt<sup>1814</sup>.

In a recent study, the scholar Delsigne reads Leontes's final redemption and Hermione's transformation in the light of alchemical symbolism, defining both events as "hermetic miracles":

As in alchemy, the spiritual transformation in the magician is directly related to the magical metamorphosis of a material object; a change in one causes a parallel change in the other. As Leontes, and to a lesser extent the other audience members, suffers an acute compunction of heart, a piercing of the soul, he is purified and sanctified; this spiritual purification corresponds to the slow, painful softening of the stone statue into Hermione's flesh, both hermetic miracles<sup>1815</sup>.

In an alchemical way, Leontes's "recreation" is concretely accomplished at the end of the romance and is reflected in the actual re-creation of Queen Hermione. As the king himself says in the climactic Act III, when repenting for his faults: "Tears shed there / Shall be my recreation" (III, ii, 236-7). Garber notices that it is the very word "recreation", bearing the meaning of 'comfort-consolation' and of 'creating anew', that connects the paths of the king and the queen of Sicily:

Leontes' word 'recreation' (comfort or consolation) embeds within it the notion of re-creation, and the audience will come to know Hermione as a statue, an artifact that is re-created, through patience and faith, back into the cycle of life and time once again<sup>1816</sup>.

In the same way as Leontes has been "redeemed"<sup>1817</sup>, Hermione herself is "redeemed" from death, as Paulina says when commanding the statue to move: "Stir – nay, come away; / Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him / *Dear life redeems you*" (V, iii, 101-103, italics mine). Kamachi reads Hermione's supposed death as a *descensus ad inferos* and claims that Shakespeare wants the audience to be involved in Hermione's descent into Hades and, therefore, in her final 'resurrection':

By leading his audience to believe in her actual death, Shakespeare is asking them to go through the journey of the Underworld themselves, so that they can participate in the final miracle of 'resurrection' at a deeper level<sup>1818</sup>.

---

<sup>1814</sup> George Ripley, Epistle to King Edward the Fourth, in Id., *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 115.

<sup>1815</sup> Jill Delsigne, "Hermetic Miracles in *The Winter's Tale*", cit., p. 105.

<sup>1816</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, cit., p. 841.

<sup>1817</sup> Cleomenes (to Leontes): "Sir, you have done enough, and have performed / A saint-like sorrow. No fault could you make / Which you have not *redeemed*" (V, i, 1-3, italics mine).

<sup>1818</sup> Mitsuru Kamachi, "What's in a Name?: Hermione and the Hermetic Tradition in *The Winter's Tale*", cit.,

Leontes's *nigredo*-like journey into his own 'blackness', then, is mirrored in Hermione's symbolical descent into Hades, thus recalling not only the symbolism of alchemy but also that of the Eleusinian mysteries.

The *coniunctio*, intended as the union of body and spirit and the reconciliation between the king and the queen, is ready to occur after both Leontes and Hermione have been 're-created'. As pointed out by Abraham, the chemical wedding is precisely the "union of the universal male and female forces, which the alchemists speak of as either the union of spirit and soul, or the union of the already united soul and spirit with the purified body of the Stone"<sup>1819</sup>. The alchemist Edward Kelly remarks that the stone represents the conjunction between the husband and the wife:

Now what is meant by Man and Wife is this,  
Agent and Patient, yet not two but one,  
Even as was Eva, Adams Wife I wisse:  
Flesh of his Flesh and Bone of his Bone,  
Such is the Unionhood of our precious Stone.  
As Adam slept until his Wife was made,  
Even so our Stone, ther can no more be said<sup>1820</sup>.

In *The Winter's Tale*, the true conjunction, defined by Kelly as a "unionhood" between "Man and Wife", is accomplished at the end of the romance, when Hermione's "stone" is concretely transmuted and Leontes is fully "recreated". As a matter of fact, the chemical king is successfully redeemed at the completion of the *opus alchymicum*. As argued by Thomas Norton, "Grace on that King shall descend, / When he ould Manners shall amende"<sup>1821</sup>: according to alchemists, "When there is made a Seperacion [...] there schalbe a glad Coniunccion"<sup>1822</sup>. The culmination of the *opus alchymicum* is actually conceived of as "Gold wythouten stryfe", as "a matrymony pure: / Betweene the husband and the wyfe" so that "none dyvysion / Be there, in the coniunccion"<sup>1823</sup> (see plates from 1 to 17).

During the phase of fixation, the alchemist attracts the celestial influences on earthly matter, thus conjoining heaven with earth and, as the first principle of the *Tabula smaragdina* reads, accomplishing "the miracles of one thing"<sup>1824</sup>. By enticing the spirit of

---

p. 27.

<sup>1819</sup> See 'queen (white)', in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 161-2.

<sup>1820</sup> Edward Kelly, *Kelle's Worke*, cit., TCB 325.

<sup>1821</sup> Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*, cit., TCB 53.

<sup>1822</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin's Dreame*, cit., TCB 258.

<sup>1823</sup> Richard Carpenter, *The Worke of Rich: Carpenter*, TCB 275.

<sup>1824</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula Smaragdina*, cit., in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28: "True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is

life into entering matter, alchemists allegedly collaborate with God and Nature. Paracelsus argues that the latter operates by means of “a universal spirit” and a “divine breath”, a “central and universal fire”:

[Nature] is not visible, though it operates visibly; for it is simply a volatile spirit, fulfilling its office in bodies, and animated by the universal spirit – the divine breath, the central and universal fire, which vivifies all things that exist<sup>1825</sup>.

Ripley maintains that when ‘sublimation’ occurs, “Hevyn uppon Erth must be reiterate”<sup>1826</sup>. The very philosopher’s stone, as already said, is sometimes defined as a “heaven” since it represents the quintessential perfection of the superlunary world and is a reproduction of the fifth element, or aether, i.e. the imperishable substance of which the heavenly bodies are composed. In like manner, Ashmole claims that to “awaken the sleeping spirit which lyes bound up in the prison of the body” is to “fix the celestial influences”:

It is no ordinary *Speculation* to awaken the *sleeping Spirit* which lyes bound up in the straight Prison of the *Body*; to invite and allure that propitious *Spirit* to descend from *Heaven*, and unite itselfe with that which is *Internall*; and there withal to convey a *Vinculum* thereinto, that is of power to hold fast and fix the *Celestiall Influences*<sup>1827</sup>.

It is the very spirit of nature, what Paracelsus calls a “divine breath” and “a universal fire”, that Paulina restores, thus showing how art can help or, in Polixenes’s words, “mend” nature. When Hermione is turned from statue to living woman and is reconciled with her husband, the *coniunctio oppositorum* is fully accomplished: art and nature, life and death, male and female, high and low, earth and heaven are harmoniously united. As Frye observes, in the final scene of *The Winter’s Tale* “there is no magician, no Prospero, only the sense of a participation in the redeeming and reviving power of a nature identified with art, grace, and love”<sup>1828</sup>.

When Paulina breathes the spirit of life into Hermione’s body, then, she does not only conjoin nature and art but also microcosm and macrocosm. Ashmole observes that “to hold fast and fix the Celestiall Influences [...] is *the series and Order of Nature conjoyn’d with Art*: and this, and all this must be effected, before one true Magicall Operation can be

---

below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing”.

<sup>1825</sup> Paracelsus, *A Short Catechism of Alchemy*, HAWP 1: 289.

<sup>1826</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchymie*, cit., TCB 172.

<sup>1827</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses, upon Some part of the preceding Worke*, cit., TCB 465.

<sup>1828</sup> Northrop Frye, “Recognition in *The Winter’s Tale*”, in Maurice Hunt (ed.), *The Winter’s Tale. Critical Essays*, cit., pp. 117-18.

performed”<sup>1829</sup> (*italics mine*). However, as Paracelsus writes, “[o]nly when the time has been fulfilled, and not before, does the course of nature and are set in”<sup>1830</sup>. In *Splendor solis*, Trismosin argues that the alchemical art helps nature until the latter produces, in due time, the proper form: “That by Art may be aided, what Nature decocts and putrefies, until she gives it, in due time, the proper form, and our Art but adapts and prepares the Matter as becomes Nature, for such work”<sup>1831</sup>. In *The Winter’s Tale*, as already noticed, Paulina restores Hermione to life when “’Tis time”:

’Tis time; descend; be stone no more;  
 approach.  
 [...] Stir – nay, come away;  
 Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him  
 Dear life redeems you.  
 (V, iii, 99-103)

As pointed out by Frye, “the final recognition is appropriately that of a frozen statue turning into a living presence, and the appropriate Chorus is Time, the destructive element which is also the only possible representative of the timeless”<sup>1832</sup>. If considering that the philosopher’s stone is a symbol of the never-ending and eternal course of life, of renewal and of the *coniunctio oppositorum* – as the other renowned emblem of alchemy, the *uroboros*, is –, it is evident that alchemical imagery is particularly relevant to the final scene of *The Winter’s Tale*, a play that celebrates the natural, and obliquely alchemical, cycle of death and rebirth, constant dissolution and regeneration (see plate 79).

#### 8.4. ‘My true Paulina, / We shall not marry till thou bidd’st us’. Paulina as Lady Alchymia

---

<sup>1829</sup> Elias Ashmole, *Annotations and Discourses, upon Some part of the preceding Worke*, cit., TCB 465.

<sup>1830</sup> Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>1831</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>1832</sup> Northrop Frye, “Recognition in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 118.

As the scholar William Engel argues, “Paulina patiently manipulates the conditions for actualising the possibilities of transformative and redemptive art”<sup>1833</sup>. In the previous chapters, I have suggested that Paulina, who is the agent of Leontes’s transformation, accompanies the king of Sicily in his healing path towards redemption. More specifically, I have read Paulina’s lines to Leontes – “If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within” (III, ii, 201-3)– in the light of the symbolism of alchemy, arguing that she seems to be instructing the king on the alchemical procedure to follow in order to revive Queen Hermione, a rebirth that will finally lead to the chemical wedding. Furthermore, as already noticed, Paulina condemns Leontes to a phase of expiation, a “winter / In storm perpetual” (III, ii, 209-210), that recalls the stage of *nigredo*<sup>1834</sup>. She is aware that the king needs time before being redeemed and, therefore, reconciled with her queen, thus evoking all those parables that draw on the metaphor of the healing of the *rex chymicus*. She also knows that time and patience are key elements in the journey towards the renewal of the chemical king. The protagonist of *Blomfields Blossoms* is explicitly warned about the importance to patiently tend to the alchemical work: “Night and day thou must tend thy worke buisily, / Having constant patience never to be weary”<sup>1835</sup>. In this respect, it is worth quoting Thomas Vaughan (who published under the pseudonym of ‘Eugenius Philalethes’)<sup>1836</sup>, who argues that women are more apt than men to perform the *opus alchymicum* because “they are more neat and patient”:

As for the work it self, it is no way troublesome, a *Lady* may reade the *Arcadia*, and at the same time attend this *Philosophie* without disturbing her *fansie*. For my part I think *women* are fitter for it than men, for in such things they are more *neat* and *patient*, being used to a small *Chimistrie* and *Sack-possets*<sup>1837</sup>.

Interestingly enough, in Act III Paulina convinces Leontes and all the bystanders that the queen of Sicily is dead, thus evidently influencing the course of coming events. At the news of Hermione’s fainting, the lady urges the king to “Look down / And see what death is doing” (III, ii, 145-46). Before Leontes’s belief that Hermione’s “heart is but o’ercharged” (III, ii, 148) and his request to “apply to her / Some remedies for life” (III, ii,

---

<sup>1833</sup> William E. Engel, “*Kinetic emblems and memory images in The Winter’s Tale*”, in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>1834</sup> See section 5.4. ‘Therefore betake thee / To nothing but despair’. Leontes’s *nigredo*.

<sup>1835</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 310.

<sup>1836</sup> See Jennifer Speake, “Vaughan, Thomas”, ODNB 56: 204.

<sup>1837</sup> Eugenius Philalethes, *Magia Adamica: Or, The Antiquitie of Magic*, in Id., *The Man-Mouse Taken in a Trap, and tortur’d to death for gnawing the Margins of Eugenius Philalethes*, London, 1650, p. 118.

150-51), Paulina firmly replies that there is no doubt about the queen's death: "I say she's dead – I'll swear it" (III, ii, 200). Pilgrim notices that Paulina is moved throughout the play by the "definite intention of preparing him [Leontes] for Hermione's return"<sup>1838</sup>. It is not a chance that it is only after Leontes submits himself to a *nigredo*-like phase of 'cleansing' that she allows the 'chemical wedding' between the king and queen, eventually redeeming Hermione: "I'll fill your grave up. [...] / Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him / Dear life redeems you" (V, iii, 101-3). It is legitimate to believe that throughout the romance Paulina acts in the light of the alchemical theory according to which "When there is made a Seperacion [...] there schalbe a glad Coniuncion"<sup>1839</sup>.

One of the questions which scholars and readers of the play have been most concerned with regards the sort of art Paulina personifies. As already said, Hermione's resurrection alludes to the *Asclepius* and, therefore, to Hermetic philosophy. Moreover, Paulina herself employs a kind of language that, even though devoid of any specific significance to modern readers, would have been highly evocative of alchemy to Shakespeare's audience<sup>1840</sup>. In order to shed light on the connections between Paulina and alchemy, it is worth considering the role of the female dimension within alchemical imagery. Alchemy is constantly regarded as a nurse and a helper of nature, a *ministra naturae*. Furthermore, as already noticed, in the course of the *opus alchymicum* the male practitioner is required to imitate the process by means of which life is created within the female womb: the adept assumes a maternal role, allowing the philosophical child to grow within the alembic that operates as a female uterus (see plates 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, and 62). As Ray observes, the significant role of women is especially evident in alchemical imagery:

The centrality of women to alchemical experiment is strikingly evident in the gendered imagery of alchemy itself, which, in addition to establishing female origins through figures such as Maria the Prophetess, is often depicted as 'women's work' [...] or as a gestational process that takes place in a womblike alchemical vessel<sup>1841</sup>.

Interestingly enough, a number of contemporary illustrations portray the art of alchemy as a lady. In a treatise by Leonhard Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia*, the alchemical art is clearly represented in the shape of a woman. The text was published in 1570 and 1574, the two editions containing two slightly different versions of the same plate: in both engravings

<sup>1838</sup> Richard Pilgrim, *You Precious Winners All*, cit., p. 62.

<sup>1839</sup> John Dastin, *Dastin's Dreame*, cit., TCB 258.

<sup>1840</sup> See section 5.3. "If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within. Leontes as Rex Chymicus"

<sup>1841</sup> Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy. Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015, p. 5.

‘Alchimia’ appears while standing between the opposites of the sun and moon (see plates 56 and 57). That the representation of the art of alchemy in female terms was well known also in England is attested by a plate in Konrad Gesner’s *The newe Iewell of Health*, the English translation by George Baker of Gesner’s *Thesaurus Euonymi Philiatri de remediis secretis* (1552)<sup>1842</sup>. Baker’s version of Gesner’s work was published in London in 1570, 1576, and 1599, this time with the title of *The Practice of the new and old Physicke*. The title-page of Baker’s English translations of Gesner’s text, whose numerous publications are evidence of their wide diffusion in the late sixteenth century, shows Lady Alchimy who, as in the case of Thurneysser’s ‘Alchymya’, stands between the sun and moon, carrying a still and a poker in her hands. Several other instruments belonging to the alchemist’s apparatus, among which are alembics of different forms and a bellows, are scattered on the floor (see plates 58 and 59). In a letter addressed to Lady Knowles, John Thornborough, Queen Elizabeth’s chaplain in ordinary, explicitly invokes “Lady *Alcumy*”, thus further testifying to the association of the art with the female dimension: “I thought good to write to your Ladishippe how mucche the Lady *Alcumy* rejoyceth. That a Lady of your birth and worth will ... knock at her first and outmost gate”<sup>1843</sup>.

Pereira remarks that, according to the complex symbolism of alchemy, the union with the feminine principle usually stands for the return to the *prima materia*, that is the source of all life: it symbolises the possibility of rebirth, a phase that, however, is accomplished through ‘death’<sup>1844</sup>, in the same way as the seed of grain ‘dies’ into the womb of Nature before it grows. As Eliade masterfully demonstrates, alchemical symbolism is deeply rooted in the archaic and sacred rituals related to Mother Earth<sup>1845</sup>. The nuptial iconography, that epitomises the necessary balance of male and female forces, a conception that is at the core of alchemy, is depicted in a variety of ways: it is a wedding between a king and a queen, a *coniunctio* of brother and sister, as in the vision of Arisleus, or an incestuous union between the chemical king and his mother, as in Ripley’s *Cantilena* and Dastin’s *Visio*. The reconciliation with the feminine, then, represents the final end of the alchemical quest, i.e. the marriage between the artifex and nature: “La *coniunctio* degli opposti, che è al cuore dell’alchimia, sarebbe dunque l’unione ‘nuziale’ dell’artefice,

<sup>1842</sup> See Gustav Ungerer, “Baker, George”, ODNB 3: 371.

<sup>1843</sup> John Thornborough, *Letter of Chemistry to the right Honourable the Lady Knowles* (British Library, MS Sloane 1799, fols. 75r-76r), quoted by Jayne Elizabeth Archer, “*Rudenesse itselſe she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia”, cit., p. 47. As documented by Usher, Thornborough cultivated a lifelong interest in alchemy and published a work on alchemy and chemistry entitled *Lithotheorikos*. See Brett Usher, “Thornborough, John”, ODNB 54: 591.

<sup>1844</sup> Michela Pereira, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, cit., p. L.

<sup>1845</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Forgeons et alchimistes*, Flammarion, Paris, 1956 and Id., *Le mythe de l’alchimie*, translated by Ilena Tacou, in *Cahiers de l’Herne*, 33, 1978, pp. 157-67.

scienziato e filosofo, col mondo naturale”<sup>1846</sup>. The hermaphrodite is actually the most important symbol of alchemy, along with the caduceus and the *uroboros*, and exemplifies the so-called *rebis*, the perfect union of male and female<sup>1847</sup>.

The art of alchemy is regularly identified also with Wisdom. In Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens*, the engraving accompanying emblem 26 shows Lady Sapientia at whose back is the *arbor scientiae*, i.e. the Tree of Philosophy (see plate 54). The latter is sometimes described and portrayed as the tree of the sun and moon, that represents the contraries that have to be reconciled and is, therefore, a symbol of the philosopher’s stone<sup>1848</sup> (see plate 64). Alchemists constantly identify their art with wisdom, an association that they trace back to Solomon, who was endowed with the right Hermetic knowledge that allowed him to be initiated to alchemical arcana<sup>1849</sup>. The protagonist of the aforementioned alchemical parable *Blomfields Blossoms* meets *Lady Philosophy*, “A Lady most excellent”<sup>1850</sup>, in his journey towards the Campe of Philosophy. The latter first introduces the narrator to *Raymund Lullie*, and then leads him into “her Garden planted deliciously”, where he can marvel at *The Tree Philosophicall*: “Among the faire Trees one Tree in speciall, / Most vernant and pleasant appeared to my sight. / A name inscribed, *The Tree Philosophicall*”<sup>1851</sup>. Further dwelling on the identification of alchemy and wisdom, the treatise *Aurora consurgens*, as already pointed out, is opened by a description of a lady who represents *Sapientia*: “All good things came to me together with her, that Wisdom of the south”<sup>1852</sup>.

In *The Winter’s Tale*, wise Paulina evidently guides Leontes throughout his journey of expiation and inner growth. As already said, “the play is also a representation of the king’s search for that special wisdom of which Paulina speaks”<sup>1853</sup>. At the very beginning of the romance, she introduces herself as the king’s physician:

Good my liege, I come –  
And I beseech you hear me, who professes  
Myself your loyal servant, your physician,

---

<sup>1846</sup> Michela Pereira, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, cit., pp. xxx-xxxi. See the plate accompanying Maier’s emblem XLII in *Atalanta fugiens*. The illustration shows the male alchemist who follows Dame Nature (see plate 63).

<sup>1847</sup> Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, cit., p. 111: “Sol and Luna are often portrayed as a hermaphroditic brother-sister pair or *rebis*, sometimes as an incestuous pair (and then as King and Queen, or Prince and Princess)”.

<sup>1848</sup> See ‘philosophical tree’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., pp. 150-51.

<sup>1849</sup> H.M.E. De Jong, Commentary to Emblem 26, in Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., pp. 198-99.

<sup>1850</sup> William Blomfield, *Blomfields Blossoms*, cit., TCB 310.

<sup>1851</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1852</sup> Thomas Aquinas (attributed to), *Aurora consurgens*, cit., p. 71. See also ‘sapientia’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>1853</sup> Scott Colley, “Leontes’s search for wisdom in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 43.

Your most obedient counsellor.  
(II, iii, 51-64)

A few lines above, Paulina declares to have come “with words as medicinal as true” in order to “purge him of that humour / That presses him from sleep” (II, iii, 36-38). It is worth pointing out that in alchemical literature “the work of cleansing and purifying the matter of the Stone” is defined as ‘women’s work’<sup>1854</sup>. In the light of alchemical imagery and language, then, the fact that Paulina accompanies the king of Sicily in his process of ‘cleansing’ is remarkable. As a matter of fact, alchemists compare the phase of purification, also known as ‘ablution’, to the work of women washing sheets (see plates 50 and 53). The metaphor recurs in *Tractatus Opvs Myliervm, et Ludus puerorum*, a Latin treatise collected in *Artis auriferae*. The text begins by explicitly comparing the *opus alchymicum* to both the work of women and the play of children: “Operis processio dicitur omne opus mulierum, et ludus puerorum”<sup>1855</sup>. The same imagery is to be found in two illustrations of *Splendor solis* (see plates 53 and 78). In the commentary that accompanies plate 20, Trismosin highlights the association between the *opus alchymicum* and the *ludus puerorum*: “Wherefore is this Art compared to the play of children, who when they play, turn undermost that which before was uppermost”<sup>1856</sup>. The author suggests that, since the alchemical work presupposes constant reversals of state and the alternation of phases of dissolution and solution, it evokes precisely the games of children, who, as Trismosin writes, constantly “turn undermost that which before was uppermost”<sup>1857</sup>. In another plate of *Splendor solis*, Trismosin dwells upon the metaphor of the *opus mulierum*: the illustration actually depicts several women while washing and drying some linen (see plate 53). In the ensuing commentary the author explains the comparison between women’s work and the *opus alchymicum*: “And this is why this Art is compared to Woman’s Work, which consists in cooking and roasting until it is done”<sup>1858</sup>. The *opus* actually entails some operations, such as cooking and washing, that inevitably recall the chores women daily perform in their households. The illustration that accompanies emblem 3 in *Atalanta fugiens* portrays a woman who is “cleaning dirty laundry by pouring hot water over it”<sup>1859</sup> (see plate 50). The motto urges the alchemist to do as the lady in the plate does: “Go to the woman who washes the sheets and do as she does”<sup>1860</sup>. In a similar way, emblem 22 draws

---

<sup>1854</sup> See ‘women’s work’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 219.

<sup>1855</sup> *Tractatus Opvs Myliervm, et Ludus puerorum dictus*, AA 2: 171.

<sup>1856</sup> Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis*, cit., p. 39.

<sup>1857</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1858</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>1859</sup> Michael Maier, Epigram to Emblem III, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>1860</sup> Motto accompanying Emblem III, *Ibidem*, p. 66. Warlick remarks that the scene portrayed in the

on the imagery of women's house duties, especially cooking: "When you have obtained the white lead, then do women's work, that is to say: COOK"<sup>1861</sup>. The illustration portrays a pregnant woman standing before a stove (see plate 51). As Warlick highlights, Maier is re-laborating on sources that are mainly collected in *Artis auriferae*, where the *opus alchymicum* is most regularly defined as *opus mulierum*<sup>1862</sup>.

As already said, Thomas Vaughan claims that women are best suited than men to accomplish the alchemical work, evidently dwelling upon a metaphorical apparatus that is to be detected in precedent alchemical writings. Archer observes that even though Vaughan's remark might seem to debase women's abilities, alluding to the idea that the operations of the *opus* are so simple that they can be compared to cooking and washing, the "instinctual wisdom" traditionally attributed to women "could potentially put [them] in a privileged position with respect to chymical knowledge"<sup>1863</sup>. Discussing the role of women and their representation in the literature of alchemy, Warlick points out that even though "genre scenes of women" were present in other emblem books, in fact, "their comic, misogynist overtones were not shared by alchemical emblems", that, instead, suggest that domestic activities were essential to the development of alchemy<sup>1864</sup>. With the progress of the Scientific Revolution, however, "female practitioners would appear only at the periphery"<sup>1865</sup>. If women emerge as the undisputed protagonists in a number of alchemical illustrations, there also exists a set of plates that, as Warlick observes, longs for a "balanced partnership of masculine and feminine energies needed to engage in the work"<sup>1866</sup>. The text Warlick refers to is *Mutus Liber* (1677), that, as already noticed, is collected in Manget's *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*. The scholar observes that the iconographical sequence in *Mutus Liber* shows that "a man and a woman work together in the laboratory and in the fields to complete the lunar and solar cycles of the work"<sup>1867</sup>. K. P. Long actually remarks that the alchemical writings that appeared from the mid-sixteenth century emphasise the *coniunctio* of male and female, a conjunction that is symbolised by

---

illustration that accompanies emblem 3 in *Atalanta fugiens* "parallels the transition from the black phase to white, as women wash dirty laundry by pouring hot water over the clothes, removing the dirt to make them clean". M. E. Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems", in Alison Adams and Stanton J. Linden (eds.), *Emblems and Alchemy*, cit., p. 39.

<sup>1861</sup> Michael Maier, Motto accompanying Emblem XXII, in Id., *Atalanta fugiens*, cit., p. 176.

<sup>1862</sup> M. E. Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems", cit., p. 35.

<sup>1863</sup> Jayne E. Archer, "Women and Chymistry in Early Modern England: the Manuscript Receipt Book (c. 1616) of Sarah Wiggess", in Kathleen P. Long (ed.), *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2010, p. 194.

<sup>1864</sup> M. E. Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems", cit., pp. 46-47.

<sup>1865</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47.

<sup>1866</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>1867</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 44-46.

the hermaphrodite, an increasingly important figure in alchemical works and iconography<sup>1868</sup>. In another essay, the scholar highlights that, unlike contemporary treatises on anatomy and medicine, alchemical texts of the early modern period focused on the representation of “the female body and the feminized male body”, thus offering an alternative view to that regarding the male dimension as the norm<sup>1869</sup>.

In her role of ‘healer’, Paulina recalls another Shakespearean heroine: Helena. As already said, alchemy is particularly relevant to the comedy *All’s Well That Ends Well*. David Haley discusses the character of Helena, the “artifex” and “prophetess” of the drama<sup>1870</sup> and the agent of the king’s healing, in alchemical terms. Haley highlights that “alchemical allegories were an open mystery to the sixteenth-century reader”, who would have connected the sickness of the king of France in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well* with those alchemical parables that describe the ‘transmutation’ of the *rex chymicus* as a metaphor for the *opus alchymicum*<sup>1871</sup>. According to Floyd-Wilson, the king’s healing in *All’s Well* depends upon “an experiential knowledge of recipes that anticipates an emerging scientific culture”<sup>1872</sup>. In particular, the scholar observes that in Renaissance England a close connection existed between “occult knowledge and female secrets”<sup>1873</sup> and that “Helena herself may embody occult properties, thus returning *All’s Well That Ends Well* to a world of natural magic”<sup>1874</sup>. Floyd-Wilson concludes that Shakespeare’s comedy “captures a transitional period in early modern England when an emergent scientific world-view had yet to be disentangled from its natural magical origins”<sup>1875</sup>.

As far as alchemy is concerned, Archer highlights that the attribution, “whether mythical or historical”, of a number of alchemical texts to female authors “acknowledged the centrality of the feminine principle within alchemical language, knowledge, and imagery”<sup>1876</sup>. Maria Prophetissa and Cleopatra, for instance, were regularly quoted also by Renaissance alchemists as two authorities of the alchemical art. Shakespeare himself is aware of the association between Cleopatra and alchemical knowledge when making the

---

<sup>1868</sup> Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, cit., 110: “alchemical works published from the mid-sixteenth century on [...] emphasize the *conjunction* of male and female, the union of spiritual and physical, as necessary for the perfection of matter. [...] The hermaphrodite, an increasingly important figure in alchemical works, was the symbol of this necessary but complex *conjunction* and balancing of male and female”.

<sup>1869</sup> See Kathleen P. Long, “Odd Bodies: Reviewing Corporal Difference in Early Modern Alchemy”, in Id. (ed.), *Gender and Scientific Discourse*, cit., p. 63 and p. 66.

<sup>1870</sup> David Haley, *Shakespeare’s Courtly Mirror*, cit., p. 92.

<sup>1871</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>1872</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>1873</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>1874</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>1875</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>1876</sup> Jayne Elizabeth Archer, “*Rudeness itself she doth refine*. Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia”, cit., p. 47.

Egyptian queen pronounce the celebrated lines that praise Mark Antony in alchemical terms: “How much unlike art thou Mark Antony! / Yet, coming from him, that great med’cine hath / With his tinct gilded thee” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I, v, 34-6). Most interestingly, in Renaissance England real women were associated with alchemical practices. It is not a chance that George Baker dedicated *The newe Iewell of Health* to the Countess of Oxford, Anne Cecil de Vere:

Wherefore I at this time to pleasure my cuntrye and friendes, haue published this newe *Iewell* vnder your Honourable protection [...] because your wit, learning, and authoritie hath great force and strength in repressing the more easily bee defended against Sycophants and fault finders<sup>1877</sup>.

As Floyd-Wilson notices, “the experiential knowledge of nature’s secrets [...] had long been associated with women”<sup>1878</sup>. Queen Elizabeth herself, as already pointed out, was addressed to as both the supreme patron and a symbol of the alchemical art<sup>1879</sup>. Mary Sidney Herbert, sister of the poet Philip Sidney, was equally renowned for her alchemical interests, as testified by the following excerpt from John Aubrey’s biography:

In her time Wilton house was like a College, there were so many learned and ingeniose persons. She was the greatest patronesse of witt and learning of any lady in her time. She was a great chymist and spent yearly a great deale in that study. She kept for her laborator in the house Adrian Gilbert (vulgarly called Dr. Gilbert), halfe brother to Sir Walter Raleigh, who was a great chymist in those dayes. [...] She also gave an honourable yearly pension to Dr. <Thomas> Mouffett, [...]. Also one ... Boston, a good chymist<sup>1880</sup>.

The antiquarian and biographer Aubrey clearly documents the Countess of Pembroke’s alchemical studies, which she cultivated at Wilton house. Another well-known lady who dedicated herself to alchemy was Margaret Russell, Countess of Cumberland, who was a “lover” of alchemical experimentations, thanks to which she produced “excellent medicines”<sup>1881</sup>.

---

<sup>1877</sup> George Baker, “To the Honourable, Vertuous, and his singular good Lady, the Noble Countesse of Oxeforde”, in Konrad Gesner, *The newe Iewell of Health, wherein is containd the most excellent Secretes of Phisicke and Philosophie, deuided into fower Bookes*. [...] Gathered out of the best and most approued Authors, by that excellent Doctor Gesnerus. Also the Pictures, and maner to make the Vessels, Furnaces, and other Instrumentes therevnto belonging. Faithfully corrected and published in Englishe, by George Baker, Chirurgian, Henrie Denham, London, 1576.

<sup>1878</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>1879</sup> See sections 3.1. “Alchemy in Elizabethan England. The Historical Context” and 3.2. “Queen Elizabeth as a Symbol of Alchemical Art”.

<sup>1880</sup> John Aubrey, *Brief Lives, chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the Years 1669 & 1696*, edited from the author’s manuscripts by Andrew Clark, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1898, vol. I, p. 311.

<sup>1881</sup> Jayne E. Archer, “Women and Chymistry in Early Modern England”, cit., p. 197.

On the whole, knowledge of the art of distillation, along with the ability of preparing medicines and drugs, was thought to be an essential part of a woman's education, thus attesting to the connection between housekeeping and, therefore, women and 'chymistry', a term that, as Principe states, designates "*the sum total of alchemical/chemical topics as understood in the seventeenth century*"<sup>1882</sup>. Competence in chymistry was not only confined to noble women, but, rather, belonged to the training of housewives in general: "the early modern housewife was an important producer and consumer of chymical literature, knowledge, and practices"<sup>1883</sup>. As a matter of fact, Archer points out that "in early modern England natural philosophy and housewifery were believed to be related at a fundamental level"<sup>1884</sup>. In like manner, in her recent study on the relationships between alchemy and the female world in Renaissance Italy, Ray argues that women devoted themselves to alchemy not only in court contexts but also in the private space of their households:

Not only did women engage in the quest to produce alchemical gold, often in court contexts, but they also incorporated alchemical practice into their quotidian lives, most especially with regard to the management of the household and the care of their own bodies and those of their families<sup>1885</sup>.

In order to better understand the relationship between alchemical knowledge and the female sphere, it is worth pointing out that alchemy comprehended a wide variety of practices and was not only concerned with metal working. Alchemists were also healers and physicians, engaged with the preparation of other products besides the elixir of life, as John French argues in *The Art of Distillation*:

Now we must consider that there are degrees in this art, for there is the accomplishment of the elixir it self, and there is the discovery of many excellent essences, magisteries, and spirits, etc., which abundantly recompence the discoverers thereof with profit, health, and delight<sup>1886</sup>.

The preparation of oils and distilled waters created "a group of intermediary distillation

---

<sup>1882</sup> Lawrence M. Principe, *The Aspiring Adept*, cit., p. 9 (emphasis in original). Principe also adds that "The term *chymistry* is extremely convenient for describing a broad historical domain as it was contemporaneously denominated. It avoids the connections implicit in the use of either *chemistry* or *alchemy*".

<sup>1883</sup> Jayne E. Archer, "Women and Chymistry in Early Modern England", cit., p. 192.

<sup>1884</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.

<sup>1885</sup> Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>1886</sup> John French, *The Art of Distillation or A Treatise of the choisest Spagyricall Preparations performed by way of Distillation, being partly taken out of the most select Chymicall Authors of severall Languages, and partly out of the Authors manuell Experience*, Printed by Richard Cotes, London, 1651, sig. A1v quoted by Long, *Gender and Scientific Discourse*, p. 208.

products between the raw material and the elixir”, as remarked by Multhauf<sup>1887</sup>. It follows that “quintessences of simples, balms, and compound medicines of manifold powers”<sup>1888</sup>, as those women themselves created in their households, could be obtained from varied alchemical procedures. As stated by Ray, in sixteenth-century books of secrets, for instance, “alchemy, popular medicine, and the manufacture of cosmetics are all closely and inextricably intertwined”<sup>1889</sup>. Notwithstanding this, Archer observes that the role of English women in the field of early modern chymistry has been largely forgotten, thus inevitably contributing to spread the view that alchemy was a ‘male’ activity. However, the scholar continues, “[t]he stillroom (or ‘distillatorie’) and the manuscript receipt book were two of the most important sites of female creativity in early modern England”<sup>1890</sup>. In like manner, focusing on women’s contribution to the development of medicine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Harkness claims that they “were at the very heart of London’s medical world. They were not marginal, they were not laughable, and they were not expendable”<sup>1891</sup>.

All this considered, Paulina can legitimately be interpreted as a personification of the alchemical art and, therefore, as a healer, a woman who employs her alchemical and Hermetic knowledge to cure Leontes. It is worth recalling that the art of alchemy is traditionally considered as a helper of nature, that other “Dame”<sup>1892</sup> with which Lady Alchemy cooperates. When Paulina describes herself as a physician, come to Leontes’s court in order to provide her lord with a remedy to cure his sleeplessness and, therefore, with some “sleep”, one might think of a passage in *King Lear*, where the doctor in charge of sick Lear defines repose as “Our foster *nurse* of nature” (IV, iv, 11; italics mine). Paulina, who immediately casts herself as a protector of Perdita – emblem of that conflation of art and nature that alchemy itself represents<sup>1893</sup> – and then, in the final act, lifts “the princess from the earth” so that “she might no more be in danger of losing” (V, ii, 75-7), gives a further proof of her acting as a ‘nurse’: fostering the process of renewing matter and retracing the steps of “great creating Nature” (IV, iv, 87), Paulina’s actions

---

<sup>1887</sup> Robert Multhauf, “The Significance of Distillation in Renaissance Medical Chemistry”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* (30), 1956, pp. 330-31 quoted by Jayne E. Archer, “Women and Chymistry in Early Modern England”, cit., pp. 207-208.

<sup>1888</sup> Long, *Gender and Scientific Discourse*, p. 216.

<sup>1889</sup> Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>1890</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 215.

<sup>1891</sup> Deborah E. Harkness, “A View from the Streets: Women and Medical Work in Elizabethan London”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, 2008, p. 84.

<sup>1892</sup> Elias Ashmole, Prolegomena, TCB sig. B4v: “*There you may meet with the Genii of our Hermetique Philosophers, learne the Language in which they woo’d and courted Dame Nature*”.

<sup>1893</sup> See chapter 7: “The art itself is nature”. The Alchemical Conception of Art and Nature in *The Winter’s Tale*.

recall one of the principles of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, i.e. “The father thereof is the Sun, the mother the Moon. [...] the earth is the nurse thereof”<sup>1894</sup>. According to alchemical symbolism, the philosophical child is the product of the union between the father, the Sun, and the mother, the Moon, a conjunction that is accomplished through a third element, Nature, the ‘nurse’ of the ‘philosophical child’. At the beginning of the play, Paulina, addressing herself to “good goddess Nature” (II, iii, 102) and exclaiming “let’t not be doubted / I shall do good” (II, ii, 52-53), commits to a “great errand” (II, ii, 45), as suggested by Hermione’s lady-in-waiting Emilia:

Most worthy madam,  
Your honour and your goodness is so evident  
That your free undertaking cannot miss  
A thriving issue; there is no lady living  
So meet for this great errand.  
(II, ii, 41-45)

I believe that, employing her art to “mend” the court of Sicily and, at the same time, associating herself with Mother Earth, Paulina’s “errand” consists precisely in promoting the reunion between the royal couple, thus perpetuating nature’s creative action and personifying the role of alchemy.

Further underlining the centrality of the female dimension in the redemptive path of the play and her leading role in the king’s healing, Paulina remarks that the task of curing Leontes from his “unsafe lunes” (II, ii, 29) must be performed by a woman: “The office / Becomes a woman best; I’ll take’t upon me” (II, ii, 30-31). Leontes himself in Act V, at the end of his journey, acknowledges Paulina to be his healer, both physical and spiritual: “O grave and good Paulina, the great comfort / That I have had of thee!” (V, iii, 1-2). The king finally resolves to comply with Paulina’s instructions and promises that he shall not marry until she establishes that the right time has come. Again, the lady demonstrates to be perfectly conscious of the course the events should take and, as an alchemist who patiently follows the rhythm of dissolution and reunion of the *opus alchymicum*, prophetically claims that Leontes will re-marry only when the first queen, Hermione, is restored to life:

LEONTES: My true Paulina,  
We shall not marry till thou bidd’st us.

PAULINA: That

---

<sup>1894</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula smaragdina*, in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 28.

Shall be when your first queen's again in breath.  
Never till then.  
(V, i, 80-84)

As “a medial and mediating term”<sup>1895</sup>, Paulina is aware of the fact that the king will be reunited with his seemingly lost queen only after a period of separation and penitence. A number of alchemical plates actually show the chemical couple united in a grave, thus paradoxically symbolising union and dissolution, life and death at the same time (see plates 43 and 45).

Chiara Crisciani remarks that alchemy and prophecy are closely associated in a number of alchemical writings, an identification that is to be found in its early stages in Arabic and Greek sources and that reaches a climax in the alchemical treatises of the late Middle-Ages<sup>1896</sup>. More specifically, the scholar observes that alchemy can be rightly defined as a kind of “concrete prophecy” because the alchemist, thanks to his prophetic-like knowledge of natural operations, actively “collaborates in the perfecting of nature and matter”<sup>1897</sup>. The alchemist is “a minister of God and His medium” and also a “cocreator”<sup>1898</sup>:

if prophecy is knowledge, interpretation and annunciation of the future, but also and above all insight into the *occulta*, these features belong to the knowledge of the alchemists too. They must reach the deepest and most secret principles of nature<sup>1899</sup>.

Moving both from the identification of alchemy and prophecy and from the conception, particularly widespread in early modern England, that women were “instruments of occult knowledge”<sup>1900</sup> and favoured vehicles for the understanding of nature’s unintelligible processes, Paulina’s role in *The Winter’s Tale* becomes even more significant. As a matter of fact, she is the only one who shares Apollo’s prophetic knowledge. In the third act, Hermione’s innocence is established and the prophecy reported in the scroll brought to Sicily from Delphos foretells that “the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found” (III, ii, 132-133)<sup>1901</sup>. Paulina, fully aware that goodness will be finally

---

<sup>1895</sup> Ian McAdam, “Magic and Gender in Late Shakespeare”, in Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane (eds.), *Late Shakespeare*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>1896</sup> See Chiara Crisciani, “*Opus and sermo*: The Relationship between Alchemy and Prophecy (12th – 14th Centuries)”, *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 13, n. 1, 2008, pp. 4-24.

<sup>1897</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>1898</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1899</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>1900</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, cit., p. 15: “As both occult objects and instruments of occult knowledge, women hold a crucial but often obscured position in the history of science”.

<sup>1901</sup> The Sicilian lords Cleomenes and Dion are asked by King Leontes to journey to Apollo’s temple, in the

restored and that “the gods / Will have fulfilled their secret purposes” (V, i, 35-6), foreshadows the recovery of the king’s seemingly lost daughter, employing a prophetic-like language: “Care not for issue, / The Crown will find an heir” (V, i, 46-7). However, she also knows that in order for Apollo’s prophecy to be actualised, certain conditions have to be met. As Pilgrim puts it, Hermione could not return to her husband “until penitence had done its work”<sup>1902</sup>. As a helper of Apollo and, therefore, as a mediator between the earthly and the divine realms, Paulina finally ‘transmutes’ the court of Sicily into a microcosm of harmony and love, where all previous ‘differences’ are mended, thus actively collaborating in the perfecting of nature and matter, as alchemists themselves do.

Some critics have read Paulina as a feminine counterpart of Saint Paul. McAdam, for instance, remarks that she was “so named as a reflection of St Paul”<sup>1903</sup>. Pilgrim, who describes the lady as “the ‘priestess’ of the oracle” and “a mouthpiece of the divine”<sup>1904</sup>, notices that several connections can be traced between her and Pauline doctrines. It is especially St Paul’s theory of Christ’s resurrection, as expressed in the first letter to the Corinthians, that has led scholars to see some links with Paulina’s agency in *The Winter’s Tale*<sup>1905</sup>. In the same way as Paul presented the miracle of the resurrection, Paulina displays the ‘resurrection’ of Hermione in the final act of the play. The languages of alchemy and religion were complexly intertwined in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Martin Luther himself, as already noted, associates alchemy with “the resurrection of the dead”<sup>1906</sup>. Pereira actually observes that alchemical philosophy is deeply rooted in religious thought as, for instance, the Pauline topic of the extension of grace to all Creation<sup>1907</sup>, a theme with which alchemists were particularly concerned since their primary purpose was the perfection and redemption of the earthly dimension. Given the constant conflation of

---

Greek island of Delos, known as Delphos in Shakespeare’s time: “Yet for a greater confirmation – / For in an act of this importance ’twere / Most piteous to be wild – I have dispatched in post / To sacred Delphos, to Apollo’s temple, / Cleomenes and Dion, whom you know / Of stuffed sufficiency. Now from the oracle / They will bring all, whose spiritual counsel had, / Shall stop or spur me. Have I done well?” (II, i, 180-187).

<sup>1902</sup> Richard Pilgrim, *You Precious Winners All*, cit., p. 62.

<sup>1903</sup> Ian McAdam, “Magic and Gender in Late Shakespeare”, cit., p. 255.

<sup>1904</sup> Richard Pilgrim, *You Precious Winners All*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>1905</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15: 12-14: “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the Dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the Dead? But if there be no resurrection of the Dead, then is Christ not risen. And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain”.

<sup>1906</sup> See section 3.2 “Queen Elizabeth as a Symbol of Alchemical Art”.

<sup>1907</sup> Michela Pereira, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Alchimia*, cit., p. xvii: “[l’alchimia] Ha prima di tutto un contenuto religioso, perché la prospettiva di perfezione che ne è alla base presenta un profondo parallelismo con le tematiche soteriologiche dell’epoca delle origini e, in quanto progetto di salvezza della materia e del corpo, mostra affinità con tematiche cabalistiche, ma anche con il motivo paolino dell’estensione della salvezza a tutto il creato”. Pereira refers, in particular, to Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Because the creature it selfe also shall bee deliuered from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious libertie of the children of God”. See Romans 8: 21.

alchemical and biblical language, then, I believe that an interpretation of Paulina in religious terms does not exclude, but, rather, reinforce, a reading of her role within the play in the light of alchemical philosophy.

In her work *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, Yates wonders whether Shakespeare is employing “the Hermetic life-infusing magic as a metaphor of the artistic process”: “‘Proceed’, commands the King. How does Shakespeare intend the allusion to be taken? Does he use the Hermetic life-infusing magic as a metaphor of the artistic process? Here we become involved in deep debate, which I leave on one side”<sup>1908</sup>. Paulina, as Engel points out, is evidently a “crafty counterpart”<sup>1909</sup> of the playwright. She employs her magical art and her prophetic knowledge to influence the course of events. She acts upon the very processes of life and death, showing that she has gained insight into nature’s *occulta*, and, most importantly, recovers the feminine principle and reintegrates it with its male opposite, seemingly prompted by the non-dichotomous rationale of the alchemists: “The recuperation of feminine nature in the play, and the undoing of the demonization of (hetero)sexuality, is largely due to the agency of Paulina”<sup>1910</sup>. As remarked by McAdam, “[t]he statue of the supposedly dead Hermione serves as a final dismissal of male narcissism, the tendency to demonise or objectify women – to obscure their own personhood or subjectivity”<sup>1911</sup>, thus evoking the alchemists’ tendency to efface gender boundaries<sup>1912</sup>. Paulina performs the role of a holy and prophetic figure who accomplishes the alchemical work of distilling goodness out of evil, somehow evoking Shakespeare’s lines from *Henry V*: “There is some soul of goodness in things evill, / Would men observingly distill it out” (IV, i, 4-5). If all the other characters are ‘acted upon’, subjects of her art, Paulina acts like a dramatist and directs the alchemical performance: she brings to completion the redemptive cycle of the play, that ends where it began, at the court of Sicily, thus perfectly retracing the *rota*, the circular course of the *opus alchymicum* and of nature. As Artaud notices, “there is a mysterious identity of essence between the principle of theatre and that of alchemy”<sup>1913</sup>. In *The Winter's Tale*, in particular, the transformative art of alchemy and of drama correspond and their healing effects are actualised by Paulina.

In order to highlight Paulina’s centrality in the romance, I would like to consider

---

<sup>1908</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, cit., pp. 90-91.

<sup>1909</sup> William E. Engel, “*The Winter's Tale*: Kinetic emblems and memory images in *The Winter's Tale*”, cit., p. 87.

<sup>1910</sup> Ian McAdam, “Magic and Gender in Late Shakespeare”, cit., p. 255.

<sup>1911</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1912</sup> See Kathleen P. Long, “Odd Bodies: Reviewing Corporal Difference in Early Modern Alchemy”, cit., p. 65.

<sup>1913</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, translated from the French by Mary Caroline Richards, Grove Press, New York, 1958, p. 48 (Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1964, vol. 4).

Kenneth Branagh's production of *The Winter's Tale*, that I saw in January 2016 at the Garrick Theatre, in London. In this representation, the role of Paulina, played by Judi Dench, is particularly stressed, because Paulina herself also speaks the words of devouring and redeeming Time, a part usually given to male actors. I believe that the image of Paulina performing the role of Time and, therefore, of Nature, flying over sixteen years and showing "the freshest things now reigning" (IV, 1, 13) and the effects of Leontes's repentance, strengthens her acting as a representative of alchemy. As a matter of fact, the lady, like the alchemical art, "mends Nature" (IV, iv, 96) by diligently respecting its processes and rhythms. 'Lady Alchemy' and 'Dame Nature', conflated in Paulina's character, evidently cooperate in Shakespeare's romance in order to attain the chemical wedding, a *coniunctio* that is also the marriage of art and nature, the ultimate goal of alchemists.

#### 8.5. 'If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating'.

##### King James's Political and Religious Attitude and his Possible Reception of *The Winter's Tale*

In sections 3.3 and 3.4 I have suggested that James's knowledge of Renaissance magic was remarkable and that he was undoubtedly against alchemy as a form of counterfeit but accepted its most philosophical implications. Moreover, the Stuart monarch's relationships with the Emperor Rudolf II<sup>1914</sup>, at whose court all sorts of alchemical and hermetic studies were welcomed, contradicts the stereotyped idea that James was haunted by his fear of occult practices. In the light of the alchemical-Hermetic reading of *The Winter's Tale* presented in this work, I consider it appropriate to conclude by reflecting upon the elements of the romance that might have pleased the new Stuart king. In particular, if taking into account that James "saw himself as the peacemaker of Europe"<sup>1915</sup>, it can be assumed that *The Winter's Tale*, that seems to follow the healing pattern of the *rota alchemica*, was also interpreted as a celebration of the monarch's ideals. As a matter of fact, at the basis of alchemical philosophy, as Long points out, is the belief that differences

---

<sup>1914</sup> See R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, cit., pp. 80-83.

<sup>1915</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 72.

can be conjoined and, above all, that “this can be achieved by a mortal man”<sup>1916</sup>. The caduceus and the hermaphrodite are two alchemical emblems that most effectively represent the propensity towards inclusiveness and harmony that is at the core of alchemy.

Evans argues that, in their political activity, both James I and Rudolf II constantly “sought to pursue a middle course”<sup>1917</sup>, in the attempt to establish peace within Christendom. It is not surprising, then, that the figure of Peace appears on the frontispiece to the 1616-edition of King James’s collected *Workes*, along with Religion (see plate 91). James’s accession to the throne actually brought a period of relative political stability in Europe, in contrast with Queen Elizabeth’s imperial design:

The accession of James VI of Scotland as king coincided with the re-establishment, more or less, of a peace in Europe which was to last until the outbreak of the Thirty Years War on the Continent in 1619 and until the advent of the Civil War in England in 1642. In 1598 Spain and France came to terms at the Treaty of Vervins, in 1604 England followed suit<sup>1918</sup>.

Parry observes that James’s accession was seen as the advent of a new ‘golden age’. The king’s peaceful policy, both on international and domestic level, seemed to offer security after the uncertainty of Queen Elizabeth’s last years of reign<sup>1919</sup>. In Thomas Campion’s *Masque in honour of the Lord Hayes*, performed before the king in 1606-7, the monarch is explicitly described as a peacemaker, as one that ‘married’ England and Scotland and mixed “bloods divided”:

O then, great Monarch, with how wise a care  
Do you these bloods divided mixe in one,  
And with like consanguinities prepare  
The high and ever-living Union  
’Tweene Scots and English; who can wonder then  
If he, that marries Kingdoms, marries Men?<sup>1920</sup>

These lines recall John Donne’s *The good-morrow*, a poem where the lyrical voice explicitly employs alchemical language and, specifically, the symbolism of the *coniunctio*, the balanced and perfect proportion of contraries, to describe the everlasting union of the

---

<sup>1916</sup> Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, cit., p. 113.

<sup>1917</sup> R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, cit., p. 81: “In their political activity both monarchs sought to pursue a middle course, not as a compromise, but as a revulsion against extremist claims which to them were also one-sided; and with both the striving for peace within Christendom appears to have been something possessing almost apodictic force”.

<sup>1918</sup> Roy Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, cit., p. 73.

<sup>1919</sup> See Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. x.

<sup>1920</sup> The lines are from the dedication to King James that precedes Thomas Campion’s *Masque in honour of the Lord Hayes* quoted by John Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First*, cit., vol. II, p. 105.

two protagonists: “What ever dyes, was not mixt equally; / If our two loves be one, or, thou and I / Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die”<sup>1921</sup>. King James himself, in an alchemical way, “mixed” the divided bloods of England and Scotland, ‘marrying’ the two previously opposed reigns in an “ever-living Union”.

James’s policy was evidently characterised by a desire to solve religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants: “King James had long held an irenic desire to heal the fundamental division in the Christian world between Catholics and Protestants”<sup>1922</sup>. One of his conciliatory strategies consisted in linking his children to Protestant and Catholic partners. The king actually desired that his older son, Henry, married a Catholic spouse, but the prince’s untimely death thwarted his father’s plan. A similar project had been devised for his other child, Charles: James hoped that the latter would marry an infanta, with the intent to reinforce England’s peace with Spain, an agreement that was ratified by the Treaty of London in 1604<sup>1923</sup>. As far as the Treaty of London is concerned, there is evidence that twelve members of the King’s Men, John Heminges included, attended upon Philip II’s Spanish ambassador at Somerset House during the negotiations that, in August 1604, led to the establishment of a long-lasting peace between England and Spain. As recounted by Lewis, among the Declared Accounts of Sir John Stanhope of the Audit Office, is the official entry for a payment to some associates of the King’s Men, thus attesting that the Shakespearean company actively participated in the entertainments organised in honour of the Spanish delegation. As far as Shakespeare’s presence in the group of ten “fellows” who attended the Spanish ambassador is concerned, Lewis argues that the document is not specific on this<sup>1924</sup>. The fact that members of the King’s Men were actively engaged in the peace negotiations between England and Spain is, I believe, a key detail in the reading of *The Winter’s Tale*, a romance that displays the reconciliation between Sicily and Bohemia,

---

<sup>1921</sup> John Donne, *The good-morrow*, ll. 19-21, in Id., *Poems*, cit., p. 165.

<sup>1922</sup> Graham Parry, *Glory, Laud, and Honour: The Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>1923</sup> *Ibid.* “His eldest son Prince Henry was expected to marry a Catholic before death frustrated the design. James desired a Spanish match for his second son Charles, and was willing to approve the building of a Catholic chapel at St James in 1623 for the use of a Catholic princess. As king, Charles married the French Catholic princess Henrietta Maria in 1625”. See also W. B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 157: “He [James] negotiated with Spain, France, Savoy, and Tuscany for a marriage treaty for his elder son Henry and, after Henry’s death in 1612, pursued such negotiations on behalf of his younger son Charles with both Spain and France”.

<sup>1924</sup> Benjamin Roland Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents. Facsimiles, Transliterations, Translations, & Commentary*, Stanford University Press, Stanford University, California, 1940-1941, vol. 2, p. 372: “True it is that *Othello* was initially performed at Whitehall, the King’s official palace, on November 1, 1604, the Ambassador having departed on August 27. If the ‘ffellowes’ are the persons included in the James I Patent of May 19, 1603, and the Manuscript Accounts of the Master of the Wardrobe of James I, March 15, 1604, William Shakespeare was included in the ‘tenne of their ffellowes’. But the document is not specific on the point, and evidence is inconclusive”.

two countries that were opposed from a religious point of view, as will be discussed. On the whole, the King's Men played a significant role at James's court. As reported by Kronbergs, they "had been made liveried members of the royal household" and between 1603 and 1613 they presented their work at court "on an average of ten to twenty times a year"<sup>1925</sup>.

The Calvinist James<sup>1926</sup>, under whose supervision an authorised version of the Bible was published in 1611, constantly tried to obtain peace on a religious level, adopting a much more conciliatory approach towards religion than his Catholic mother, Queen Mary, and his cousin, Queen Elizabeth, did. The London preacher Andrew Willet welcomed the new king in 1604 by focusing on the golden time that the Church of England was enjoying: "a golden time: such as the like (as his Maiestie saith) hath not been read nor heard of since the daies of the Romane Emperor Augustus"<sup>1927</sup>. Far from declaring that Calvinism was the only acceptable faith in his reign<sup>1928</sup>, the Stuart king usually employed an ecumenical approach towards religious differences, an attitude that "enabled him to recognize differing religious opinions with interest rather than fear"<sup>1929</sup>. Evidence exists that testifies to King James's actual purpose to convene an ecumenical council immediately after he ascended to the English throne<sup>1930</sup>. As documented by Patterson, an exchange of letters between James and the Catholic historian and jurist Jacques-Auguste de Thou, the royal librarian to King Henry IV of France, testifies to the concern for religious stability that both monarchs shared. In a letter dating from 31<sup>st</sup> December 1603, Thou congratulates with the Stuart king and pleads the latter to foster "the concord of the Church with common consent"<sup>1931</sup>. In response to Thou's request, James replies that he would participate in "the union of the Church" and act in favour of the healing of "the differences which prevail in Religion"<sup>1932</sup>.

King James had largely devoted himself to solve religious issues also as king of

---

<sup>1925</sup> Ann Kronbergs, "The Significance of the Court Performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at the Palatine Wedding Celebrations", cit., p. 343.

<sup>1926</sup> W.B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, cit., pp. 16-17: "Separated from his Catholic mother and father in the first few months of his life, he had been brought up in a Protestant environment by the earl and countess of Mar. From the age of four he was tutored by the renowned scholar and poet, George Buchanan, whose faith was conventionally Calvinist, and by the younger and more amiable Peter Young, who had studied at Geneva under Theodore Beza, Calvin's associate and successor".

<sup>1927</sup> Andrew Willet, *Ecclesia Triumphans*, quoted by Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 232.

<sup>1928</sup> See Jenny Wormald, "James VI and I", ODNB 29: 651: "he [James] never insisted that only Calvinism was acceptable in his church. In the last year of his life he refused to suppress Richard Mountague's contentious anti-Calvinist *A New Gagg for an Old Goose*, instead inviting him to clarify his position".

<sup>1929</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1930</sup> See W.B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, cit., pp. 34-35.

<sup>1931</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale MS. Dupuy 409, fols. 3-38 verso; BL MS. Dupuy 632, fol. 2, quoted by W.B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, cit., p. 1.

<sup>1932</sup> BN MS. Dupuy 409, fol. 39; MS Dupuy 632, fol. 3, quoted by W.B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, cit., p. 3.

Scotland, endeavouring to appease controversies within the Scottish Kirk, conflicts that were largely due to Queen Mary's Catholic faith and alliances. As a matter of fact, the Reformation had been approved by Parliament in 1560 but Queen Mary never ratified it, thus threatening the future of Protestantism in Scotland. Moreover, her marriage with a Catholic, Lord Darnley, James's father, did nothing but incite the fears of Protestants<sup>1933</sup>. In the years that followed, several parties, prompted by both religious and political concerns, tried to influence and manipulate young James, sometimes even seizing him<sup>1934</sup>. It was the "unfinished character of the Scottish Reformation" and the consequent disagreements with Protestants, then, that mostly engaged James during his years of reign in Scotland<sup>1935</sup>. As might be expected, the monarch also had good reasons not to alienate Catholics, who "were, for the most part, admonished and exhorted in Scotland rather than persecuted"<sup>1936</sup>. Most interestingly, the conspicuous presence of Catholics at court in the 1580s and 1590s was not only due to religious and political motives, a detail that further highlights the king's peaceful attitude: as Patterson remarks, "James found Roman Catholics congenial" not only because of their association with his mother and "their cosmopolitan interests and experiences", but also because "he liked to discuss and debate theological issues with them"<sup>1937</sup>.

King James's aspiration to foster religious peace in Europe is a key point in terms of his reception of Shakespeare's romance. As a matter of fact, the conflict between Leontes and Polixenes might also be read in religious terms since in Shakespeare's time Sicily and Bohemia were representative of two different religions. In the early fifteenth century, Bohemia broke with Catholic Rome under the guidance of the religious reformer Jan Hus. Several crusades were eventually proclaimed against the so-called Hussites, who were active mainly in the municipalities of Prague and other cities. Bohemia, then, was a renowned battlefield between the Hussite union and the supporters of Catholicism. During the Reformation, Hussite reformers, known as 'Unitas Fratrum', were in contact with Lutheran and Reformed Protestants. It is only in 1620 that the Catholic factions managed to resume control and defeat Protestant barons<sup>1938</sup>. Rudolf II had to confront with religious issues especially in Austria and Bohemia: the latter, in particular, "stood geographically on the periphery of orthodox Protestantism" and "also at the edge of the orthodox Catholic

---

<sup>1933</sup> See W.B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>1934</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>1935</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>1936</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>1937</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>1938</sup> See "Hussites", *Britannica. Micropaedia*, 5: 225.

world”<sup>1939</sup>. In the light of these historical events, Delsigne argues that the opposition between Sicily and Bohemia that is at the core of *The Winter’s Tale* points to religious issues that were well known to Shakespeare’s audience. Furthermore, the scholar continues, the play stages “a hermetic miracle” by ending with a reconciliation between the two countries:

the play ends with a hermetic miracle, not only in the animation of a statue but perhaps also in the reconciliation of the king of Sicily, a Catholic country, and the king of Bohemia, historically the first nation to establish a reformed church (the Hussites) in Europe<sup>1940</sup>.

*The Winter’s Tale* is closed by a ‘marriage’, a happy union between Protestant Bohemia and Catholic Sicily, an appeasement that reflects James’s own objectives. According to Delsigne, Shakespeare’s romance deliberately rests on a “balance of textual indeterminacy”, thereby allowing for “an irenic experience” of it: the final scene can be read as either “a Catholic miracle”, “an emblem of protestant scepticism of representation” or “an instance of hermetic magic that transcends the divide between Catholics and protestants as part of the *prisca theologia*”<sup>1941</sup>. What is most remarkable in relation to James’s own policy is the fact that the interest in Hermetic philosophy typical of his age “was in part spurred by an irenic hope of finding a third way to relieve the religious strife of the sixteenth century”<sup>1942</sup>. Evans points out that in those years Europe saw the emergence of an “eirenical movement”, “an attempt to evade tightening religious antagonisms by calling on intellectual reserves which the practical world would not admit”<sup>1943</sup>. This attitude was supported by a number of contemporary scholars (namely Philip Melanchton, Guillaume Postel, Giordano Bruno, and Tommaso Campanella, among others) and can be defined as “the ‘third force’ of sixteenth-century Europe”<sup>1944</sup>, as Evans calls it employing an expression coined by Heer. Even though the latter refers mainly to the first part of the century, Evans observes that the same ideals apply to subsequent thinkers:

The ‘third ideal’, the *Imperium Tertium*, the empire of the spirit, the reconciliation of

---

<sup>1939</sup> R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World*, cit., p. 101.

<sup>1940</sup> Jill Delsigne, “Hermetic Miracles in *The Winter’s Tale*”, cit., p. 99.

<sup>1941</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93: “This deliberate balance of textual indeterminacy encourages an irenic experience of the play, an uncertainty of whether to interpret the final scene as a Catholic miracle, as an emblem of protestant scepticism of representation, or as an instance of hermetic magic that transcends the divide between Catholics and protestants as part of the *prisca theologia*, an ancient chain of divine wisdom reaching all the way back to the moment when God animated a clay statue to create Adam”.

<sup>1942</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>1943</sup> R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World*, cit., p. 92.

<sup>1944</sup> *Ibid.* Evans refers to Friedrich Heer, *Die dritte Kraft: der europäische Humanismus zwischen den Fronten des konfessionellen Zeitalters*, Fischer, Frankfurt, 1960.

opposites – are equally applicable, if not more so, to the rarefied, embattled, intellectualized thinkers of subsequent years. They were the articles of faith of many contemporary scholars. Heer’s ‘Old Europe’, the open mind which still seeks to create unity out of extremes of mood and experience, formed the ideal of the universalists and pansophic writers of the Mannerist age, of the Hermetists and adherents of the *prisca theologia*<sup>1945</sup>.

Interestingly enough, in his first speech to Parliament as king of Great Britain, in 1603, James explicitly declares his intent to find a third, middle way to deal with Catholics, thus creating a “Christian vnion in Religion”, and argues to be “content to meete them in the mid-way”:

And in this point, I haue no occasion to speake further here, sauing that I could wish from my heart, that it would please God to make me one of the members of *such a general Christian vnion in Religion*, as laying wilfulness aside on both hands, *we might meete in the midst*, which is the Center and perfection of all things. For if they would leaue, and be ashamed of such new and grosse Corruptions of theirs, as themselues cannot maintaine, nor denie to bee worthy of reformation, *I would for mine owne part be content to meete them in the mid-way*<sup>1946</sup>. (italics mine)

It can be assumed that *The Winter’s Tale*, a play that longs for religious, political, and familiar reconciliation, functions as a mirror of King James’s own aspiration to heal divisions between Christian factions. Moreover, the Stuart king’s association with “that triplicity which in great veneration was ascribed to the ancient Hermes”<sup>1947</sup> suggests that the monarch himself, while attending the play’s performance, might have felt part of that *prisca theologia* which both Hermes and Solomon belonged to. Again, the figure of Solomon, the ‘father’ of alchemy, implies significant connections between James’s iconography and alchemical imagery. The king himself in *Meditation upon the Lords Prayer* acknowledges and accepts the association with the “King of peace”, Solomon:

I know not by what fortune, the *dicton* of PACIFICUS was added to my title, at my comming in *England*; that of the Lyon, expressing true fortitude, hauing beene my *dicton* before: but I am not ashamed of this addition; for King *Salomon* was a figure of CHRIST in that he was a King of peace<sup>1948</sup>.

As might be expected, the accession of the Stuart dynasty saw the unfolding of a

---

<sup>1945</sup> R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>1946</sup> King James the First, *A Speach, as it was Delivered in the Vpper Houise of the Parliament to the Lords Spiritvall and Temporall, and to the Knights, Citizens and Burgesses there assembled, on Mvnday the XIX, Day of March 1603*, in Id., *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince*, cit., p. 492.

<sup>1947</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, “To the King”, cit., p. 263.

<sup>1948</sup> King James the First, *Meditation upon the Lords Prayer: Written by the Kings Maiestie, for the benefit of all his subiects, especially of such as follow the Court*, Printed by Robert Barker, and Iohn Bill, London, 1616, in Id., *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince*, cit., p. 590.

great variety of imagery that epitomised the virtues and policies of the new monarch<sup>1949</sup>. One of the symbols best celebrating James, as already said, is the caduceus, that traditionally stands for harmony restored<sup>1950</sup>. As an alchemical emblem, it also represents the union of opposites and the balance between the elements<sup>1951</sup>. Dom Pernety provides an interpretation of the caduceus in the light of alchemical symbolism, noticing that the two fighting serpents, that represent the volatile and the fixed aspects of matter, are finally conflated to form philosophical gold:

Le *caducée* était composé de trois parties, de la tige d'or surmontée d'une pomme de fer, et de deux serpens, qui semblent vouloir se dévorer. L'un de ces serpens représente la partie volatile de la matiere philosophique, l'autre signifie la partie fixe, qui se combattent dans le vase; l'or philosophique dont la tige est le symbole, les met d'accord en les fixant l'un et l'autre, et en les réunissant en un seul corps inséparablement<sup>1952</sup>.

If considering that the *opus alchymicum* is also described as a process of “peace and strife”<sup>1953</sup>, it is not surprising that alchemists regard the caduceus as a suitable emblem of the alchemical art. As remarked by Abraham, “[t]his magic rod has the power of reconciling the conflicting elements into harmony” since “[a]fter much quarrel and strife, the snakes become entwined in perfect harmony”<sup>1954</sup>. In like manner, Healy observes that the “spiralling movement back and forth” that distinguishes the alchemical work of transmutation is symbolised by the entwined serpents of the caduceus”<sup>1955</sup>. The alchemist Benjamin Lock explicitly claims that the initial stage of contention is the source of the final, everlasting reunion: “after long strife [the elements] are made frendes, concluding in such a perfecte unity as can not be broken”<sup>1956</sup>. The same pattern of dissolution and

---

<sup>1949</sup> Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. x: “The accession of a new dynasty of kings in 1603 saw the deployment of a great variety of images and symbols that declared the distinctive virtues and policies of King James”.

<sup>1950</sup> See “caduceo”, in Hans Biedermann, *Simboli. Astrologia, cabala, alchimia, emblemi araldici, divinità: la ricerca perenne dei significati nascosti*, Garzanti, Milano, 1991 (or. ed. *Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole*, Droemersche Verlagsanstalt Th. Knaur Nachf., München, 1989): “il simbolo deriverebbe dal bastone che Mercurio aveva ricevuto da Apollo. Quando il dio giunse in Arcadia, ‘trovò due serpenti che si mordevano a vicenda; lanciò il bastone fra loro ed essi ritrovarono l’accordo, perciò il bastone ha preso quel nome come segno di concordia, ovvero il veleno della guerra viene placato e annullato grazie a parole di pace”.

<sup>1951</sup> *Ibid.* “Principale attributo del dio Mercurio (gr. Ermes), messaggero degli dei. [...] Come simboli alchemici i due serpenti significano l’equilibrio fra gli elementi”.

<sup>1952</sup> See “Caducée”, in Dom Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, cit., pp. 70-1.

<sup>1953</sup> “The elements with their opposing qualities are said to be warring, conflicting foes until reconciled and united in peace”. See ‘peace and strife’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 141.

<sup>1954</sup> See ‘caduceus’, in Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>1955</sup> Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>1956</sup> Benjamin Lock, *Picklock to Riply Castle*, f. 25, quoted by Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 141. As Grund points out, “[i]t is not exactly clear who the ‘author’ of *The Picklock* was or when it was produced. A date in one of the copies of *The Picklock* makes clear that it must have been finished before 6 June

reunion, hate and love, is visually represented also in a plate from *Splendor solis*. The illustration shows the “amorous birds of prey”, whose struggle stands for strife and merging at the same time and, as the caduceus and the hermaphrodite, represents the paradoxical rhythm of the *solve et coagula*<sup>1957</sup> (see plates 76 and 77).

Interestingly enough, Shakespeare refers to the caduceus at the very beginning of *The Winter's Tale* when lord Camillo, talking with Archidamus, alludes to printer's devices that show the caduceus along with two clasped hands. When describing the relationship between King Leontes and King Polixenes, the Sicilian lord notices that “they [...] shook hands as over a vast; and embraced as it were from the ends of opposed winds”:

Since their more mature dignities and royal necessities made separation of their society, their encounters, though not personal, have been royally attorneyed with interchange of gifts, letters, loving embassies, that they have seemed to be together, though absent; shook hands, as over a vast; and embraced, as it were, from the ends of opposed winds. (I, i, 24-31)

Pitcher points out that Camillo is specifically alluding to a printer's device showing “hands extended in friendship from opposite clouds”<sup>1958</sup>. As a matter of fact, the caduceus often appeared in printer's or publisher's devices along with clasped hands emerging from opposite clouds<sup>1959</sup>. As a case in point, another version of the device Camillo points to, in use in England from the 1590s, also featured the caduceus and two clasped hands emerging from opposed clouds and two cornucopias (see plate 85). The device, first employed by the bookseller T. Richard in Paris, passed to Thomas Orwin, publisher of some of Marlowe's and Nashe's works, and finally to Felix Kingston, who seemed to have used it until the 1620s<sup>1960</sup>. Similar to Orwin's and Kingston's are the “Wechel devices”, used by Chrétien and Andreas Wechel in Paris and Frankfurt respectively, and employed in England from the early seventeenth century: these emblems present “a Pegasus above a caduceus and cornucopia upheld by hands emerging from clouds”<sup>1961</sup> (see plate 86). What makes the

---

1602, but I have not been able to narrow down the frame further. The question about the author is still more complicated. Both the manuscripts of the text [...] proclaim one Benjamin Lock to be the author of *The Picklock*. Although this may seem to be a peculiar coincidence, perhaps indicating a mistake for Humfrey Lock, the case may in fact be less straightforward. Based on two entries in the astrologer and mathematician John Dee's diary that mention a Benjamin Lock, Julian Roberts and Andrew Watson suggest that a Benjamin Lock was a disciple of Dee's from 13 September 1580 until at least 31 August 1582”. See Peter J. Grund, Introduction to Humfrey Lock, “*Mysticall Wordes and Names Infinite*”, cit., p. 24.

<sup>1957</sup> See Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>1958</sup> See John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 147n.

<sup>1959</sup> Jan Schouten, *The Rod and Serpent of Asklepios*, cit., pp. 125-6.

<sup>1960</sup> See Ronald B. McKerrow, *Printers' & Publishers' Devices in England & Scotland 1485-1640*, The Bibliographical Society, London, 1949, p. 105.

<sup>1961</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

Wechel devices worth mentioning is the fact that they passed to Nicholas Okes, who published some of Shakespeare's plays. In particular, the device appeared in the first Quarto of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, published by Okes for Nathaniel Butter in 1608, and in the 1622-edition of Shakespeare's *Othello*<sup>1962</sup>. It can be safely asserted, then, that Shakespeare's audience, and, therefore, James himself, would have taken the hint at the printer's device with two clasped hands emerging from clouds that also featured the caduceus, i.e. a renowned symbol both of King James and of alchemy. As noticed by Kamachi, the dramatist further alludes to the two serpents of the caduceus through the character of Hermione<sup>1963</sup>, who recalls the goddess Harmonia, as already said. According to the Ovidian myth recounted in the fourth book of the *Metamorphoses*, Harmonia and her husband Cadmus were actually turned into two serpents after the latter had previously killed a snake in Thebes.

The rhythm of division and reunion that characterises the romance as a whole and that is reminiscent of the alchemical cycle of *solve et coagula* is further underlined by Archidamus in the very beginning of the play. The Bohemian lord immediately focuses on the "difference" between Leontes and Polixenes: "If you shall chance, Camillo, to visit Bohemia [...] you shall see, as I have said, great difference between our Bohemia and your Sicilia" (I, i, 1-4). The term 'difference, conveying the idea of 'row' or 'disagreement', as Pitcher observes, foreshadows the imminent dispute between the two kings and, above all, draws attention to it<sup>1964</sup>. A few lines below, Camillo, further highlighting the hostility that will dominate the first half of the play, alludes to the "opposed winds" (I, i, 31) that separate Sicily and Bohemia, two countries that mirror each other from a geographical point of view, being placed on a "north-south axis"<sup>1965</sup>. Given the importance of opening scenes in Shakespeare's plays, often providing key details for the interpretation of the following events, the stress on the initial antagonism, or 'opposition', between the two kings invites the audience to read the play as a journey from enmity and chaos to harmony and reunion. Camillo's subsequent lines actually emphasise the structure of the play since they alternately draw on images of separation and union. While discussing with

---

<sup>1962</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1963</sup> Mitsuru Kamachi, "What's in a Name?: Hermione and the Hermetic Tradition in *The Winter's Tale*", cit., p. 34: "It is also of interest that 'Harmonia' and her husband Cadmus were turned into two serpents, reminding us of the two intertwined serpents of the 'caduceus' – the wand carried by Hermes as the messenger of the gods".

<sup>1964</sup> See John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 145n. See also "difference", in OED, entry 3: "A disagreement or opinion of sentiment; a dispute or quarrel, (in early use) *esp.* one involving open hostility or violent conflict".

<sup>1965</sup> John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 145n: "The countries are on a north-south axis with *opposed winds*".

Archidamus about the seemingly unalterable bonding between Leontes and Polixenes, “trained together in their childhoods” (I, i, 22-3), Camillo contrasts their being together in terms of affection with their being physically distant and “opposed” (I, i, 31) and remarks that, despite the “separation of their society” (I, i, 26), “their encounters” have occurred by means of “interchange of gifts, letters” and “loving embassies” (I, i, 26-8). The contrast between the expressions indicating fondness and proximity, such as “encounters”, “interchange”, “embraced” and “shook hands”, evidently contrast those highlighting the distance between the two kings and foreshadowing their coming quarrel, namely “separation”, “absent”, “over a vast”, and “opposed winds”.

It is, therefore, evident that in the very first scene, Shakespeare obliquely concentrates the basic pattern of the romance. If taking into account that all divisions are healed at the end of the play, then it is possibly not a chance that the drama is closed by an implicit reference to Hermetic philosophy, that alternative, conciliatory way to deal with religious conflicts. Most interestingly, the final hint at the *Asclepius* is significant in terms of King James’s relationship with Hermeticism. As already anticipated, the Stuart monarch seemed to have accepted white magic, especially when it was directed at restoring order, as in the case of Prospero. Conversely, he rejected “that blacke and vnlawfull science of *Magie*”<sup>1966</sup>, i.e. necromancy, a condemnable discipline by means of which its practitioners “will raise such diuers formes of spirits” by drawing “such diuers formes of circles and coniurations”<sup>1967</sup>. As Epistemon explains to Philomathes in *Daemonologie*, “this word *Necromancie* is a Greeke word [...] which is to say, the prophecie by the dead. This last name is giuen, to this blacke and vnlawfull science”<sup>1968</sup>. Given James’s disapproval of the unlawful art of necromancy, it is not surprising that Paulina, before reanimating Hermione, strongly defends her art from accusations of being a conjuror of evil spirits:

Either forbear,  
Quit presently the chapel, or resolve you  
For more amazement. If you can behold it,  
I’ll make the statue move indeed, descend  
And take you by the hand. But then you’ll think –  
Which I protest against – I am assisted  
By wicked powers.  
(V, iii, 85-91)

The lady’s fears can be explained also in the light of the king’s hostility towards conjuring

---

<sup>1966</sup> King James the First, *Daemonologie*, cit., p. 99.

<sup>1967</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1968</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

practices, as attested, for instance, by the king's refusal to accept John Dee's plea for mercy<sup>1969</sup>. Paulina's healing art, however, is "lawful", as she herself remarks when asking those who believe it is witchcraft to leave the chapel: "Then all stand still. / Or those that think it is unlawful business / I am about, let them depart" (V, iii, 94-6).

A comparison between Paulina and the evil Queen in *Cymbeline*, a romance contemporary with *The Winter's Tale*, might shed further light on the Stuart monarch's attitude towards Renaissance magic. The two women actually epitomise benign and black magic respectively. Cymbeline's wicked wife, unlike Paulina, employs her knowledge of the art of distillation and of the occult properties of nature for evil purposes. Chymistry has been taught her by the physician Cornelius:

I wonder, doctor,  
Thou ask'st me such a question. Have I not been  
Thy pupil long? Hast thou not learn'd me how  
To make perfumes? Distil? Preserve? Yea so,  
That our great king himself doth woo me oft  
For my confections? Having thus far proceeded  
(Unless thou think'st me devilish) is't not meet  
That I did amplify my judgement in  
Other conclusions? I will try the forces  
Of these thy compounds on such creatures as  
We count not worth the hanging (but none human)  
To try the vigour of them, and apply  
Allayments to their act, and by them gather  
Their several virtues, and effects.  
(I, vi, 10-23)

Since the Queen has asked him to provide her with some "most poisonous compounds / Which are the movers of a languishing death" (I, vi, 8-9), Cornelius himself suspects her intentions: "I do not like her. She doth think she has / Strange ling'ring poisons: I do know her spirit" (I, vi, 33-34). The "most poisonous compounds" the Queen requests are actually intended to kill Princess Imogen, King Cymbeline's virtuous daughter. It is not coincidence that the Queen and her malignant son, Cloten, are the only two characters who die and, therefore, are excluded from the redemptive pattern of the play. Paulina, conversely, is depicted as a sort of female Prospero since she evidently uses her art to recover goodness and truth.

Scholars have noticed that several of the protagonists of Shakespeare's last plays reflect some of the issues that were related to the person of King James. Kurland, for instance, highlights "the relevance of contemporary British politics, and the character and

---

<sup>1969</sup> See section 3.4. "King James's Relationships with John Dee, Walter Raleigh, Arthur Dee, Michael Maier, Cornelis Drebbel, and Tycho Brahe".

interests of the King, to our understanding of the plays Shakespeare wrote (or co-wrote) from *Pericles* through to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*<sup>1970</sup>. More specifically, Romero observes that Leontes might be associated with the despotic James, especially if taking into account the links between some of the characters of *The Winter's Tale* and real, historical figures: Hermione-Ceres and Queen Elizabeth-Astraea, Perdita-Proserpina and Princess Elizabeth Stuart, Florizel and Friederich V, Mamilius and Henry Prince of Wales<sup>1971</sup>. If accepting the association between the king of Sicily and James I, then it can be assumed that Leontes's final acceptance of Paulina's magical art, that he defines "as lawful as eating", mirrors King James's own disposition to accept lawful magical practices: "O, she's warm! / If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating" (V, iii, 109-111). Leontes, like King James, eventually approves white, benign magic, as Paulina's is<sup>1972</sup>.

Paulina's art, acting on the very processes of life and death, might also have reminded the Stuart king of Tycho Brahe's ability to rule "the *Starres* above"<sup>1973</sup>. James himself was usually presented as a mirror of heavenly harmony and, consequently, his court was regarded as a microcosm that reflected the perfect proportions of the macrocosm. This belief evidently recurred in masques: music was one of the most common devices employed to heighten the association between the Stuart court and the heavenly dimension. Limon notices that the separation between "the 'divine' courtly sphere" represented by James and "the mundane world outside", the anti-masque, was actually signalled by music, respectively harmonious and wild<sup>1974</sup>. In a similar way, as Hart remarks, the music originating from the mechanical devices of the Stuart gardens was believed to draw down benign influences from the heavens onto the court<sup>1975</sup>. As might be expected, King James was conceived of as the source of heavenly harmony and, therefore, he was oftentimes referred to in musical terms. A panegyric written in honour of the king evidently testifies to the association between James and Orpheus:

---

<sup>1970</sup> Stuart M. Kurland, "Shakespeare and James I: personal rule and public responsibility", cit., p. 210.

<sup>1971</sup> "Se Ermione-Cerere è figura della regina Elisabetta-Astrea, Perdita-Proserpina rappresenta la principessa Elizabeth, Florizel evoca Friedrich V e Mamilio il principe Henry, forse non sarà illegittimo supporre che il dispotico e ingiusto re Leonte è da leggersi come una raffigurazione di Giacomo I". Milena Romero Allué, "*What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in The Winter's Tale*", cit., p. 82.

<sup>1972</sup> As Pitcher remarks, the distinction is between black magic and white, natural magic, permissible if the spell and magic were benign. See John Pitcher (ed.), *The Winter's Tale*, cit., p. 344n.

<sup>1973</sup> See section 3.4. "King James's Relationships with John Dee, Walter Raleigh, Arthur Dee, Michael Maier, Cornelis Drebbel, and Tycho Brahe".

<sup>1974</sup> Jerzy Limon, *The Masque of Stuart Culture*, cit., p. 62: "Music is one of the devices constantly used to stress the separation of the two spheres: it is the 'divine' courtly sphere from the mundane world outside. The first sphere is always 'modeled' by harmonious music, which by analogy implies the ideal harmony of the entire sphere, including its inhabitants. The source of this harmony is of course King James".

<sup>1975</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 138.

Behold, how like another Orpheus, Amphion, and Arion, he draweth to the true knowledge of God, very salvage Beasts, Forrests, Trees, and Stones, by the sweet Harmony of his harp: the most fierce and wilde, the most stupid and insenced, the most brutish and voluptuous, are changed and ciuilized by the delectable sound of his Musicke<sup>1976</sup>.

Since he reflected “the heavenly harmony of the heavens through his wise rule, James was inevitably cast as a musician”<sup>1977</sup>. Like the “enchanter” Prospero, who directs his art and music towards “the service of political order”<sup>1978</sup>, and Paulina, who draws down celestial music in order to heal Leontes’s “diseased” microcosm, King James employs his “harp” and “the delectable sound of his Musicke” to maintain concord within his court and realm. It is, therefore, legitimate to believe that the king might have particularly appreciated the scene of Hermione’s ‘resurrection’ by means of music, a scene that celebrates his own healing and ‘magical’ powers and that alludes to the Hermetic imagery associated with him. It should also be recalled that in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as Burnett points out, audible music was believed to restore health to both the human body and soul, a belief that was “the underlying principle and rationale of musical therapy”<sup>1979</sup>. Again, if considering James’s faith in his ability to cure certain kinds of diseases with the touch of his hands, it follows that the music that allows for Hermione’s restoration to life was supposed to celebrate the king’s own ‘supernatural’ and healing faculties. As Kronbergs remarks, “[t]he position of the monarch was a critical element in court performances”<sup>1980</sup> since he became the main addressee of the dramas he himself chose. Indeed, “the repertoire of plays [...] reflected his choices as the chief patron of the company”<sup>1981</sup>. The fact that *The Winter’s Tale* was included in the group of plays that were enacted to celebrate the Palatine Wedding attests that it pleased James’s tastes.

As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this study, alchemical imagery offers an alternative, and important, perspective from which to read *The Winter’s Tale*. Moreover, it is also highly relevant to the understanding of James’s own policy. The monarch’s pacific

---

<sup>1976</sup> George Marcelline, *The Triumphs of King James the First*, Printed at Brittaines Bursse, by William Jaggard for Iohn Budge, London, 1610, quoted by Robin Headlam Wells, *Elizabethan Mythologies: Studies in Poetry, Drama and Music*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 69. See also Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*, cit., p. 232: “Conceits of an orphic kind, along with related allusions to Arion, who charmed the dolphins, or Amphion, who raised a city to music, are common in the masques and Court poetry of James’s reign, often serving as metaphors for the King’s peace”.

<sup>1977</sup> Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, cit., p. 138.

<sup>1978</sup> Robin Headlam Wells, *Elizabethan Mythologies*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>1979</sup> Charles Burnett, “Sound and its Perception in the Middle Ages”, in Charles Burnett, Michael Fend, and Penelope Gouk (eds.), *The Second Sense. Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgment from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, The Warburg Institute, London, 1991, p. 50.

<sup>1980</sup> Ann Kronbergs, “The Significance of the Court Performance of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* at the Palatine Wedding Celebrations”, cit., p. 342.

<sup>1981</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 343.

and, obliquely alchemical, tendency to reconcile differences and placate conflicts acquires extra value if read in the light of a kind of language that was well known by Shakespeare and his contemporaries: a language that, if correctly deciphered, could lead to a closer understanding of God and His Creation. It is legitimate to believe that King James, as Hermes Trismegistus and Solomon, traditionally considered as the ‘fathers’ of alchemy, could plunge into this enigmatic language, in the same way as he was able to unravel the “Court Hieroglyphicks” of the masques. Ben Jonson himself, in *Expostulation with Inigo Jones* (1631), defines the masques as the “Spectacles of State” and the “true Court Hieroglyphicks!”<sup>1982</sup>. As highlighted by Kogan, alchemy “held great meaning for Jonson both in terms of satire and royal celebration”<sup>1983</sup>. In particular, the scholar refers to the *Masque of Blackness* (1605), where Jonson celebrates England and its ruler, James, in terms that are highly evocative of alchemical language:

For were the world, with all his wealth a ring,  
 Britannia, whose new name makes all tongues sing,  
 Might be a diamond worthy to enchase it,  
 Ruled by a sun that to this height doth grace it,  
 Whose beams shine day and night, and are of force  
 To blanch an Ethiop, and revive a corse<sup>1984</sup>.

Kogan observes that “Jonson’s imagery, with its jewels and light of resurrection, not only recalls the traditional belief in ‘the king’s touch’, the royal power to heal on contact, but also suggests a larger frame of discourse in the world of alchemy”<sup>1985</sup>. In *Masque of Blackness* Jonson further dwells on the association between James and the alchemical meaning of the sun, glistening the world below, a symbolism that recurs also in *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, as already said. Moreover, the transmuting rays of James-Sol can even “blanch an Ethiop”, an image that recalls the alchemical *albedo*, the phase of the *opus alchymicum* when the blackness of putrefaction is replaced by the purity of whiteness. As the philosopher’s stone, the sun-like powers of the monarch are able to “revive a corse”, a metaphor that hints at the alchemical belief that transmutation is a ‘rebirth’, or ‘resurrection’, of nature, thus transmuting England into a precious ‘stone’, “a diamond worthy to enchase” the whole world.

---

<sup>1982</sup> Ben Jonson, *Expostulation with Inigo Jones*, 1631, quoted by Donald James Gordon, “Poet and Architect: the Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 12, 1949, p. 154.

<sup>1983</sup> Stephen Kogan, *The Hieroglyphic King. Wisdom and Idolatry in the Seventeenth-Century Masque*, Associated University Presses, London-Toronto, 1986, p. 29.

<sup>1984</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Blackness*, 1605, in Id., *The Complete Masques*, edited by Stephen Orgel, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 1969, ll. 220-25, p. 56.

<sup>1985</sup> Stephen Kogan, *The Hieroglyphic King*, cit., p. 29.

According to the alchemical world-view, everything is a symbol of something else: in the same way as a marriage represents the union of contraries, the caducean rod stands for the harmonious balance between opposing forces. Alchemical philosophy, unlike other official fields of knowledge, offers the opportunity of “embracing, rather than eliminating, difference”<sup>1986</sup>. By embracing differences, the monarch, like an alchemist, was also in control of nature, mending and perfecting it when necessary. As remarked by Long, scholars have long noticed that the majority of alchemical writings focus on “man’s natural authority”<sup>1987</sup>: in the words of Berthelot, even early alchemical texts, such as the Greek Leyden Papyrus<sup>1988</sup>, illustrate the manifold issues with which alchemists deal, namely the technical procedures of the manufacturing of metals and matter, the psychological implications of transmutation, and, above all, their surmises concerning man’s power over nature”<sup>1989</sup>. King James, as Sol, is the supreme authority who has been placed at the head of the earthly microcosm to understand the true, heavenly alchemy and contrast the base practice of transmuting metals performed by the “sooty tribe” of fraudulent alchemists<sup>1990</sup>. I believe that *The Winter’s Tale*, with its allusions to the Hermetic culture of the time, was also intended to pay homage to King James’s Hermetic imagery and divine-like ability to penetrate into the secret laws of the cosmos and to his attempt to “accomplish the miracles of one thing”, as the first principle of the *Emerald Table* reads: “That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing”<sup>1991</sup>.

---

<sup>1986</sup> Kathleen P. Long, “Odd Bodies: Reviewing Corporal Difference in Early Modern Alchemy”, cit., p. 85.

<sup>1987</sup> Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, cit., p. 114.

<sup>1988</sup> The Leyden Papyrus, as well as the Stockholm Papyrus, bears the name of the city where it was found. They are both written in Greek and date from the end of the third century AD. See Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader*, cit., p. 45. Linden reproduces an English translation of an excerpt from the Leyden Papyrus X.

<sup>1989</sup> Marcelline Berthelot, Introduction to Id. (ed.), *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, Otto Zeller, Osnabruck, 1967, reprint of the 1888-edition, vol. 1, p. 5: “ces papyrus nous fournissent aujourd’hui un document sans pareil pour apprécier à la fois les procédés industriels des anciens pour fabriquer des alliages, leur état psychologique et leurs préjugés mêmes relativement à la puissance de l’homme sur la nature”. Quoted by Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, cit., p. 114.

<sup>1990</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, cit., ll. 80-82, pp. 437-438: “You that are both the Sol and Jupiter of this sphere, Mercury invokes your majesty against the sooty tribe here; for in your favour only I grow recovered and warm”.

<sup>1991</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Tabula Smaragdina*, cit., p. 28.

## Conclusion

Studies on the position of alchemical culture in the Renaissance have gradually emerged, even though with a certain degree of difficulty, from that aura of ‘occultism’ in which they have long been enveloped. The path towards academic recognition has been facilitated thanks to the contribution of scholars who have edited a high number of alchemical texts by employing a wide variety of approaches. Robert Schuler, William Newman, Barbara Obrist, Michela Pereira, and Mino Gabriele, among others, have brought to the attention of modern readers several key works of the Western alchemical canon. Significant progress has been achieved also in the study of the relationships between alchemy and literature: Stanton Linden, Charles Nicholl, Margaret Healy, and Lyndy Abraham have investigated the role of the alchemical worldview in the literary and dramatic production of early modern England, with a specific focus on William Shakespeare and his contemporaries. It is also worth mentioning the erudite researches of Johannes Fabricius and Klossowski de Rola, who have focused on the visual aspect of alchemy.

What makes the study of the alchemical tradition a difficult task for researchers is precisely the extremely huge quantity of treatises on alchemy that had appeared since the discipline was born. In the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as already said, there was a dramatic rise in the number of Hermetic works that circulated in either manuscript and printed form. However, most of the times, the authors of these writings are not identifiable with precision, either because they wrote under a pseudonym, as Solomon Trismosin and Eirenaeus Philalethes, or because the texts were erroneously fathered upon older authorities, such as Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle, or even upon legendary figures, as Hermes Trismegistus and Maria Prophetissa. It should also be recalled that a number of the alchemical treatises that were handed down to the Renaissance are Latin translations of Arabic sources and, therefore, their origins cannot be easily circumscribed. To cite an instance, scholars cannot determine with certainty the time of the composition of *Turba philosophorum*, a text of Arabic origins, first published in Latin in 1572 and possibly composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries.

Another hindrance is represented by the allegorical and obscure nature of the alchemical language, constantly conflating several traditions. Because of the impossibility to read and understand alchemical texts from a single perspective, due to their numerous layers of significance, studies on alchemy are usually exposed to varied objections. As I have emphasised throughout this work, it is always difficult to establish the meaning of the

alchemists' assertions and, as a consequence, interpreting a literary work in the light of alchemical vocabulary and imagery entails a certain degree of risk: given the rich set of allusions alchemists draw on and the fact that the majority of alchemical symbols are usually meant to signify different concepts at the same time, certain nuances of meaning are inevitably lost. Moreover, alchemical vocabulary is also intermixed with biblical and mythological references. The main criticism in this case is that a specific metaphor or idea is not exclusive to alchemy. In my opinion, this is a vantage point rather than a limit since it allows for a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the literary work in question. As far as *The Winter's Tale* is concerned, alchemy accentuates rather than narrow the complexity of the play, that, in turn, reflects the cultural variety of its epoch, an era when the languages of alchemy, religion, and Classical mythology most frequently overlapped.

I have tried to provide the highest possible number of primary sources in order to attest the actual persistence of certain topoi that recur in the texts discussed in this study and, as a consequence, their relevance to the Shakespearean age. I have also considered some works that postdate *The Winter's Tale* in order to prove the continuity of a variety of topics and concepts. As a case in point, the treatises of the German Count Michael Maier constantly draw on older alchemical sources, re-elaborating certain commonplace notions of the alchemical tradition. Furthermore, a substantial part of this dissertation is devoted to the visual aspect of alchemy, with the intent to show that alchemical beliefs circulated widely through different channels. As in the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*, the illustrations are never a simple translation of the text but, rather, enlighten the writings they accompany as if to form a more comprehensive whole, thus recalling the alchemical symbol of the 'chemical wedding'. The image of the chemical wedding actually suggests that differences should not be erased but, rather, conjoined. As a matter of fact, alchemists widely employed the emblematic genre, that conflates word and image, 'body' and 'soul', to convey their beliefs.

To the difficulty of deciphering the meaning of alchemical treatises is added the problem of succeeding in offering a new and convincing reading of a play much studied as *The Winter's Tale*. The critical bibliography on this romance is so vast that one has the impression that everything has already been said. Throughout the course of this research, I have unexpectedly found a number of studies on the role of alchemy in Shakespeare's poems and plays, works that, even though indebted to Yates's pioneering ideas, surpass them by exploring new directions. I believe that *The Winter's Tale* functions as a *summa* of Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic production, presenting manifold issues that the

dramatist had already explored. Time, that is the undisputed protagonist of the sonnets and that constantly recurs, as both destroyer and redeemer, in numerous comedies and tragedies, appears as an actual character in *The Winter's Tale*. Moreover, the relationship between the artistic and the natural dimensions, a theme that Hamlet himself deals with when recommending the actors to “hold the mirror up to nature”<sup>1992</sup>, is one of the most important topics in *The Winter's Tale*, as attested by the debate between King Polixenes and Perdita in the sheep-shearing scene. A discussion of the context of nature versus art also entails a wider consideration on the significance of dramatic art: in *The Winter's Tale*, the characters constantly converse with the audience thus suggesting that, as Hamlet himself seems to imply, the public itself, i.e. ‘nature’, is being represented on the stage. As documented by Spurgeon, nature is one of the most recurrent themes in Shakespeare’s macrotext<sup>1993</sup>. Again, the role of “good goddess Nature” (II, iii, 102) is especially enhanced in *The Winter's Tale*: the play is actually framed by time and the cycle of the four seasons.

The female dimension is another key issue in the drama: generally speaking, in Shakespeare’s last plays, women are evidently endowed with healing and creative powers. The climax of the evolution of women’s roles is epitomised by the character of Paulina, who appears as “a crafty counterpart” of the dramatist<sup>1994</sup>. The woman is also connected with the world of Renaissance magic: the sort of magical art Shakespeare displays in *The Winter's Tale* is not a black, unlawful art akin to witchcraft, as it is in *Macbeth* but, rather, a “lawful” (V, iii, 111) discipline that hints at the most valuable philosophical concerns that are at the basis of the Hermetic culture. Employing her art to restore goodness, truth, and order, Paulina acts as a sort of female Prospero and prompts the audience to reflect upon the kind of magic she is using and, consequently, on the boundaries between art, both Hermetic and dramatic, and nature. As I have pointed out in this work, both theatrical and alchemical art are based on illusion: alchemy, like theatre, requires the audience to “awake their faith”<sup>1995</sup> in order to believe in the dramatist’s and the alchemist’s ‘magic’. The association between alchemy and theatre is made explicit at the beginning of Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*: after the tricksters agree with Face to use his master Lovewit’s house as an

---

<sup>1992</sup> Hamlet: “Be not too tame, neither; but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance: that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature” (*Hamlet*, III, ii, 16-22).

<sup>1993</sup> See Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [1935] 1968, pp. 44ff.

<sup>1994</sup> William E. Engel, “*The Winter's Tale*: Kinetic emblems and memory images in *The Winter's Tale*”, cit., p. 87.

<sup>1995</sup> Immediately before allowing the transformation of Queen Hermione from stone to living woman, Paulina asks the audience to awake their faith: “It is required / You do awake your faith” (V, iii, 94-5).

alchemical laboratory, they “all begin to act”<sup>1996</sup>, thus starting their ‘alchemical performance’.

Moving from the wide critical apparatus that already exists on *The Winter’s Tale*, my intent has been to shed further light on this romance and on the epoch in which it was composed and performed. In discussing the different and seemingly incompatible approaches adopted by Queen Elizabeth and King James towards Renaissance ‘occult philosophy’, my purpose has also been to assess, and sometimes re-evaluate, the relevance of Hermetic thought to the shaping of the early modern English *Weltanschauung*. Shakespeare’s romance looks back nostalgically at the Golden Age of ‘Gloriana’, while, at the same time, celebrating the new king’s ideals. As a matter of fact, *The Winter’s Tale* certainly pays homage to the kind of studies supported by the Virgin Queen, some interests that were pursued by the children of James, Princess Elizabeth and Prince Henry of Wales, and also glorifies the values of peace and union promoted by the Stuart monarch, associated with Mercury, Solomon, and Hermes Trismegistus.

---

<sup>1996</sup> Ben Jonson, “The Argument”, l. 8, in Id., *The Alchemist*, edited by Peter Holland and William Sherman, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, edited by David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, vol. 3, p. 561.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### Shakespeare's Works

*A Descriptive Catalogue of the Early Editions of the Works of Shakespeare Preserved in the Library of Eton College*, Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press, London, 1909.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *The Works of William Shakespeare, the Text Formed From a New Collation of the Early Editions: to Which Are Added All the Original Novels and Tales On Which the Plays are Founded; Copious Archaeological Annotations on Each Play; an Essay on the Formation of the Text; and a Life of the Poet*, edited by James Orchard Halliwell, Printed for the editor by J.E. Adlard, London, 1853-1865, 16 vols.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *Sonnets*, Being a Reproduction in Facsimile of The First Edition 1609, From the Copy in the Malone Collection in the Bodleian Library, With Introduction and Bibliography by Sidney Lee, Clarendon Press, London, 1905.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *A Collection of First and Early Editions of His Works 1594 to 1700*, The Rosenbach Company, New York, 1951.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *The Winter's Tale*, edited by J. H. P. Pafford, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, Methuen, London-New York, 1984.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *The First Folio of Shakespeare*, Based on Folios in the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection, With a New Introduction by Peter W. M. Blayney, W. W. Norton & Company, New York-London, 1996.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *Pericles*, edited by Suzanne Gossett, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London, 2004.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, edited by John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, Stanley Wells, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005<sup>2</sup>.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, edited by Colin Burrow, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *The Winter's Tale*, edited by John Pitcher, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London, 2010.

SHAKESPEARE, William, *Cymbeline*, edited by J. M. Nosworthy, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London, [1955] 2013.

## **Alchemical and Hermetic Works**

AGNELLO, Giovanni Baptista, *The Revelation of the Secret Spirit. Declaring the most concealed secret of ALCHYMIE. Written first in Latine by an vnknowne Author, but explained in Italian, by Iohn Baptista Lambye*, Printed by Iohn Haviland for Henrie Skelton, London, 1623.

ALLEGRETTI, Antonio, *De la trasmutatione de metalli. Poema d'alchimia del XVI secolo*, a cura di Mino Gabriele, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma, 1981.

ANDREAE, Johann Valentin, *Christianopolis*, introduced and translated by Edward H. Thompson, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1999. (Johannes Valentinus Andrae, *Reipublicae Christianopolitanae descriptio*, Argentorati, 1619).

ANON., *L'Enfant Hermaphrodite du Soleil et de la Lune ou Exposé de la théorie et de la pratique de la recherche et fabrication de la Pierre des Sages par un Philosophe et Adepte Inconnu*, 1452, J. C. Bailly, Paris, 1985.

ANON., *Le Precieux Don de Dieu* (Ms. N. 3 de la Collection Verginelli-Rota, Bibliothèque de l'Accademia dei Lincei, Rome), edited by Mino Gabriele, Bailly, Paris, 1988.

ANTHONY, Francis, *Panacea aurea sive Tractatus duo de ipsius Auro Potabili*, Ex Bibliopolio Frobeniano, Hamburgi, 1618.

ANTHONY, Francis, PHILALETHES, Eirenaeus, RIPLEY, George, et al., *Collectanea Chymica: A Collection of Ten Several Treatises in Chymistry*, Printed for William Cooper at the Pelican in Little Britain, London, 1684.

AQUINAS, Thomas (attributed to), *Aurora Consurgens. A Document attributed to Thomas Aquinas on the Problems of Opposites in Alchemy*, edited by Marie-Louise von Franz, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966.

*Artis auriferae*, Excudebat Conr. Waldkirch, Expensis Claudij de Marne, Basileae, 1593, 2 vols.

ASHMOLE, Elias, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum. Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of our Famous English Philosophers, who have written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language. Faithfully Collected into one Volume*, A Reprint of the London Edition 1652, With a New Introduction by Allen G. Debus, Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York-London, 1967. (Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, Printed by J. Grismond for Nathaniel Brooke, London, 1652).

BACON, Roger, *Secretum secretorum cum glossis et notulis*, in Id., *Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi*, edited by Robert Steele, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1920, vol. 5, pp. 25-175.

BACON, Roger, *The Mirror of Alchimy, Composed by the Thrice-Famous and Learned Fryer, Roger Bachon*, edited by Stanton J. Linden, Garland, New York-London, 1992. (Rogerius Bachon, *Speculum alchemiae in In Hoc Volumine De Alchemia continentur haec. Gebri Arabis, Philosophi solertissimi, rerumque naturalium, praecipue metallicarum peritissimi, De investigatione perfectionis metallorum. [...] Speculum Alchemiae, doctissimi viri Rogerii Bachonis. Correctorium Alchemiae doctissimi viri Richardi Anglici. Rosarius minor, de Alchemia, Incerti authoris. Liber Secretorum Alchemiae Calidis filium Jazichi Judaei. Tabula Smaragdina de Alchemia, Hermetis Trismegistis. Hortulani philosophi, super Tabulam Smaragdinam Hermetis, Commentarium, Norimbergae apud Joh. Petreium, 1541).*

BERTHELOT, Marcellin (ed.), *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, avec la collaboration de Ch. Em. Ruelle, Georges Steinheil, Paris, 1888, 3 vols.

BOSTOCKE, Richard, *The Difference Betwene the Auncient Physicke, First Taught by the Godly Forefathers, Consisting in vnitie Peace and Concord: and the Latter Physicke Proceeding From Idolaters, Ethnickes, and Heathen: as Gallen, and such other other consisting in dualitie, discorde, and contrarietie And Wherein the Naturall Philosophie of Aristotle Doth Differ from the Trueth of Gods Worde, and is iniurious to Christianitie and Sounde Doctrine*, Printed by G. Robinson for Robert Walley, London, 1585.

BONUS OF FERRARA, Petrus, *Pretiosa margarita novella*, Apud Aldi filios, Venetii, 1546. (Engl. tr. Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, The Original Aldine Edition, James Elliott & Co., London, 1894).

BRAHE, Tycho, *Learned: Tico Brahae his Astronomicall Coniectur of the new and much Admired [star] Which Appered in the year 1572*, Printed at London, By B.A. and T.F. for Michaell [Sparke] and Samuell Nealand, 1632.

CALID, *The Booke of the Secrets of Alchimie, Composed by Galid the Sonne of Jazich, Translated out of Hebrew into Arabick, and out of Arabick into Latine, and out of Latin into English*, in Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchimy*, edited by Stanton J. Linden, Garland, New York-London, 1992, pp. 28-48. (Calidis, *Liber Secretorum Alchemiae*, in *In Hoc Volumine De Alchemia [...]*, Norimbergae apud Joh. Petreium, 1541).

CHARNOCK, Thomas, *Alchemical Letter to Queen Elizabeth*, transcribed by Fiona Oliver, introduction by Adam McLean, Adam McLean, Glasgow, 2002.

CHESNE, Joseph du, *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke, for the Preseruation of Health. Written in Latin by Iosephus Quersitanus, Doctor of Phisicke. And Translated into English, by Thomas Tymme*, Printed by Thomas Creede, London, 1605.

CHESTER, Robert of, *The Book of the Composition of Alchemy*, edited by Adam McLean, Adam McLean, Glasgow, 2002. (*Liber de compositione alchemiae, quem edidit Morienvs Romanus, Calid Regi Aegyptiorum: quem Robertus Castrensis de Arabico in Latinum transtulit*, in *Artis auriferae*, Excudebat Conr. Waldkirch, Expensis Claudij de Marne, Basileae, 1593, vol. 2, pp. 3-54).

CONDEESYANUS, Hermannus, *Dyas Chymica Tripartita*, Lucas Jennis, Frankfurt, 1625.

CONSTANTINE OF PISA, *The Book of the Secrets of Alchemy*, edited by Barbara Obrist, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1990. (Constantinus Pisanus, *Liber secretorum alchimie*, 13<sup>th</sup> century, MS. Ferguson 104, Glasgow University Library, Glasgow).

COPENHAVER, Brian P. (ed.), *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

DASTIN, John, *Epistola boni viri* (14<sup>th</sup> century), in Wilfred R. Theissen, "John Dastin's Letter on the Philosopher's Stone", *Ambix*, vol. 33, Part 2/3, November 1986, pp. 78-87.

DASTIN, John, *Visio* (14<sup>th</sup> century), in Wilfred Theisen, "John Dastin's Alchemical Vision", *Ambix*, vol. 46, Part 2, July 1999, pp. 65-72.

DEE, John, *The Private Diary of Dr. John Dee, and the Catalogue of his Library of Manuscripts, from the original manuscripts in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and Trinity College Library, Cambridge*, edited by James Orchard Halliwell, Camden Society, John Bower Nichols and Son, London, 1842.

DEE, John, *Lists of Manuscripts Formerly Owned by John Dee*, with Preface and Identification by M.R. James, Printed at the Oxford University Press for the Bibliographical Society, Oxford, 1921.

DEE, Arthur, *Fasciculus Chemicus: or Chymical Collections, Expressing The Ingress, Progress, and Egress, of the Secret Hermetick Science, out of the choisest and most Famous Authors [...] Whereunto is added, The Arcanum or Grand Secret of Hermetick Philosophy*, Both made English by James Hasolle, Published in Latin at Basle, 1629, London, Printed by J. Flesher for Richard Mynne, 1650.

DEE, Arthur, *Fasciculus Chemicus*, edited by Lyndy Abraham, Garland, New York and London, 1997.

DELLA RIVIERA, Cesare, *Il mondo magico degli eroi*, edizione del 1605 in caratteri moderni, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma, 1986.

DE VADIS, Egidius, *Dialogue entre la Nature et le Fils de la Philosophie*, préface de Bernardus G. Penotus a Portus, éditions Dervy, Paris, 1993.

*Divers Traitez de la Philosophie Naturelle, sçavoir La Turbe des Philosophes, ou Le Code de Verité en l'Art. La Parole Delaissée de Bernard Trevisan. Led Deux Traitez de Corneille Drebel Flaman*, Paris, 1672.

DORN, Gérard, *Dictionarium Theophrasti Paracelsi, Continens obscuriorum vocabulorum, quibus in suis Scriptis passim utitur, Definitiones: a Gerardo Dorneo collectum, et plus dimidio auctum*, Francoforti, 1584.

DORN, Gérard, *La clef de toute la philosophie chimistique et commentaires sur trois traités de Paracelse*, edited by Caroline Thuysbaert and Stéphane Feye, Beya Éditions, Grez Doiceau, 2014.

ESPAGNET, Jean de, *The Summary of Physicks Restored (Enchyridion Physicae Restitutae)*, edited by Thomas Willard, Garland, New York-London, 1999.

FERGUSON, John, *Bibliotheca Chemica: a Catalogue of the Alchemical, Chemical and Pharmaceutical Books in the Collection of the Late James Young of Kelly and Durris*, James Maclehose and sons, Glasgow, 1906, 2 vols.

FESTUGIÈRE, André Marie Jean, NOCK, Arthur Darby, RAMELLI, Ilaria (eds.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, Bompiani, Milano, 2005.

FLAMEL, Nicolas, *Écrits alchimiques*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1993.

FLAMEL, Nicolas, *His Exposition of the Hieroglyphicall Figures (1624)*, edited by Laurinda Dixon, Garland Publishing, New York, 1994.

FLAMEL, Ortensio, *Il libro rosso: compendio del magismo, delle scienze occulte e della filosofia ermetica secondo Ermete Trismegisto, Pitagora, Cleopatra, Artefius, Maria Egizia, Alberto Magno, Paracelso, Cornelio Agrippa, Cardano, Mesmer, Carlo Fourier, ecc.*, Editoriale Italiana, Milano, 1947.

FLUDD, Robert, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia*, Aere Johan-Theodori de Bry, typis Hieronymi Galleri, Oppenheimii, 1616-1621, 2 vols.

FLUDD, Robert, *Philosophicall Key*, being a transcription of the manuscript at Trinity College, Cambridge, with an introduction by Allen G. Debus, Science History Publications, New York, 1979.

FORMAN, Simon, *The Autobiography and Personal Diary of Dr. Simon Forman, the Celebrated Astrologer*, edited by James Orchard Halliwell, from the unpublished manuscripts in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, London, 1849.

FRENCH, John, *The Art of Distillation or A Treatise of the choisest Spagyricall Preparations performed by way of Distillation, being partly taken out of the most select Chymicall Authors of severall Languages, and partly out of the Authors manuall Experience*, Printed by Richard Cotes, London, 1651.

GARIN, E., Brini, M., VASOLI, C., ZAMBELLI, C. (eds.), *Testi Umanistici su l'Ermetismo. Testi di Ludovico Lazzarelli, F. Giorgio Veneto, Cornelio Agrippa di Nettesheim*, Fratelli Bocca, Roma, 1955.

GESNER, Konrad, *The newe Iewell of Health, wherein is containyed the most excellent Secretes of Phisicke and Philosophie, deuided into fower Bookes. [...] Gathered out of the best and most approued Authors, by that excellent Doctor Gesnerus. Also the Pictures, and maner to make the Vessels, Furnaces, and other Instrumentes therevnto belonging. Faithfully corrected and published in Englishe, by George Baker, Chirurgian, Henrie Denham, London, [1570] 1576.*

GESNER, Konrad, *The Practice of the new and old Physicke: wherein is contained the most excellent Secrets of Phisicke and Philosophy, deuided into foure Bookes [...], Newly corrected and published in English by George Baker one of the Queenes Maiesties chiefe Chirurgians in Ordinary*, Peter Short, London, 1599.

GREENE, Robert, *The Honorable Historie of Frier Bacon, and Frier Bongay As it was plaid by her Maiesties seruants*, Printed by Adam Islip for Edward White, London, 1594.

KELLY, Edward, *The Alchemical Writings*, translated from the Hamburg edition of 1676, James Elliott and Co., London, 1893. (*Edouardi Kellaie Tractatus duo egregii de lapide philosophorum*, Apud Gothofredum Schultzen, Hamburgi, 1676).

LAMBSPRINGII, *Nobilis Germani, Libellus de Lapide Philosophico*, in *Triga Chemica, id est de Lapide Philosophico Tractatus tres editore et Commentatore Nicolao Bernaudo Delphinat*, Apud Christophorum Raphelengium, 1599.

LIBAVIUS, Andreas, *Alchymia*, Excudebat Joannes Saurius, Impensis Petri Kopffii, Francofurti, 1606.

LOCK, Humfrey, “*Mysticall Wordes and Names Infinite*”: *an Edition and Study of Humfrey Lock’s Treatise on Alchemy*, edited by Peter J. Grund, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, 2011.

MAGNUS, Albertus, *Libellus de alchimia: ascribed to Albertus Magnus*, translated from the Borgnet Latin Edition, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1958. (Albertus Magnus, *Libellus de alchimia*, in Id., *Opera omnia*, edited by Borgnet, Paris, 1890-1899, vol. 37, pp. 545-573).

MAGNUS, Albertus, *Compound of compounds*, translated by Luc Villeneuve, Adam McLean, Glasgow, 2003. (Albertus Magnus, *Compositum de compositis*, in *Theatrum Chemicum*, Argentorati, Sumptibus Heredum Eberh. Zetzneri, 1659, vol. 4, pp. 825-841).

MAIERO, Michaele, *Symbola avreae mensae*, Francofvrti, Typis Antonij Hummij, Impensis Lucae Iennis, 1617.

MAIERO, Michaele, *Tripus aureus, hoc est, Tres tractatus chymici selectissimi, nempe I. Basili Valentini, Benedectini ordinis monachi, Germani, Practica una cum 12 clavibus et appendice, ex Germanico; II. Thomae Nortoni, Angli philosophi Crede mihi seu Ordinale, ante annos 140. ab authore scriptum, nunc ex anglicano manuscripto in latinum translatum, phrasi cuiusque authoris ut et sententia retenta; III. Cremeris cuiusdam Abbatis Westmonasteriensis Angli Testamentum, hactenus nondum publicatum, nunc in diversarum nationum gratiam editi, et figuris cupro affabre incisus ornati opera et studio Michaelis Maieri Phil. et Med. D. Com. P. et c.*, Francofurti, ex chalcographia Pauli Iacobi, impensis Lucae Iennis, 1618.

MAIER, Michael, *Atalanta fugiens. Sources of an Alchemical Books of Emblems*, edited and translated by Helena Maria Elizabeth de Jong, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1969. (Michaele Maiero, *Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, Emblemata nova de secretis naturae chymica*, Oppenheimii, Ex typographia Hieronymi Galleri, Sumptibus Joh. Theodori de Bry, 1618).

MAIER, Michael, *Atalanta Fugiens*, translated and edited by Joscelyn Godwin, Phanes Press, Grand Rapids, USA, 1989.

MANGET, Jean-Jacques, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, Chouet, G. De Tournes, Cramer, Perachon, Ritter & S. De Tournes, Genevae, 1702, 2 vols.

MORIENUS, *A Testament of Alchemy being the Revelations of Morienus, Ancient Adept and Hermit of Jerusalem to Khalid Ibn Yazid Ibn Mu'Awiyya, King of the Arabs of the Divine Secrets of the Magisterium and Accomplishment of the Alchemical Art*, edited by Lee Stavenhagen, Published for The Brandeis University Press by The University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1974. (*Liber de compositione alchemiae in Artis auriferae*, Excudebat Conr. Waldkirch, Expensis Claudij de Marne, Basileae, 1593, vol. 2, pp- 3-54).

*Musaeum Hermeticum, Reformatum et Amplificatum*, Hermannum à Sande, Francofurti, 1678. (Engl. tr. *The Hermetic Museum. Restored and Enlarged: Most Faithfully Instructing All Disciples of the Sopho-Spagyric Art How That Greatest and Truest Medicine of The Philosopher's Stone May Be Found and Held*, now first done into English from the Latin original published at Frankfort in the year 1678, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, J. Elliot and Co., London, 1893).

MYLIUS, Johannes D., *Philosophia reformatata*, Francofurti, Apud Lucam Iennis, 1622.

NEWMAN, William R. (ed.), *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1991.

NORTON, Thomas, *Ordinal of Alchemy*, edited by John Reidy, published for the Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975.

PARACELSE, *De l'alchimie*, introduction, traduction, notes et commentaires de Lucien Braun, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, Strasbourg, 2000.

PARACELSUS, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus the Great*, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, James Elliott, London, 1894, 2 vols.

PARACELSUS, *Selected Writings*, edited by Jolande Jacobi, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1951.

PARACELSUS, *Four Treatises*, edited with a preface by Henry E. Sigerist, translated with introductory essays by C. L. Temkin, G. Rosen, G. Zilboorg, H. E. Sigerist, The Johnson Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, [1941] 1996.

PARACELSUS, *Paracelsus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541. Essential Theoretical Writings*, edited by Andrew Weeks, Brill, Leiden, 2008.

PARIGI, Silvia, ROSSI, Paolo (eds.), *La magia naturale nel Rinascimento: testi di Agrippa, Cardano e Fludd*, Utet, Torino, 1989.

PEREIRA, Michela (ed.), *Alchimia. I testi della tradizione occidentale*, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano, 2006.

PERNETY, Dom *Les Fables Égyptiennes et Grecques Dévoilées & réduites au même principe, avec une Explication des Hiéroglyphes, et de la Guerre de Troye*, Delalain, Paris, 1786, 2 vols.

PERNETY, Dom, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermetique dans le quel on trouve les allégories fabuleuses des poètes, les métaphores, les énigmes et les termes barbares des philosophes hermétiques expliquées*, texte conforme à l'édition de 1787, E.P. Denoël, Paris, 1972.

PHILALETHES, Eirenaeus, *Secrets Reveal'd: or, An Open Entrance to the Shut-Palace of the King: Containing, the Greatest Treasure in Chymistry, never yet so Plainly Discovered*, W. Godbid for William Cooper, London, 1669.

PHILALETHES, Eirenaeus, ANTONY Francis, RIPLEY, George et al., *Collectanea chemica being Certain Select Treatises on Alchemy and Hermetic Medicine*, James Elliott & Co., London, 1893.

PHILALETHES, Eugenius, *Magia Adamica: Or, The Antiquitie of Magic*, in Id., *The Man-Mouse Taken in a Trap*, London, 1650.

PICCOLINI, Sabina e Rosario (eds.), *La Biblioteca degli Alchimisti: itinerario alchemico attraverso i testi dei veri sapienti*, Franco Muzzio, Padova, 1996<sup>2</sup>.

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, Giovanni Francesco, *Opus Aureum*, a cura di Maurizio Barracano, Arktos, Carmagnola, 1979. (Joannes Franciscus Picus Mirandulae Dom, *Opus Aureum*, in Jean-Jacques Manget, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, Chouet, G. De Tournes, Cramer, Perachon, Ritter & S. De Tournes, Genevae, 1702, vol. 2, pp. 558-584).

QVERCETANI DOCT. MEDICIQVE REGII, *Ad Veritatem Hermeticae Medicinae, Lvtetiae Parisiorvm*, Apud Abrahamvm Savgrain, 1604.

RIPLEY, George, *Cantilena* (MS. Ashmole 1445, VIII, pp. 2-12), in Frank Sherwood Taylor, "George Ripley's Song", *Ambix*, vol. 2, 1946, pp. 177-81.

RIPLEY, George, *The Compound of Alchymy or the Ancient Hidden Art of Archemie: Containing the right & perfectest meanes to make the PHILOSOPHERS STONE, Aurum potabile, with other excellent Experiments. Divided into Twelve Gates*, Thomas Orwin, London, 1591.

RIPLEY, George, *Compound of Alchymy* (1591), edited by Stanton J. Linden, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2001.

*Rosarium Philosophorum, Ein alchemisches Florilegium*, edited by Joachim Telle, reprint from original edition published in Frankfurt in 1550, Weinheim, VCH, 1992, 2 vols. (*Rosarium philosophorum*, in *Artis auriferae*, Excudebat Conr. Waldkirch, Expensis Claudij de Marne, Basileae, 1593, vol. 2, pp. 204- 384).

RULAND, Martin, *A Lexicon of Alchemy or Alchemical Dictionary, Containing a Full and Plain Explanation of All Obscure Words, Hermetic Subjects, and Arcane Phrases of Paracelsus*, 1612, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, John Watkins, London, 1893. (Martini Rulandi, *Lexicon alchemiae, sive Dictionarium alchemisticum Cum obscuriorum Verborum, et Rerum Hermeticarum, tum Theophrast-Paracelsicarum phrasium, planam explicationem continens*, Palthenus, Francofurti, 1612).

RUPESCISSA, John de, *The Book of Quintessence*, Hermetic Research Series n. 9, Adam MacLean, Glasgow, 2002 (Ioannis de Rupescissa, *De consideratione quintae essentiae rerum omnium*, 1561).

SCHIAVONE, Valeria (ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 2001.

SCHULER, Robert M. (ed.), *Alchemical Poetry, 1575-1700: from Previously Unpublished Manuscripts*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1995.

*Secretum Secretorum. Nine English Versions*, edited by M. A. Manzalaoui, Published for The Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.

SENDIVOGIUS, Michael, *A Treatise on Salt*, Hermetic Research Series n. 8, Adam McLean, Glasgow, 2002.

STARKEY, George, *The Marrow of Alchemy*, Printed by A.M. for Edw. Brewster, London, 1654.

STARKEY, George, *A True Light of Alchymy, Containing A Correct Edition of the Marrow of Alchymy*, Printed by I. Dawks for the author, London, 1709.

*Theatrum Chemicum: praecipuos selectorum auctorum tractatus de chemiae et lapidis philosophici*, Sumptibus Heredum Eberh. Zetzneri, Argentorati, 1659-1661, 6 vols. (first published, E. Zetzneri, Ursel, 1602, 4 vols.).

THURNEYSSER, Leonhard, *Quinta essentia, das ist, Die höchste Subtilitet, Krafft, und Wirkung, beyder der fürtrefflichsten, vnd menschlichem Geschlecht am nützlichsten Künsten, der Medicin vnd Alchemy [...]*, Cum Privilegio Cesareo, Leipzig, 1574.

TREVISANUS, Bernardus, *La parole delaisée*, in *Trois traitez de la philosophie naturelle, non encores imprimez*, Par Iean Sara, Paris, 1618.

TRISMOSIN, Solomon, *Splendor solis*, Including 22 Allegorical Pictures Reproduced from the Original Paintings in the Unique Manuscript on Vellum, dated 1582, in the British Museum, With Introduction, Elucidation of the Paintings, aiding the Interpretation of their Occult Meaning, Trismosin's Autobiographical Account of his Travels in Search of the Philosopher's Stone, A Summary of his Alchemical Process Called 'The Red Lion', and Explanatory Notes by J. K., Kegan Paul, Trench, Rubner & Co., London, 1920.

*Turba philosophorum*, in *Artis auriferae*, Excudebat Conr. Waldkirch, Expensis Claudij de Marne, Basileae, 1593, vol. 1, pp. 1-137. (Engl. tr. *Turba philosophorum or Assembly of the Sages*, translated by Arthur Edward Waite, George Redway, London, 1896).

TYMME, Thomas, *A Dialogue Philosophicall Wherein Natures Secret Closet is Opened, and the Cause of all Motion in Nature Shewed, out of Matter and Forme, tending to mount Mans Minde from Natures to Supernaturall and Celestiall promotion: And how all things exist in the number of three. Together with the Invention of an Artificiall perpetuall motion, presented to the Kings most excellent Maiestie*, T.S. For Clement Knight, London, 1612.

VALENTIN, Basile, *Les douze clefs de philosophie de frere Basil Valentin, religieux de l'ordre Sainct Benois: traictant de la vraye medecine metallique: plus l'Azoth, ou, Le moyen de faire l'or caché des philosophes: traduction francoise*, Paris, chez Ieremie et Cristophe Perier, 1624. (Basilus Valentinus, *Ein kurtz summarischer Tractat, von dem grossen Stein der Uralten*, Eisleben, 1599).

VALENTINE, Basil, *Of natural & supernatural things also of the first tincture, root, and spirit of metals and minerals, how the same are conceived, generated, brought forth, changed and augmented; Whereunto is added Fryer Roger Bacon, Of the Medicine or Tincture of Antimony; Mr. John Isaac Holland, his Work of Saturn; and Alex. Van Suchten, Of the Secrets of Antimony*, Translated out of High Dutch by Daniel Cable, Printed by Moses Pitt at the White Hart in Little Britain, London, 1671.

VALENTINE, Basil, *The Last Will and Testament of Basil Valentine*, Printed by S.G. and B.G. for Edward Brewster, London, 1671.

VALENTINE, Basil, *His Triumphant Chariot of Antimony*, with annotations of Theodore Kirkringius (1678), edited by L.G. Kelly, Garland, New York, 1990. (Basil Valentine, *His Triumphant Chariot of Antimony, with Annotations of Theodore Kirkringius*, Printed for Dorman Newman, London, 1678).

*Zoroaster's Cave, Or The Philosopher's Intellectuall Echo to One Another from their Cells*, Printed for Matthew Smelt, London, 1667.

## Other Primary Sources

AIKIN, Lucy, *Memoirs of the Court of King James the First*, Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, London, 1822, 2 vols.

ALCIATO, Andrea, *Il libro degli emblemi*, a cura di Mino Gabriele, Adelphi, Milano, 2015<sup>2</sup>.

ALIGHIERI, Dante, *Inferno*, in Id., *Commedia*, con il commento di Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano, 1991, vol. 1.

ANEAU, Barthélemy, *Picta poesis, Vt Pictvra Poesis Erit*, Apud Mathiam Bonhomme, Lyons, 1552.

ARMENINI, Giovan Battista, *De' veri precetti della pittvra*, in Ravenna, Appresso Francesco Tebaldini, ad instantia di Tomaso Pasini Libraro in Bologna, 1587.

AUBREY, John, *'Brief Lives', chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the Years 1669 & 1696*, edited from the author's manuscripts by Andrew Clark, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1898, 2 vols.

AUGHTERSON, Kate (ed.), *The English Renaissance. An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, Routledge, London-New York, [1998] 2002.

BACON, Francis, *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon. Including All His Occasional Works*, edited by James Spedding, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, London, 1861, vol. I.

BACON, Francis, *New Atlantis and The Great Instauration*, edited by Jerry Weinberger, Harlan Davidson, Wheeling, Illinois, 1989<sup>2</sup>.

BACON, Francis, *Collected Works*, with a new introduction by Graham Rees, Routledge, London, 1996, 12 vols.

BACON, Francis, *The Advancement of Learning*, edited by Michael Kiernan, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2000.

BROWNE, Thomas, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, Faber & Faber, London, 1964, vol. I.

BRUNO, Giordano, *Dialoghi filosofici italiani*, a cura di Michele Ciliberto, Mondadori, Milano, 2000.

CAUS, de, Salomon, *Les raisons des forces mouvantes, avec diverses machines tant utiles que plaisantes: ausquelles sont adjoints plusieurs desseins de grottes & fontaines*, Hierosme Droüart, Paris, 1624.

COPERNICO, Niccolò, *De revolutionibus orbium caelestium. La costituzione generale dell'universo*, edited by Alexandre Koyré, Einaudi, Torino, 1975.

DAVIES, John, *Hymnes of Astraea, in acrosticke verse*, Printed by R. Field for I. Standish, London, 1599.

DEE, John, *To the Kings most excellent Maiestie. A petition from Dee to James I*, 1604.

DONNE, John, *Poems, By J. D. with Elegies on the Authors Death*, Printed by M.F. for Iohn Marriot, London, 1633.

DONNE, John, *The Sermons of John Donne*, edited by George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1953-1962, 10 vols.

FICINO, Marsilio, *Platonic Theology*, edited by James Hankins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001-2006, 6 vols.

*Gesta Grayorum or, The History of the High and Mighty Prince, Henry Prince of Purpoole, [...] Together with a Masque, as it was presented (by his Highness's Command) for the Entertainment of Q. ELIZABETH; who, with the Nobles of both Courts, was present thereat*, Printed for W. Canning, London, 1688, Reprint by Frederick Hall at the Oxford University Press, The Malone Society Reprints, 1914.

GIACOMO I STUART, *Demonologia (Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into Three Bookes)*, a cura di Giovanna Silvani, Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento, 1997.

GIOVIO, Paolo, *Dialogo dell'imprese militari et amorose*, Appresso Gvglielmo Roviglio, Lione, 1559.

HALL, John, *Select Observations on English Bodies or Cures both Empericall and Historicall, performed upon very eminent Persons in desperate Diseases. First written in Latine by Mr. John Hall*, Printed for John Sherley, at the Golden Pelican, in Little-Britain, London, 1657.

HARRISON, G. B. (ed.), *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth*, Cassell and Company, London, 1935.

JONSON, Ben, *The Alchemist*, edited by Charles Montgomery Hathaway, Holt, New York, 1903.

JONSON, Ben, *The Complete Masques*, edited by Stephen Orgel, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 1969.

JONSON, Ben, *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, edited by Martin Butler, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, edited by David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, vol. 4, pp. 433-443.

JONSON, Ben, *The Alchemist*, edited by Peter Holland and William Sherman, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, edited by David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, vol. 3, pp. 555-710.

KING JAMES THE FIRST, *Basilikon Doron or His Maiesties Instrvctions to his Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince*, Printed by Robert Waldegrave, Printer to the Kings Majestie, Edinburgh, 1603.

KING JAMES THE FIRST, *The King Maiesties Speach to the Lords and Commons of this Present Parliament at Whitehall, on Wednesday the xxi of March, ANNO DOM. 1609*, Printed by Robert Barker, London, 1609.

KING JAMES THE FIRST, *Meditation upon the Lords Prayer: Written by the Kings Maiestie, for the benefit of all his subiects, especially of such as follow the Court*, Printed by Robert Barker, and Iohn Bill, London, 1616.

KING JAMES THE FIRST, *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, Iames by the Grace of God, King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith*, Printed by Robert Barker and John Bill, London, 1616.

LORRIS, de, Guillaume, MEUN, de, Jean, *Le Roman de la rose*, Librairie Ancienne Édouard Champion, Paris, 1922, Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York, 1965, 5 vols.

LUTHER, Martin, *The Table Talk*, edited and translated by William Hazlitt, Bell & Daldy, London, 1872.

MACKAY, Christopher S. (ed.), *The Hammer of Witches. A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

MOFFETT, Thomas, *Nobilis or A View of the Life and Death of a Sidney and Lessus Lugubris*, with introduction, translation and notes by Virgil B. Heltzel and Hoyt H. Hudson, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1940.

NICHOLS, John, *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First: His Royal Consort, Family, and Court; Collected from Original Manuscripts, Scarce Pamphlets, Corporation Records, Parochial Registers, Etc.*, John Nichols, New York, Franklin, London, Society of Antiquaries, 1828, 4 vols.

OVIDIUS NASO, Publius, *Metamorphoses*, edited by Richard J. Tarrant, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

PARKINSON, John, *Paradisi in Sole. Paradisus Terrestris*, Printed by Humphrey Lownes and Robert Young, London, 1629.

PEACHAM, Henry, *Minerva Britanna or a Garden of Heroical Devises, Furnished and Adorned with Emblemes and Impresas of Sundry Natures*, Printed in Shoe-lane at the signe of the Faulcon by WA: Dight, London, 1612.

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *Oration on the Dignity of Man. A New Translation and Commentary*, edited by Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, Massimo Riva, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012.

PORFIRIO, *L'antro delle Ninfe*, a cura di Laura Simonini, Adelphi, Milano, 2006.

PUTTENHAM, George, *The Arte of English Poesie*, edited by Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [1936] 1970. (or. ed. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, London, 1589).

QUEEN ELIZABETH THE FIRST, *The golden speech of Queen Elizabeth to her last Parliament, 30 November, Anno Domini, 1601*, Printed by Tho. Milbourn, London, 1659.

QUEEN ELIZABETH THE FIRST, *Collected Works*, edited by Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 2000.

RALEGH, Walter, *The History of the World*, Printed for R. Best, In. Place & Sam Cartwright, London, 1652.

RIPA, Cesare, *Iconologia*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1976.

SAINT TERESA OF AVILA, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*, Thomas Baker, London, 1921. (Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Moradas del castillo interior*, 1588, in *Obras completas de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, Transcripción, introducciones y notas de Efrén de la Madre de Dios O.C.D. y Otger Steggink O. Carm., Madrid, La Editorial Católica, [1962] 1967, pp. 363-450).

SCOT, Reginald, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, a reprint of the first edition published in 1584, edited by Brinsley Nicholson, Elliott Stock, London, 1886.

SPENSER, Edmund, *The Faerie Qveene*, edited by A.C. Hamilton, Longman, London, 2001.

TAYLOR, Thomas, *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs: a Translation of Porphyry's De antro nympharum from The Commentaries of Proclus*, 1788-1789, in George Mills Harper and Kathleen Raine (eds.), *Thomas Taylor the Platonist. Selected Writings*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1969.

TAYLOR, Thomas, *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries. A Dissertation*, J. W. Bouton, New York, 1891.

*The Holy Bible, Conteyning the old Testament, and the New: Newly Translated out of the Originall tongues: & with the former Translations diligently compared and reuised, by his Maiesties Speciall Comandament. Appointed to be read in Churches*, Imprinted at London by Robert Barker, Printer to the Kings most Excellent Maiestie, 1611.

VASARI, Giorgio, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*, nell'edizione per i tipi di Lorenzo Torrentino, Firenze 1550, a cura di Luciano Bellosi e Aldo Rossi, Einaudi, Torino, 1986.

WARNER, William, *Albions England a continued historie of the same kingdome, from the originals of the first inhabitants thereof: and most the chiefe alterations and accidents there happening: vnto, and in, the happie raigne of our now most gracious soueraigne Queene Elizabeth. With varietie of inuentiue and historicall intermixtures, First penned and published by William Warner: and now reuised, and newly enlarged by the same author*, Printed by the widow Orwin, for Ioan Broome, London, 1597.

WHITNEY, Geoffrey, *Choice of Emblemes*, a fac-simile reprint, edited by Henry Green, Lovell Reeve & Co., London, 1866.

WINTERSON, Jeanette, *The Gap of Time. The Winter's Tale Retold*, Hogarth, London, 2015.

## 2. CRITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Shakespearean Studies

ADELMAN, Janet, *Suffocating Mothers. Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*, Routledge, New York, 1992.

ALEXANDER, Catherine M.S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

APPELBAUM, Robert, "‘Lawful as Eating’: Art, Life and Magic in *The Winter's Tale*", *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 42, 2014, pp. 32-41.

BAMBER, Linda, *Comic Women, Tragic Men. A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1982.

BARBER, Cesar Lombardi, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy. A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1959.

BATE, Jonathan, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.

BEDNARZ, James P., *Shakespeare and the Truth of Love: the Mystery of The Phoenix and the Turtle*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012.

BLOOM, Harold, *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1998.

BLOOM, Harold (ed.), *William Shakespeare: Romances. New Edition*, Bloom's Literary Criticism, Infobase, New York, 2011.

BOAS, Frederick S., *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1969.

BURROW, Colin, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

CARROLL, William C., *The Metamorphoses of Shakespearean Comedy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985.

CLARK, Cumberland, *Shakespeare and Science. A Study of Shakespeare's Interest in, and Literary and Dramatic Use of, Natural Phenomena; with an Account of the Astronomy, Astrology, and Alchemy of his Day, and his Attitude Towards These Sciences*, Cornish Brothers, Birmingham, 1929.

CLARK, Cumberland, *Shakespeare and the Supernatural*, William & Norgate, London, 1931.

COLLEY, Scott, "Leontes's search for wisdom in *The Winter's Tale*", in *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 48, n. 1, Jan. 1983, pp. 43-53.

CORTI, Claudia, "Quando dire è fare. Da *Pandosto* a *The Winter's Tale*", *Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Compare*, vol. XLIV, Fasc. 1, 1991, Pacini Editore, Pisa, pp. 19-44.

COWLING, George Herbert, *Music on the Shakespearean Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1913.

EGAN, Gabriel, "Money, Gold, and G(u)ilt: Shakespearian Alchemy", in Id., *Shakespeare*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, pp. 231-237.

FABINY, Tibor (ed.), *Shakespeare and the Emblem. Studies in Renaissance Iconography and Iconology*, Szeged, Egyetem, Hungary, 1984.

FLOYD-WILSON, Mary, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013.

FRYE, Northrop, *A Natural Perspective: the Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1965.

FRYE, Northrop, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, edited by Robert Sandler, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986.

FUSCH, Daniel, "Wonder and Ceremonies of Waking in Shakespeare's Late Plays", *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 14, 2015, pp. 125-147.

GARBER, Marjorie, *Shakespeare After All*, Anchor Books, New York, 2004.

GRANVILLE-BARKER, Harley, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1978.

GRAY, Ronald, *Shakespeare on Love: The Sonnets and Plays in Relation to Plato's Symposium, Alchemy, Christianity and Renaissance Neo-Platonism*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2011.

GREEN, Henry, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers: an Exposition of their Similarities of Thought and Expression Preceded by a View of Emblem Literature down to A.D. 1616*, Trübner & Co., London, 1870.

GREENBLATT, Stephen J., *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001.

GURR, Andrew, "The Bear, the Statue, and Hysteria in *The Winter's Tale*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 34, n. 4, 1983, pp. 420-25.

GURR, Andrew, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, Fourth Edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

HALEY, David, *Shakespeare's Courtly Mirror: Reflexivity and Prudence in All's Well That Ends Well*, University of Delaware Press, Newark; Associated University Presses, London-Toronto, 1993.

HANKINS, John Erskine, *Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Thought*, Archon Books, Hamden, Conn., 1978.

HARTWIG, Joan, "The Tragicomic Perspective in *The Winter's Tale*", *ELH*, vol. 37, n. 1, March 1970, pp. 12-36.

HOMAN, Sidney, *Shakespeare and the Triple Play. From Study to Stage to Classroom*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, Associated University Presses, London, 1988.

HONIGMANN, E.A.J., *Myriad-Minded Shakespeare. Essays on the Tragedies, Problem Comedies and Shakespeare the Man*, Macmillan, London, 1998<sup>2</sup>.

HUNT, Maurice (ed.), *The Winter's Tale: Critical Essays*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1995.

INNOCENTI, Loretta, *La scena trasformata. Adattamenti neoclassici di Shakespeare*, Sansoni Editore, Firenze, 1985.

IWASAKI, Soji, *Nature Triumphant. Approach to The Winter's Tale*, Sanseido, Tokyo, 1991.

IYENGAR, Sujata, *Shakespeare's Medical Language: A Dictionary*, Arden Shakespeare Dictionary Series, Bloomsbury, London, 2011.

JAGGARD, William, *Shakespeare Bibliography: A Dictionary of Every Known Issue of the Writings of our National Poet and of Recorded Opinion thereon in the English Language*, Shakespeare Press, Stratford-on-Avon, 1911.

JONES-DAVIES, Margaret, "'Suspension of Disbelief' in *The Winter's Tale*", *Études anglaises*, vol. 63, Part 3, 2013, pp. 259-273.

KAMACHI, Mitsuru, "What's in a Name?: Hermione and the Hermetic Tradition in *The Winter's Tale*", *Shakespearean Studies* (29), 1991, pp. 21-36.

KNIGHT, Wilson G., *Myth and Miracle. An Essay on the Mystic Symbolism of Shakespeare*, J. Burrow & Co., London, [c. 1929].

KNIGHT, Wilson, *The Mutual Flame. On Shakespeare's Sonnets and The Phoenix and the Turtle*, Methuen, London, 1955.

KNIGHT, Wilson G., *The Crown of Life. Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays*, Methuen & Co., London, 1965.

LAROQUE, François, *Shakespeare's festive world: Elizabethan seasonal entertainment and the professional stage*, translated by Janet Lloyd, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993. (François Laroque, *Shakespeare et la fête. Essai d'archéologie du spectacle dans l'Angleterre élisabéthaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1988).

LEE, Sidney, *Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance*, Published for the British Academy, by H. Milford, Oxford University Press, [c. 1915].

LEIGH, Lori, *Shakespeare and the Embodied Heroine: Staging Female Characters in the Late Plays and Early Adaptations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014.

LEWIS, B. Roland, *The Shakespeare Documents. Facsimiles, Transliterations, Translations, & Commentary*, Stanford University Press, Stanford University, California, 1940-1941, 2 vols.

MARTINO, Mario, *Il problema del tempo nei sonetti di Shakespeare*, Bulzoni Editore, Roma, 1985.

MERCHANT, W. M., *Shakespeare and the Artist*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959.

MURRAY, W. A., "Why was Duncan's Blood Golden?", in *Shakespeare's Survey. An Annual Survey of Shakespearean Study & Production*, edited by Kenneth Muir, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1966, vol. 19, pp. 34-44.

NICHOLL, Charles, *The Chemical Theatre*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980.

NUTTAL, Anthony David, *A New Mimesis. Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*, Methuen, London, 1983.

ORGEL, Stephen, *Imagining Shakespeare. A History of Texts and Visions*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003.

PACKER, Tina, *Women of Will: Following the Feminine in Shakespeare's Plays*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2015.

PAGNINI, Marcello, *Shakespeare e il paradigma della specularità: lettura di due campioni: King Lear e A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, Pacini, Pisa, 1976.

PARIS, Jean, *Shakespeare par lui-même*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1954.

PETTET, Charles Ernst, *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition*, Methuen, London, 1970.

PILGRIM, Richard, *You Precious Winners All. A Study of The Winter's Tale*, Becket Publications, Oxford, 1983.

POWER, Andrew J., LOUGHNANE, Rory (eds.), *Late Shakespeare, 1608-1613*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013.

RICHARDS, I.A., "The Sense of Poetry: Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*", *Daedalus*, vol. 87, n. 3, *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, 1958, pp. 86-94.

RICHMOND, Velma Bourgeois, *Shakespeare, Catholicism, and Romance*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2015.

ROMERO ALLUÉ, Milena, "What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter's Tale*", in Id., *Immagini della mente. Scrittura e percezione visiva nella letteratura inglese del Rinascimento*, Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, Venezia, 2016, pp. 46-95.

ROSATI, Salvatore *Il giro della ruota. Saggio sul King Lear di Shakespeare*, Casa Editrice F. Le Monnier, Firenze, 1958.

SABATIER, Armelle, *Shakespeare and Visual Culture. A Dictionary*, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London-New York, 2017.

SACERDOTI, Gilberto, *Nuovo Cielo e Nuova Terra. La Rivelazione Copernicana di Antonio e Cleopatra di Shakespeare*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1990.

SCHOENFELDT, Michael (ed.), *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Blackwell, Malden, 2007.

SCOTT, William O., "Seasons and Flowers in *The Winter's Tale*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 14, n. 4, Autumn 1963, pp. 411-417.

SCRAGG, Leah, *Discovering Shakespeare's Meaning*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, London, 1988.

SEVERI, Rita, "Il lucido inganno Shakespeariano nel finale di *The Winter's Tale*", estratto dai *Quaderni di Lingue e Letterature*, 15/1990, Verona, 1990, pp. 251-258.

SEVERI, Rita, "Art in Shakespeare: Giulio Romano and Giovan Paolo Lomazzo", *Journal of Drama Studies. An International Journal of Research on World Drama in English*, vol.

7, January-July 2013, pp. 41-68.

*Shakespeare's England. An Account of the Life & Manners of his Age*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1917, vol. 1.

SIMONDS, Peggy Munoz, *Myth, Emblem, and Music in Shakespeare's Cymbeline: An Iconographic Reconstruction*, University of Delaware Press, Newark, 1992.

SMITH, Russell (ed.), *A Handbook Index to those Characters who have Speaking Parts Assigned to Them in the First Folio of Shakespeare's Plays 1623*, A. Russell Smith, London, 1904.

SMITH, Simon, "Pleasing Strains': the Dramaturgical Role of Music in *The Winter's Tale*", in Peter Holland (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey. Shakespeare's Collaborative Work*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, vol. 67, pp. 372-383.

SMITH, Simon, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse, 1603-1625*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017.

SOKOL, B.J., "Painted Statues, Ben Jonson and Shakespeare", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 52, 1989, pp. 250-253.

SOKOL, B.J., *Art and Illusion in The Winter's Tale*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994.

SPEAIGHT, Robert, *Nature in Shakespearean Tragedy*, Hollis and Carter, London, 1955.

SPURGEON, Caroline, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [1935] 1968.

SRIGLEY, Michael, *Images of Regeneration: A Study of Shakespeare's The Tempest and its Cultural Background*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Uppsala, 1985.

STEADMAN, John M., "Like Two Spirits: Shakespeare and Ficino", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 10, n. 2, Spring 1959, pp. 244-246.

STENSGAARD, K. Richard, "All's Well That Ends Well and the Galenico-Paracelsian Controversy", *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 25, n. 2, Summer 1972, pp. 173-188.

STERNFELD, Frederick W., "The Dramatic and Allegorical Function of Music in Shakespeare's Tragedies", *Annales Musicologiques*, tome III, Société de Musique d'Autrefois, Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1955, pp. 265-282.

STRACHEY, Lytton, *Books and Characters, French & English*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1922.

TAYLOR, Anthony Brian (ed.), *Shakespeare's Ovid: the Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

TAYLOR, Gary, "King Lear: The Date and Authorship of the Folio Version", in Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (eds.), *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, pp. 351-468.

TAYLOR, Gary, "Forms of Opposition: Shakespeare and Middleton", *ELR* 24, 1994, pp. 283-314.

THOMAS, Alfred, *A Blessed Shore. England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London, 2007.

TRAVERSI, Derek Antona, *Shakespeare: the Last Phase*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1965.

TRIENENS, Roger J., "The Inception of Leontes's Jealousy in *The Winter's Tale*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 4, n. 3 (Jul. 1953), pp. 321-326.

TRUAX, Elizabeth, *Metamorphosis in Shakespeare's Plays: a Pageant of Heroes, Gods, Maids, and Monsters*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewinston, 1992.

WELLS, Stanley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.

WILES, David, *Shakespeare's Almanac: A Midsummer's Night's Dream, Marriage and the Elizabethan Calendar*, Brewer, Cambridge, 1993.

WOODBRIDGE, Linda, *The Scythe of Saturn. Shakespeare and Magical Healing*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana-Chicago, 1994.

WOODS, Gillian, *Shakespeare's Unreformed Fictions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

YOUNG, David, *The Heart's Forest. A Study of Shakespeare's Pastoral Plays*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1972.

## **Studies on Alchemy, Hermeticism, and Natural Philosophy**

ABRAHAM, Lyndy, *Marvell and Alchemy*, Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1990.

ABRAHAM, Lyndy, "'The Lovers and the Tomb': Alchemical Emblems in Shakespeare, Donne, and Marvell", *Emblematica* 5:2, 1991, pp. 301-320.

ABRAHAM, Lyndy, *Harriot's Gift to Arthur Dee; Literary Images from an Alchemical Manuscript*, The Durham Thomas Harriot Seminar, Occasional Paper n. 10, Durnham, 1993.

ABRAHAM, Lyndy, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

ADAMS, Alison, LINDEN, J. Stanton (eds.), *Emblems and Alchemy*, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 1998.

AKERMAN, Susanna, *Rose Cross Over the Baltic. The Spread of Rosicrucianism in Northern Europe*, Brill, Leiden, 1998.

*Alchemy and the Occult. A Catalogue of Books and Manuscripts from the Collection of Paul and Mary Mellon Given to Yale University Library*, Yale University Library, New Haven, 1968-1977, 4 vols.

ANGLO, Sydney (ed.), *The Damned Art. Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977.

ARCHER, Jayne Elizabeth, "Rudeness itself she doth refine: Queen Elizabeth I as Lady Alchymia", in Annaliese Connolly and Lisa Hopkins (eds.), *Goddesses and Queens: the Iconography of Elizabeth I*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007, pp. 45-66.

BAFFIONI, Carmela, *Filosofia della natura e alchimia nei commenti ad Aristotele della Scuola di Alessandria*, Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Amalfi "Gli interscambi culturali e socio-economici fra l'Africa settentrionale e l'Europa mediterranea", 5-8 Dicembre 1983, Napoli, 1986, pp. 403-431.

BERTINETTO, Alessandro, VERCELLONE, Federico (eds.), *Athanasius Kircher e l'idea di scienza universale*, Milano, Mimesis, 2007.

BIEDERMANN, Hans, *Simboli. Astrologia, cabala, alchimia, emblemi araldici, divinità: la ricerca perenne dei significati nascosti*, Garzanti, Milano, 1991. (Hans Biedermann, *Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole*, Droemersch Verlaganstalt Th. Knaur Nachf., München, 1989).

BRANN, Noel, "Alchemy and Melancholy in Medieval and Renaissance Thought: A Query into the Mystical Basis of their Relationship", *Ambix*, vol. 32, part 3, November 1985, pp. 127-48.

BURLAND, C.A., *The Arts of the Alchemists*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1967.

BURNETT, Charles, "The Legend of the Three Hermes and Abu Ma 'Shar's *Kitāb Al-Ulūf* in the Latin Middle-Ages", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (39), 1976, pp. 231-234.

BURNETT, Charles, "The Astrologer's Assay of the Alchemist: Early References to Alchemy in Arabic and Latin Texts", *Ambix*, vol. 39, part 3, November 1992, pp. 103-109.

CALIFANO, Salvatore, *Storia dell'alchimia. Misticismo ed esoterismo all'origine della chimica moderna*, Firenze University Press, Firenze, 2015.

CARUSI, Paola, "Teoria e sperimentazione nell'alchimia medioevale nel passaggio da oriente a occidente", in *La diffusione delle scienze islamiche nel Medio Evo europeo*, atti del convegno internazionale promosso dall'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei Fondazione Leone Caetani e dall'Università di Roma "La Sapienza", Roma (2-4 Ottobre 1984), Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1984, pp. 355-377.

CERCHIO, Bruno, *Il suono filosofale. Musica e alchimia*, Libreria musicale italiana editrice, Lucca, 1993.

CLARK, Kenneth, "The Uroboros", *The Hermetic Journal*, n. 5, Autumn 1979, pp. 9-14.

CLERICUZIO, Antonio, RATTANSI, Piyo (eds.), *Alchemy and Chemistry in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1994.

CLUCAS, Stephen (ed.), *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought*, Springer, Dordrecht 2006.

CLULEE, Nicholas H., *John Dee's Natural Philosophy. Between Science and Religion*, Routledge, London, 1988.

COLNORT-BODET, Suzanne, *Le code alchimique dévoilé: distillateurs, alchimistes et symbolistes*, Honoré Champion, Paris, 1989.

CRISCIANI, Chiara, "Labirinti dell'oro. Specificità e mimesi nell'alchimia latina", *Aut Aut*, Luglio-Ottobre 1981, pp. 127-51.

CRISCIANI, Chiara, "Aspetti della trasmissione del sapere nell'alchimia latina. Un'immagine di formazione, uno stile di commento", *Micrologus*, n. 3, 1993, pp. 149-184.

CRISCIANI, Chiara, PEREIRA, Michela (eds.), *L'arte del sole e della luna. Alchimia e filosofia nel medioevo*, Centro italiano dei studi sull'alto medioevo, Spoleto, 1996.

CRISCIANI, Chiara, "Esperienza, comunicazione e scrittura in alchimia (secoli XIII-XIV)", *Le forme della comunicazione scientifica*, a cura di Massimo Galuzzi, Gianni Micheli e Maria Teresa Monti, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1998, pp. 85-110.

CRISCIANI, Chiara, "Opus and sermo: The Relationship between Alchemy and Prophecy (12th – 14th Centuries)", *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 13, n. 1, 2008, pp. 4-24.

CURRY, Patrick, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989.

DEBUS, Allen G., *The English Paracelsians*, Franklin Watts, New York, 1965.

DEBUS, Allen G., *The Chemical Dream of the Renaissance*, Churchill College Overseas Fellowship Lecture n. 3, W. Heffer & Sons, Cambridge, 1968.

DEBUS, Allen G., *Man and Nature in the Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978.

DEBUS, Allen G., "The Significance of Chemical History", *Ambix*, vol. 32, part. 1, March 1985, pp. 1-14.

DEBUS, Allen G., Merkel, Ingrid (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance. Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, papers presented at a conference held in March 1982 at the Institute for Renaissance and Eighteenth-Century Studies in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, Folger Books, Washington, 1988.

DEBUS, Allen G., WALTON, Michael T. (eds.), *Reading the Book of Nature: the Other Side of the Scientific Revolution*, Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Kirksville, 1998.

EAMON, William, "Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance", *Janus. Revue Internationale de l'histoire des sciences, de la médecine, de la pharmacie et de la technique*, LXX, 3-4, 1983, pp. 171-212.

EBELING, Florian, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus. Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-New York, 2007. (Florian Ebeling, *Das Geheimnis des Hermes Trismegistos*, Verlag C.H. Beck OHG, München, 2005).

ELIADE, Mircea, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, Flammarion, Paris, 1956.

ELIADE, Mircea, *Le mythe de l'alchimie*, translated by Ilena Tacou, in *Cahiers de l'Herne*, 33, 1978, pp. 157-67.

ELIADE, Mircea, *Il mito dell'alchimia seguito da L'alchimia asiatica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2001.

ERNST, Germana, GIGLIONI, Guido (eds.), *I vincoli della natura. Magia e stregoneria nel Rinascimento*, Carocci, Roma, 2012.

FABRICIUS, Johannes, *Alchemy. The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art*, Rosenkilde and Bagger, Copenhagen, 1976.

FAGIOLO DELL'ARCO, Maurizio, *Il Parmigianino. Un saggio sull'ermetismo nel Cinquecento*, Mario Bulzoni Editore, Roma, 1970.

FERINO-PAGDEN, Sylvia et al. (eds.), *Parmigianino e la pratica dell'alchimia*, Silvana Editoriale, Milano, 2003.

FERNANDO, Diana, *Alchemy. An Illustrated A to Z*, Blandford, London, 1998.

FORSHAW, J. Peter, "The Early Alchemical Reception of John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*", *Ambix*, vol. 52, n. 3, November 2005, pp. 247-69.

FRENCH, Peter, *John Dee: the World of an Elizabethan Magus*, Routledge, New York, 1972.

GABRIELE, Mino, *Commentario sul 'Mutus Liber'*, Archè, Milano, 1974.

GABRIELE, Mino (ed.), *Alchimia. La tradizione in occidente secondo le fonti manoscritte e a stampa*, Electa, Milano, 1986.

GABRIELE, Mino, *Il giardino di Hermes. Massimiliano Palombara alchimista e rosacroce nella Roma del Seicento*, IANUA, Roma, 1986.

GABRIELE, Mino, "La signification de la 'Porte magique' de Rome et la doctrine alchimique de Massimiliano Palombara", in Didier Kahn et Sylvain Matton (eds.), *Alchimie, art, histoire et mythes*, Actes du 1er colloque international de la Société d'Étude de l'Histoire de l'Alchimie, 14-15-16 Mars 1991, S.É.H.A., Paris, 1995, pp. 691-716.

GABRIELE, Mino, *Alchimia a iconologia*, Forum, Udine, 1997.

GABRIELE, Mino, *La porta magica di Roma: simbolo dell'alchimia occidentale*, Olschki, Firenze, 2015.

GEOGHEGAN, D., "A License of Henry VI to Practise Alchemy", *Ambix*, n. 6, 1957, pp. 10-17.

GODWIN, Joscelyn, *Athanasius Kircher. A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979.

GODWIN, Joscelyn, *Robert Fludd. Hermetic Philosopher and Surveyor of Two Worlds*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979.

GREGORY, Joshua C., "Chemistry and Alchemy in the Natural Philosophy of Francis Bacon, 1561-1626", *Ambix*, n. 2, (1938-46), pp. 93-111.

HART, Vaughan, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, Routledge, London-New York, 1994.

HARTLAUB, Gustav Friedrich, "Opera chemica. Eine unbekannte Bilderhandschrift der italienischen Frührenaissance", *Die BASF Aus der Arbeit der Badischen Anilin & Soda Fabrik AG*, heft 3, 10 Jahrgang, 1960, pp. 97-102.

HARTMANN, Franz, *The Life of Philippus Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim Known by the Name of Paracelsus and the Substance of his Teachings Concerning Cosmology, Anthropology, Pneumatology, Magic and Sorcery, Medicine, Alchemy and Astrology, Philosophy and Theosophy, Extracted and Translated from His Rare and Extensive Works and from Some Unpublished Manuscripts*, Kegan Paul, London, 1896.

HEALY, Margaret and Thomas (eds.), *Renaissance Transformations: The Making of English Writing, 1500-1650*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009.

HEALY, Margaret, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination. The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011.

HEISLER, Ron, "Michael Maier and England", *The Hermetic Journal*, November 1989, pp. 119-25.

HENDERSON, Joseph L., SHERWOOD, Dyane N., *Transformation of the Psyche: the Symbolic Alchemy of the Splendor Solis*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003.

HITCHCOCK, Ethan Allen, *Remarks Upon Alchemy and the Alchemists*, Crosby, Nichols, and Company, Boston, 1857.

HOCKE, Gustav René, *Il Manierismo nella letteratura. Alchimia verbale e arte combinatoria esoterica*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1965. (Gustav René Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literatur*, Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, Hamburg, 1959).

HOLMYARD, Eric John, *Alchemy*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1957.

HUGHES, Jonathan, *The Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England. Plantagenet Kings and the Search for the Philosopher's Stone*, Continuum, New York, 2012.

HUNTER, Lynette, HUTTON, Sarah (eds.), *Women, Science and Medicine 1500-1700. Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, Sutton Publishing, Phoenix Mill, Stroud, 1997.

JOLY, Bernard, *Histoire de l'alchimie*, Vuibert, Paris, 2013.

JUNG, Carl Gustav, *Alchemical Studies*, published for Bollingen Foundation by Princeton University Press, New York, 1967.

JUNG, Carl Gustav, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Routledge, London, 1968<sup>2</sup> (or. ed. *Psychologie und Alchemie*, Rascher Verlag, Zurich, 1944).

KAHN, Didier, "“Sur la scène du théâtre chymique’: alchimie, théâtre et théâtralité”, *Chrysopoeia*, tome 1, 1987, pp. 5-45.

KAHN, Didier, MATTON, Sylvain (eds.), *Alchimie, art, histoire et mythes. Actes du 1er colloque international de la Société d'Étude de l'Histoire de l'Alchimie*, Paris, 14-15-16

mars 1991, S.É.H.A., Paris, 1995.

KAHN, Didier, “Alchemical Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Preliminary Survey and Synthesis, Part I”, *Ambix*, vol. 57, part 3, 2010, pp. 249-274.

KARPENKO, Vladimir, “The Chemistry and Metallurgy of Transmutation”, *Ambix*, vol. 39, part. 2, July 1992, pp. 47-62.

KLOSSOWSKI DE ROLA, Stanislas, *Alchimie. Florilège de l'art secret, augmenté de La Fontaine des Amoureux de Science par Jehan de la Fontaine (1413)*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1974.

KLOSSOWSKI DE ROLA, Stanislas, *The Golden Game. Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988.

KNAPP, Bettina L., *Theatre and Alchemy*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1980.

LENKE, Nils, ROUDET, Nicolas, TILTON, Hereward, “Michael Maier – Nine Newly Discovered Letters”, *Ambix*, vol. 61, n. 1, February 2014, pp. 1-47.

LENNEP, Jacques Van, *Art et alchimie. Étude de l'iconographie hermétique et de ses influences*, Éditions Meddens, Bruxelles, 1966.

*Les symboles spirituels de l'alchimie: exposition à l'occasion du Festival International de l'Esotérisme*, Carcassonne 18-20 novembre 1988, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam, 1988.

LINDEN, Stanton J., *Darke Hieroglyphicks. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 1996.

LINDEN, Stanton J. (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader. From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

LINDEN, Stanton J. (ed.), *Mystical Metal of Gold. Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture*, AMS Press, New York, 2007.

LUHRMANN, T. M., “An Interpretation of the *Fama Fraternitatis* With Respect to Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*”, *Ambix*, vol. 33, part 1, March 1986, pp. 1-10.

MCLEAN, Adam, “A Rosicrucian Manuscript of Michael Maier”, *The Hermetic Journal*, n. 5, Autumn 1979, pp. 5-8.

MANDOSIO, Jean-Marc, “La place de l’alchimie dans les classifications des sciences et des arts à la Renaissance”, *Chrysopoeia*, tome 4, 1990-1991, pp. 199-282.

MATTHEWS, John et al. (eds.), *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment Revisited*, Lindisfarne Books, Hudson, 1999.

MARTELS, Z.R.W.M. von (ed.), *Alchemy Revisited: Proceedings of the International Conference on the History of Alchemy at the University of Groningen*, 17-19 April 1989, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1990.

MATTON, Sylvain, “Le traité de l’arbre de vie ou de l’arbre solaire et la tradition alchimique”, *Chrysopoeia*, tome 1, 1987, pp. 285-302.

MATTON, Sylvain, MARGOLIN, Jean Claude (eds.), *Alchimie et philosophie à la Renaissance*, Actes du Colloque International de Tours, 4-7 Décembre 1991, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 1993.

MEBANE, John S., *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: the Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson and Shakespeare*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1989.

MENDELSON, Andrew J., “Alchemy and Politics in England 1649-1665”, *Past and Present*, n. 135, May 1992, pp. 30-78.

MERCER, John Edward, *Alchemy. Its Science and Romance*, Macmillan, New York, 1921.

MONOD, Paul Kleber, *Solomon’s Secret Arts. The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2012.

MONTGOMERY, John Warwick, “Cross, Constellation, and Crucible: Lutheran Astrology and Alchemy in the Age of the Reformation”, *Ambix*, vol. 9, 1963, pp. 65-86.

MORAN, Bruce T., *The Alchemical World of the German Court. Occult Philosophy and Chemical Medicine in the Circle of Moritz of Hessen (1572-1632)*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1991.

MULTHAUF, Robert, “The Significance of Distillation in Renaissance Medical Chemistry”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* (30), 1956, pp. 329-346.

NEEDHAM, Joseph, *The Shorter Science and Civilisation in China. An Abridgement of Joseph Needham’s Original Text*, edited by Colin A. Ronan, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978-1995, 4 vols.

NEWMAN, William R., GRAFTON, Anthony (eds.), *Secrets of Nature. Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006.

NEWMAN, William R., *Promethean Ambitions. Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004.

OBRIST, Barbara, *Les débuts de l'imagerie alchimique (XIVe – XVe siècles)*, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1982.

PATAI, Raphael, "Maria the Jewess – Founding Mother of Alchemy", *Ambix*, vol. 29, part 3, November 1982, pp. 177-97.

PEREIRA, Michela, "Alchemy and Hermeticism: an Introduction to this Issue", *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 5, n. 2, "Alchemy and Hermeticism", 2000, pp. 115-120.

PEREIRA, Michela, "Heavens on Earth. From the *Tabula Smaragdina* to the Alchemical Fifth Essence", *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 5, n. 2, "Alchemy and Hermeticism", 2000, pp. 131-144.

PEREIRA, Michela, *Arcana Sapienza. L'alchimia dalle origini a Jung*, Carocci, Roma, 2001.

PÉREZ LÓPEZ, Miguel, KAHN, Didier, REY BUENO, Mar (eds.), *Chymia: Science and Nature in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle, 2010.

POSTEL, Claude, *L'homme prophétique. Science et magie à la Renaissance*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1999.

PRINCIPE, Lawrence M., *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and his Alchemical Quest*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1998.

PRINCIPE, Lawrence M. (ed.), *Chymists and Chymistry: Studies in the History of Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry*, International Conference on the History of Alchemy and Chymistry, Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, 19-23 July 2006, Science History Publications, Sagamore Beach, Mass., 2007.

PRINCIPE, Lawrence M., *The Secrets of Alchemy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 2013.

PRITCHARD, Allan, "Thomas Charnock's Book Dedicated to Queen Elizabeth", *Ambix*, vol. 26, part 1, March 1979, pp. 56-73

RATTANSI, P. M., "Alchemy and Natural Magic in Raleigh's *History of the World*", *Ambix*, vol. 13, n. 3, October 1966, pp. 122-38.

RAY, Meredith K., *Daughters of Alchemy. Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015.

READ, John, *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1947.

ROBERTS, Gareth, *The Mirror of Alchemy. Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, The British Library, London, 1994.

ROOB, Alexander, *Alchimia & mistica*, translated by Paola Bertante, Taschen, Köln, 2014. (Alexander Roob, *Alchemie und Mystik. Das hermetische Museum*, Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1997).

ROSSI, Paolo, *Francesco Bacone. Dalla magia alla scienza*, Giulio Einaudi Editore, Torino, [1957] 1974.

ROSSI, Paolo, *Il tempo dei maghi. Rinascimento e modernità*, Raffello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2006.

SCHOLEM, Gershom Gerhard, *Alchimia e kabbalah*, Einaudi, Torino, 1995.

SCHULER, Robert M., "William Blomfield, Elizabethan Alchemist", *Ambix*, vol. 20, part 2, July 1973, pp. 75-87.

SCHULER, Robert M., "Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 41, n. 1, 1980, pp. 293-318.

SHUMAKER, Wayne, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972.

SHUMAKER, Wayne, *Renaissance Curiosa. John Dee's Conversations with Angels, Girolamo Cardano's Horoscope of Christ, Johannes Trithemius and Cryptography, George Dalgarno's Universal Language*, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, Binghamton, New York, 1982.

SHUMAKER, Wayne, *Natural Magic and Modern Science. Four Treatises 1590-1657*, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, Binghamton, 1989.

SIVIN, Nathan, *Chinese Alchemy: Preliminary Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1968.

SZULAKOWSKA, Urszula, *The Alchemy of Light. Geometry and Optics in Late Renaissance Alchemical Illustration*, Brill, Leiden, 2000.

SZYDLO, Andrew Zbigniew, *Water Which Does Not Wet Hands. The Alchemy of Michael Sendivogius*, Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute for the History of Science, Warszawa, 1994.

TAYLOR, Frank Sherwood, *The Alchemists. Founders of Modern Chemistry*, Henry Schuman, New York, 1949.

TELLE, Joachim, "Astrologie et alchimie au XVI siècle. À propos des poèmes astro-alchimiques de Christoph von Hirschenberg et de Basile Valentin", *Chrysopoeia*, tome III, fasc. 2, Avril/Juin 1989, pp. 163-92.

TESTI, Gino, *Dizionario di alchimia e di chimica antiquaria*, Casa Editrice Mediterranea, Roma, 1950.

THEISEN, Wilfred, "John Dastin: the Alchemist as Co-Creator", *Ambix*, vol. 38, part 2, July 1991, pp. 73-78.

THOMPSON, Charles John Samuel, *The Lure and the Romance of Alchemy*, George G. Harrap & Company, London, 1932.

THORNDIKE, Lynn (ed.), *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1964-66, 8 vols.

TILTON, Hereward, *The Quest for the Phoenix: Spiritual Alchemy and Rosicrucianism in the Work of Count Michael Maier*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin, 2003.

TRAISTER, Barbara Howard, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London. Works and Days of Simon Forman*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001.

WEBSTER, Charles, *From Paracelsus to Newton. Magic and the Making of Modern Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982.

WILKINSON, Ronald Sterne, "The Problem of the Identity of Eirenaeus Philalethes", *Ambix*, vol. 12, 1964, pp. 24-43.

WILLARD, Thomas, "Alchemy and the Bible", in Eleanor Cook, Chaviva Hosek, Jay Macpherson, Patricia Parker, and Julian Patrick (eds.), *Centre and Labyrinth. Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1983, pp. 115-27.

WIRTH, Oswald, *Le Symbolisme Hermétique dans ses rapports avec l'alchimie et le franc-maçonnerie*, Dervy, Paris, 1969.

YATES, Frances, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Routledge, London, [1964] 2002.

YATES, Frances, *The Art of Memory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966.

YATES, Frances, *Theatre of the World*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969.

YATES, Frances, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972.

YATES, Frances, *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

YATES, Frances, *Shakespeare's Last Plays: A New Approach*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

YATES, Frances, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, Routledge, London, [1979] 2001.

ZAMBELLI, Paola, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance*, Brill, Leiden, 2007.

ZANETTI, Cristiano, *Janello Torriani and the Spanish Empire. A Vitruvian Artisan at the Dawn of the Scientific Revolution*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2017.

## Renaissance Studies

ADAMS, Alison, HARPER, J. Anthony (eds.), *The Emblem in Renaissance and Baroque Europe: Tradition and Variety*, Selected Papers of the Glasgow International Emblem Conference, 13-17 August 1990, Brill, Leiden, 1992.

BATH, Michael, *Speaking Pictures. English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture*, Longman, London, 1994.

BATH, Michael, RUSSELL, Daniel (eds.), *Deviceful Settings: the English Renaissance Emblem and its Contexts*, Selected Papers from the Third International Emblem Conference, Pittsburgh, 1993, AMS Press, New York, 1999.

BERTI, Luciano, *Il principe dello studiolo. Francesco I dei Medici e la fine del Rinascimento fiorentino*, Edam, Firenze, 1967.

BIRRELL, T.A., *English Monarchs and their Books: from Henry VII to Charles II*, The Panizzi Lectures, The British Library, London, 1986.

BORMAN, Tracy, *Elizabeth's Women. The Hidden Story of the Virgin Queen*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2009.

BORMAN, Tracy, *The Private Lives of the Tudors. Uncovering the Secrets of Britain's Greatest Dynasty*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2016.

BROOKS-DAVIES, Douglas, *The Mercurian Monarch: Magical Politics from Spenser to Pope*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983.

CHASTEL, André, *Marsile Ficin et l'art*, preface de Jean Wirth, Librairie Droz, Genève, 1996.

CROFT, Pauline, "England and the Peace with Spain, 1604", *History Review*, September 2004 (49), pp. 18-23.

DAVIDSON, Clifford, GAMEZ, Luis R., STROUPE, John H. (eds.) *Emblem, Iconography and Drama*, Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995.

DEZZI BARDESCHI, Marco (a cura di), *Lo stanzino del principe in Palazzo Vecchio: i concetti, le immagini, il desiderio*, a cura di Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, Le Lettere, Firenze, 1980.

DORAN, Susan, "Elizabeth and Catherine de' Medici", in Glenn Richardson (ed.), *The Contending Kingdoms. France and England 1420-1700*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2008, pp. 117-132.

EVANS, Robert J. W., *Rudolf II and His World: A Study in Intellectual History: 1576-1612*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973.

FREEMAN, Rosemary, *English Emblem Books*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1948.

GOLDBERG, Jonathan, *James I and the Politics of Literature. Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1983.

GOMBRICH, Ernst H., *New Light on Old Masters*, Phaidon Press, London, 1986.

GORDON, Andrew, RIST, Thomas (eds.), *The Arts of Remembrance in Early Modern England. Memorial Cultures of the Post Reformation*, Routledge, London-New York, 2013.

GORDON, Donald James, "Poet and Architect: the Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 12, 1949, pp. 152-178.

GORDON, Donald James, *The Renaissance Imagination. Essays and Lectures by D. J. Gordon*, collected and edited by Stephen Orgel, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975.

GREENBLATT, Stephen J., *Sir Walter Raleigh. The Renaissance Man and His Roles*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1973.

HAMILTON, A.C. (ed.), *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, Routledge, London, 1990.

HARKNESS, Deborah E., "A View from the Streets: Women and Medical Work in Elizabethan London", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, 2008, pp. 52-85.

HOPKINS, Lisa, OSTOVICH, Helen (eds.), *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2014.

INNOCENTI, Loretta, *Vis eloquentiae. Emblematica e persuasione*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1983.

INNOCENTI, Loretta (ed.), *Il teatro elisabettiano*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1994.

KAUFMANN, Thomas Da Costa, *The Mastery of Nature. Aspects of Art, Science, and Humanism in the Renaissance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.

KEITH, Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1971.

KITTREDGE, G. L., *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1929.

KODERA, Sergius, *Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Medicine, and Gender in Renaissance Natural Philosophy*, Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010.

KOGAN, Stephen, *The Hieroglyphic King. Wisdom and Idolatry in the Seventeenth-Century Masque*, Associated University Presses, London-Toronto, 1986.

LEWIS, Rhodri, "Francis Bacon, Allegory, and the Uses of Myth", *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 61, February 2010, pp. 360-89.

LIMON, Jerzy, *The Masque of the Stuart Culture*, University of Delaware Press, Newark, 1990.

LONG, Kathleen, P., *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006.

LONG, Kathleen, P. (ed.), *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2010.

MACFARLANE, Alan, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: a Regional and Comparative Study*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970.

MANNING, John, "Whitney's Choice of Emblems: a Reassessment", *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 4, n. 2, November 1990, pp. 155-200.

MARSHALL, Rosalind K., *The Life of Elizabeth of Bohemia 1596-1662. The Winter Queen*, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, 1998.

MCKERROW, Ronald B., *Printers' & Publishers' Devices in England & Scotland 1485-1640*, The Bibliographical Society, London, 1949.

ORGEL, Stephen, *Spectacular Performances: Essays on Theatre, Imagery, Books, and Selves in Early Modern England*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011.

PARRY, Graham, *The Golden Age Restored. The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603-42*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1981.

PARRY, Graham, *Glory, Laud, and Honour: The Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2006.

PATTERSON, W. B., *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

PRAZ, Mario, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma, 1964.

PRICE, Bronwen, *Francis Bacon's New Atlantis: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002.

REILLY, Kara, *Automata and Mimesis on the Stage of Theatre History*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2011.

RIVA, Costanza, *Pratolino. Il sogno alchemico di Francesco I de' Medici. Miti, simboli e allegorie*, Sillabe, Livorno, 2013.

ROMANO, Ruggiero, "Una certa idea dell' 'industria' nello studiolo di Francesco I dei Medici a Firenze", in *De Florence à Venise: études en l'honneur de Christian Bec*, réunies par François Livi et Carlo Ossola, Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, 2006, pp. 379-389.

SMART, Sara, WADE, R. Mara (eds.), *The Palatine Wedding of 1613: Protestant Alliance and Court Festival*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2013.

SMITH, Pamela H., FINDLEN, Paula (eds.), *Merchants and Marvels. Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, Routledge, London-New York, 2002.

STRONG, Roy, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979.

STRONG, Roy, *Henry, Prince of Wales and England's Lost Renaissance*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1986.

TAYLER, Edward William, *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1964.

TIERIE, Gerrit, *Cornelis Drebbel*, H.J. Paris, Amsterdam, 1932.

TILLYARD, Eustace Mandeville Wetenhall, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Penguin Books in Association with Chatto and Windus, Harmondsworth, 1972.

TOMLINSON, Gary, *Music in Renaissance Magic. Toward a Historiography of Others*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993.

TUVE, Rosemond, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1954.

WALKER, D. P., *Music, Spirit and Language in the Renaissance*, edited by Penelope Gouk, Variorum Reprints, London, 1985.

WEBSTER, Charles, *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979.

WELLS, Robin Headlam, *Elizabethan Mythologies: Studies in Poetry, Drama and Music*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

WEYER, Johann, *Witches, Devils and Doctors in the Renaissance*, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, Binghamton, 1991.

WHEELER, Jo., *Renaissance Secrets. Recipes & Formulas*, with the assistance of Katy Temple, Victoria & Albert Museum Publishing, London, 2009.

## **History of Religions and Myths**

ANSELMANT, Raymond A., *The Realms of Apollo. Literature and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*, Associated University Presses, London, 1995.

CIAVOLELLA, Massimo, IANNUCCI, Amilcare A. (eds.), *Saturn from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Dovehouse Editions, Ottawa, 1992.

ELIADE, Mircea, *Death and Rebirth. The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture*, translated from the French by Williard R. Trask, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1958.

ELIADE, Mircea, *Immagini e simboli. Saggi sul simbolismo magico-religioso*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1980. (Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles. Essai sur le symbolisme magico-religieux*, Gallimard, Paris, 1952).

ELIADE, Mircea, *Il mito della reintegrazione*, a cura di Roberto Scagno, Jaca Book, Milano, 1989. (Mircea Eliade, *Mitul reintegrării*, Editura Vremea, București, 1942).

ELIADE, Mircea, *Mefistofele e l'androgine*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma, 1995. (Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles et l'androgyné*, Gallimard, Paris, 1962).

FRAZER, James George, *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*, Macmillan, New York, 1930.

FRIEDLANDER, Walter J., *The Golden Wand of Medicine. A History of the Caduceus Symbol in Medicine*, Greenwood Press, New York-London, 1992.

GRIMAL, Pierre, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1951.

JAYNE, Walter Addison, *The Healing Gods of Ancient Civilizations*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1925.

JONES, Peter V. (ed.), *Reading Ovid. Stories from the Metamorphoses*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

KEITH, Alison, RUPP, Stephen (eds.), *Metamorphosis. The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto, 2007.

KLIBANSKY, Raymond, PANOFSKY, Erwin, SAXL, Fritz, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, Cambridge, 1964.

MACEY, Samuel L., *Patriarchs of Time. Dualism in Saturn-Cronus, Father Time, the Watchmaker God, and Father Christmas*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens,

Georgia, 1987.

SCHOUTEN, Jan, *The Rod and Serpent of Asklepios*, Elsevier Publishing, Amsterdam, 1967.

SOLOMON, Jon (ed.), *Apollo. Origins and Influences*, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1994.

WESTON, Jessie L., *From Ritual to Romance*, Doubleday, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1957. (or. ed. Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1920)

## General Criticism

ARTAUD, Antonin, *The Theatre and Its Double*, translated from the French by Mary Caroline Richards, Grove Press, New York, 1958. (Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1964, vol. 4)

BENSAUDE-VINCENT, Bernardette, NEWMAN, William R. (eds.), *The Artificial and the Natural. An Evolving Polarity*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007.

BOUSQUET, Jacques, *Il Manierismo in Europa*, Bramante, Milano, 1963.

BURNETT, Charles, FEND, Michael, GOUK, Penelope (eds.), *The Second Sense. Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgment from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, The Warburg Institute, London, 1991.

CITATI, Pietro, *Goethe*, Adelphi, Milano, 1990.

CURTIUS, Ernst Robert, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated from the German by Willard R. Task, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, [1953] 1979 (Ernst Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, A. Francke Verlag, Bern, 1948).

FREYTAG, Gustav, *Technique of the Drama. An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, translated by Elias J. McEwan, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1900.

JONES, Frederick, *Virgil's Garden. The Nature of Bucolic Space*, Bristol Classical Press,

London, 2011.

KOURI, E.I., OLESEN, Jens E. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, 1520-1870*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, vol. 2.

LEONG, Elaine, RANKIN, Alisha (eds.), *Secrets and Knowledge in Medicine and Science, 1500-1800*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2011.

LOVEJOY, Arthur O., *The Great Chain of Being: a Study of the History of an Idea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., [1936] 1964.

MARTINDALE, Charles, THOMAS, Richard (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2006.

MARTINDALE, Charles (ed.), *Ovid Renewed. Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, [1988] 2009.

PAGNINI, Marcello, *Struttura letteraria e metodo critico*, D'Anna, Messina, 1967.

PAGNINI, Marcello, *Pragmatica della letteratura*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1980.

PRAZ, Mario, *Mnemosyne. The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and London, 1974.

ROSSI, Paolo, *I filosofi e le macchine, 1400-1700*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1984.

VICKERS, Brian, "Frances Yates and the Writing of History", *Journal of Modern History*, 51 (1979), pp. 287-316.

WARNER, Marina, *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1985.

## ENCYCLOPAEDIAS

*Storia della Scienza*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, Roma, 2001-2004, 10 vols.

*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1982, 30 vols.

*The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, edited by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, in association with the British Academy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, 60 vols.

## WEBSITES

<http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/how-alchemy-has-been-depicted-in-art-through-the-ages/>

Anika Burgess, “How Alchemy Has Been Depicted in Art Through the Ages”. The article is about the exhibition “The Art of Alchemy”, held at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles throughout January and February 2017.

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-cecil-papers/vol1/>  
British History Online – The Cecil Papers

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-dees-petition-to-james-i-asking-to-be-cleared-of-accusations-of-conjuring-1604/>

British Library,

John Dee, *To the Kings most excellent Maiestie. A petition from Dee to James I*, 1604.

<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/state-papers-online-15091714.aspx>  
State Papers Online, 1509-1714: the Complete Collection

<http://www.levity.com/alchemy/>  
The Alchemy Website – Levity

<http://www.oed.com/>  
The Oxford English Dictionary Online

<https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/special-collections/photographic-collection/iconographic-database/>

Warburg Institute Iconographic Database



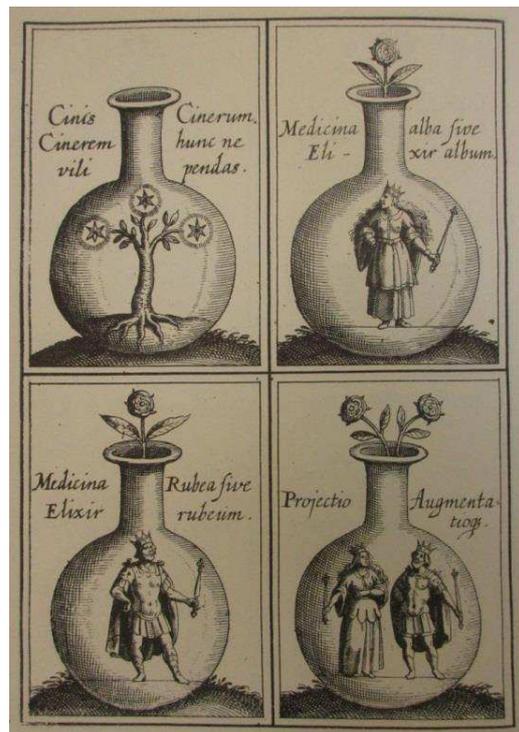
# PLATES

**The Chemical Wedding**  
**and the *Coniunctio***

**Plate 1.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*  
(16<sup>th</sup> cent.)

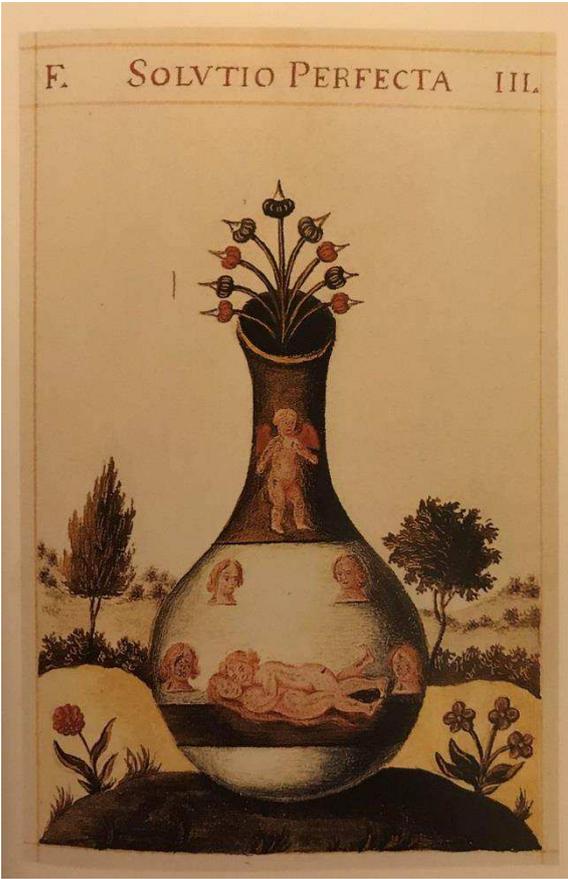


**Plate 2** J. Mylius, *Anatomia auri*  
(1628)





**Plate 5.** *Donum dei* (beginning 17<sup>th</sup> cent.)



**Plate 6.** *Donum dei* (beginning 17<sup>th</sup> cent.)



Plate 7. *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550)

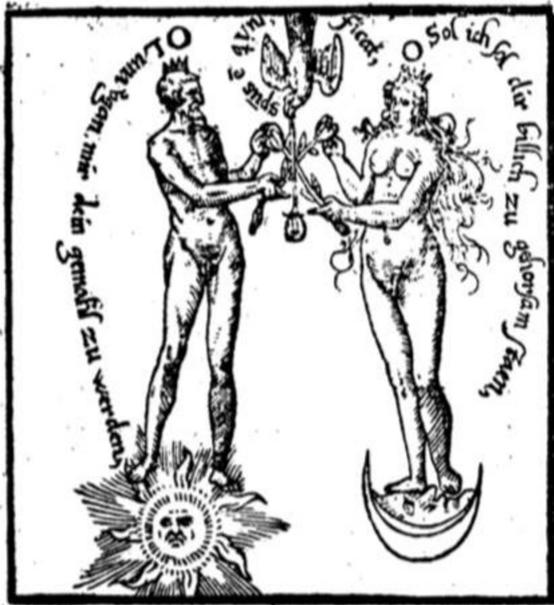


Plate 8. *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550)

CONIVNCTIO SIVE  
Coitus.

© Luna durch mein v̄mgebē/vñ süsse mynne/  
Wirstu schön/starck/vñ gewaltig als ich byn.  
© Sol/du bist vber alle liecht zu erkennen/  
So bedarffstu doch mein als der han der hēnen.



Plate 9. *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550)

PHILOSOPH. 303  
FERMENTATIO.



Plate 10. *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550)



Plate 11. Pandora (1582)

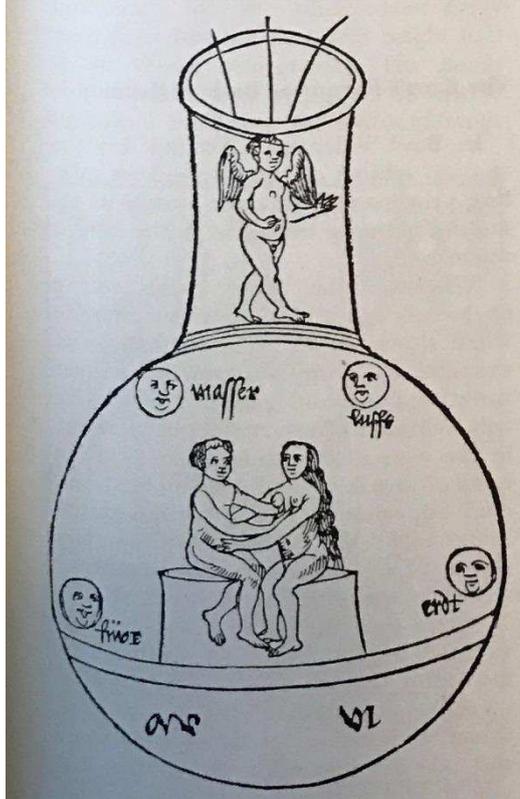


Plate 12. A. Libavius, *Alchymia* (1606)



Plate 13. J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformatata* (1622)



Plate 14. B. Valentinus, *Zwölff Schlüssel* (1602)



Plate 15. J. Mylius, *Anatomia auri* (1628)

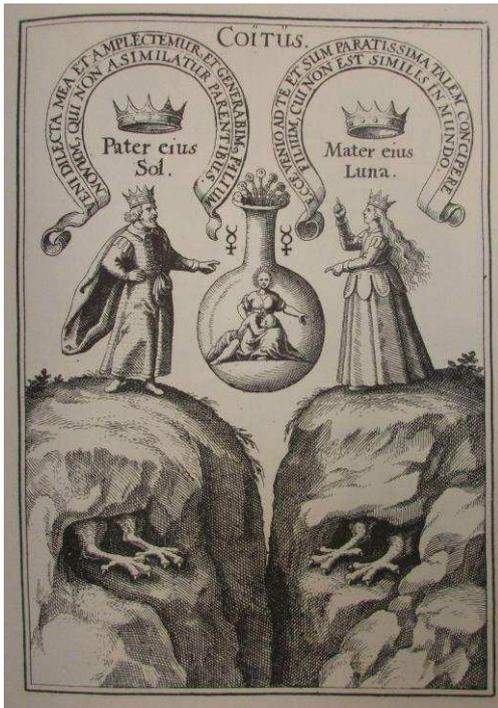


Plate 16. A. Libavius, *Alchymia* (1606)

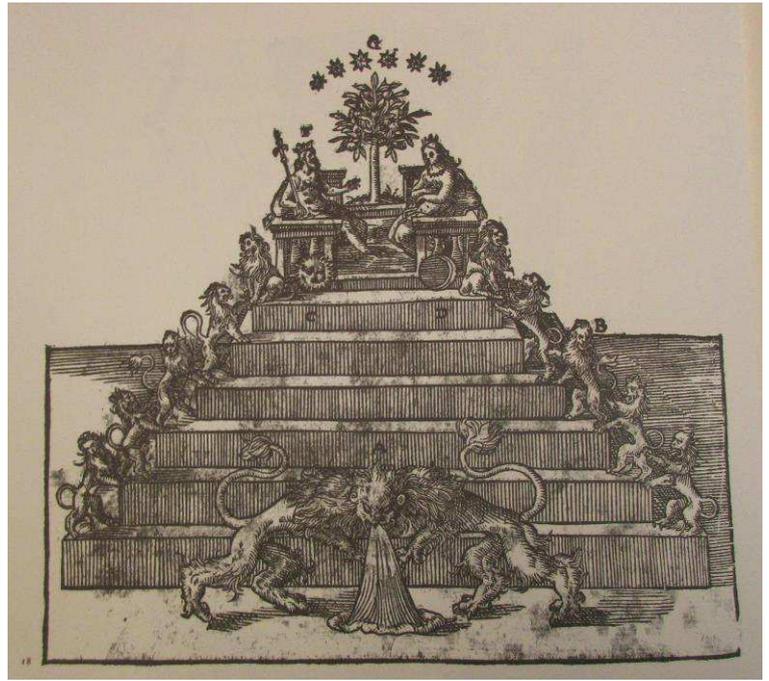
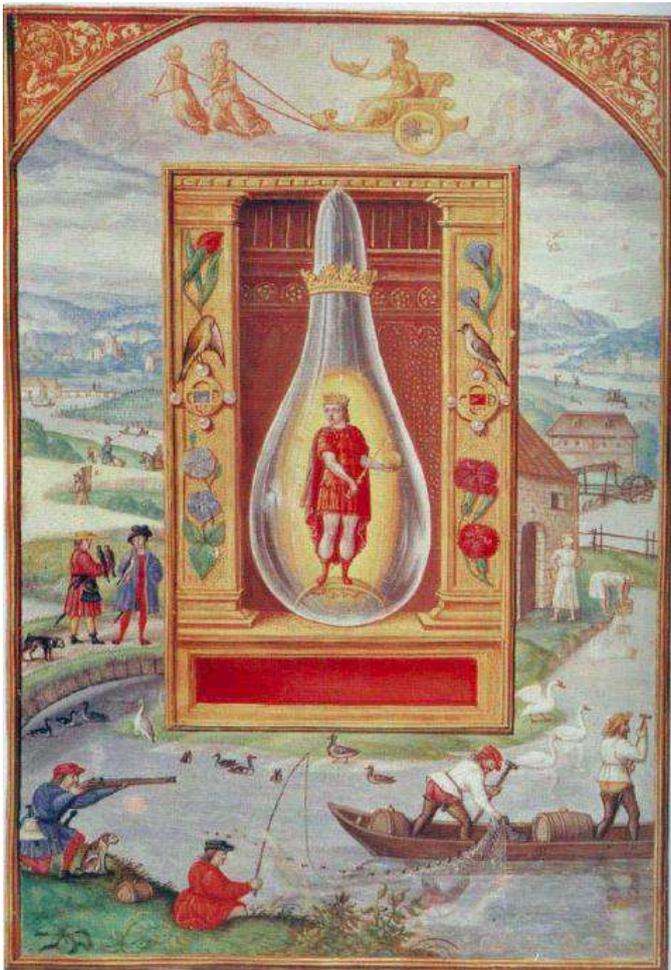


Plate 17. M. Maier, *Tripus aureus* (1618)

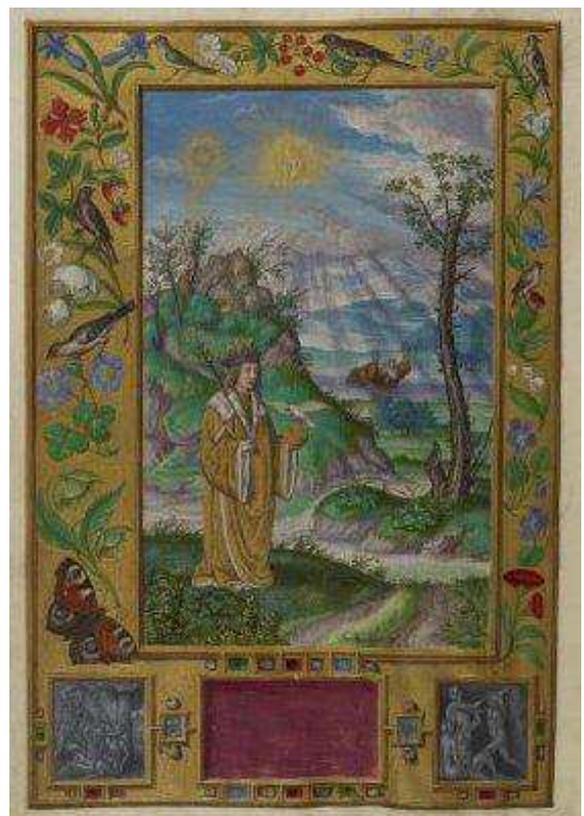


**The Transmutation of  
the  
*Rex Chymicus***

**Plate 18.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis* (16th cent.)



**Plate 19.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis* (16th cent.)



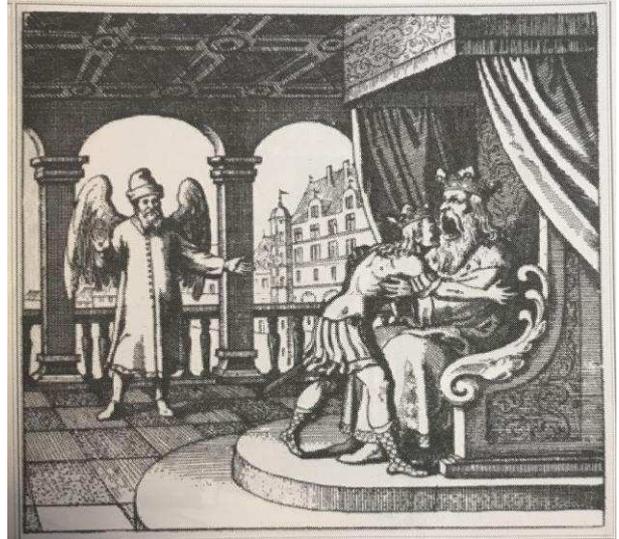
**Plate 20.** M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618),  
Emblem 48.



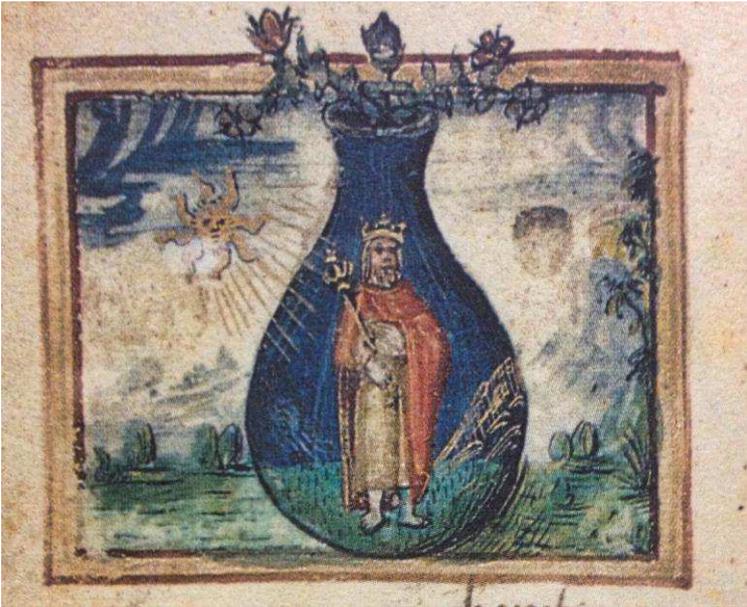
**Plate 21.** *The Book of Lambspring* (1599)



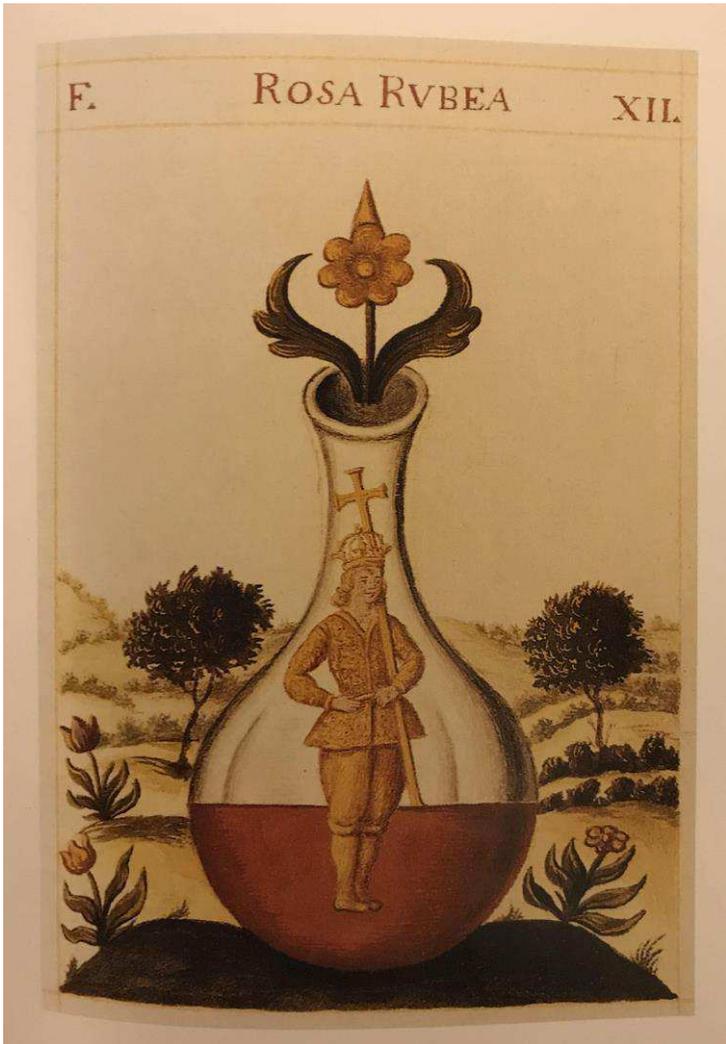
**Plate 22.** *The Book of Lambspring* (1599)



**Plate 23.** *Le Don de Dieu* (15th cent.)



**Plate 24.** *Donum Dei* (beginning 17th cent.)



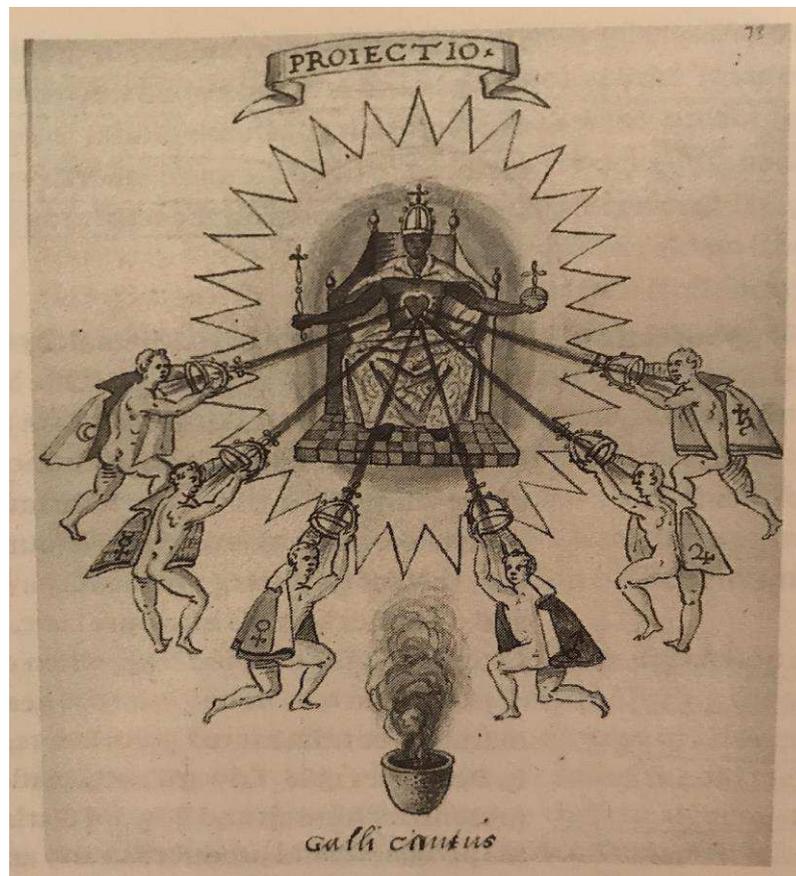
**Plate 25.** E. Kelly, *Alchemical Writings*  
(17th cent.)



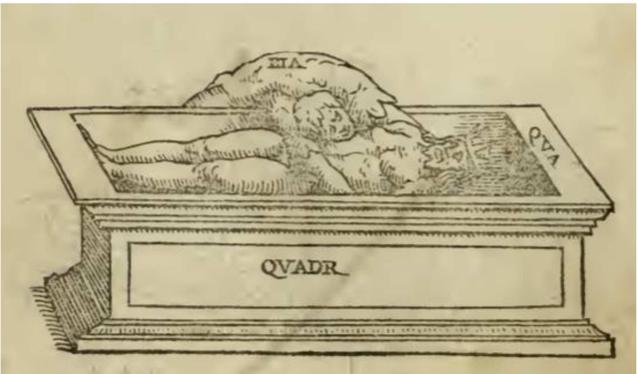
**Plate 26.** E. Kelly, *Alchemical Writings*  
(17th cent.)



**Plate 27.** *Coronatio naturae* (17th cent.)



**Plates 28-34** Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *Pretiosa margarita novella* (1546), "The Death and Rebirth of the King"





# **The Phase of Ablution**

Plate 35. M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 28

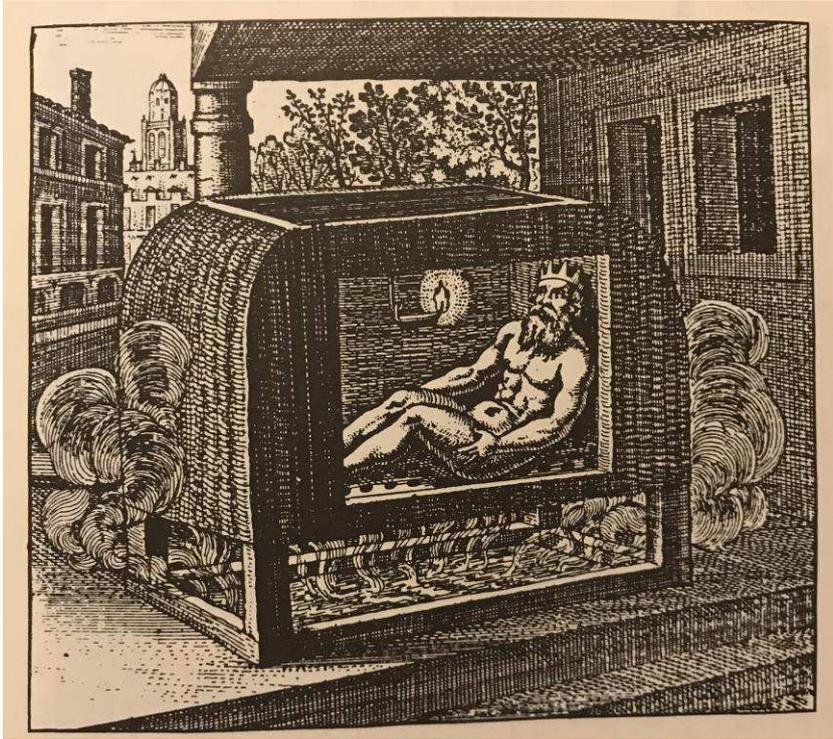
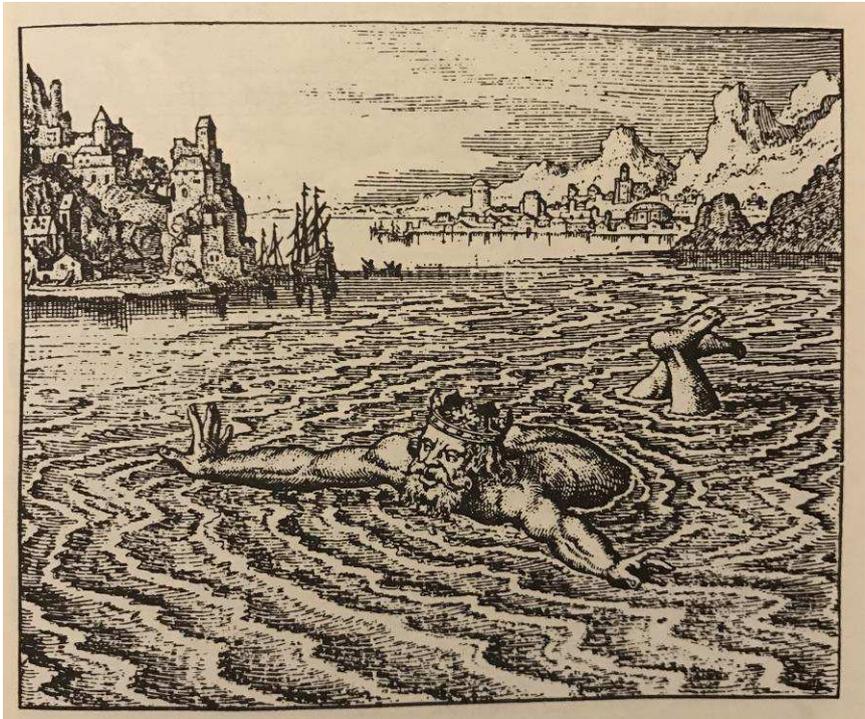
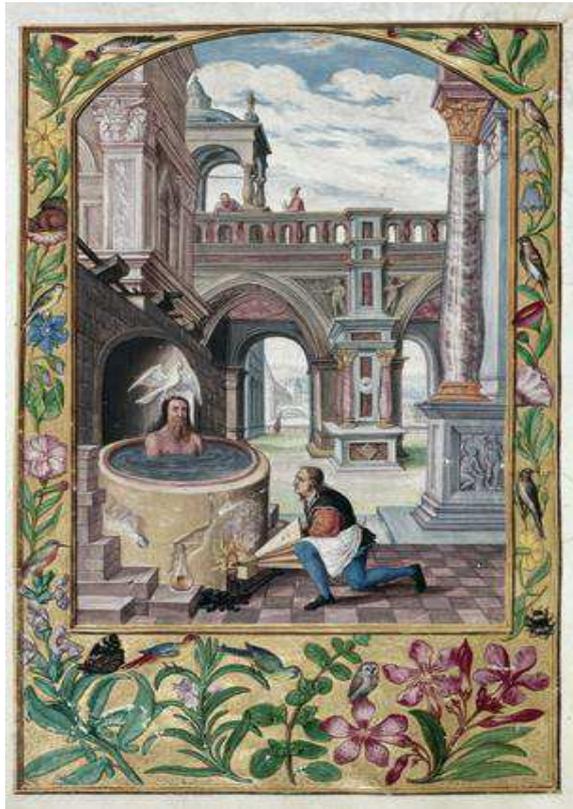


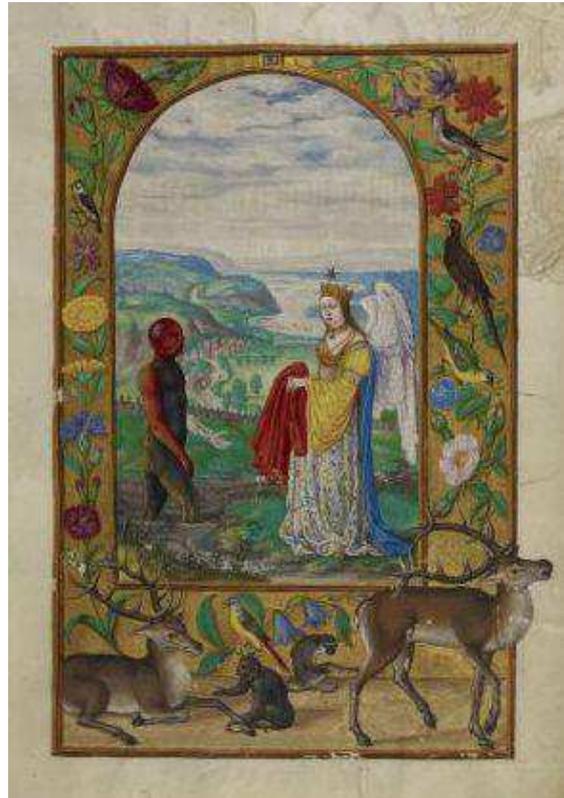
Plate 36. M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 31



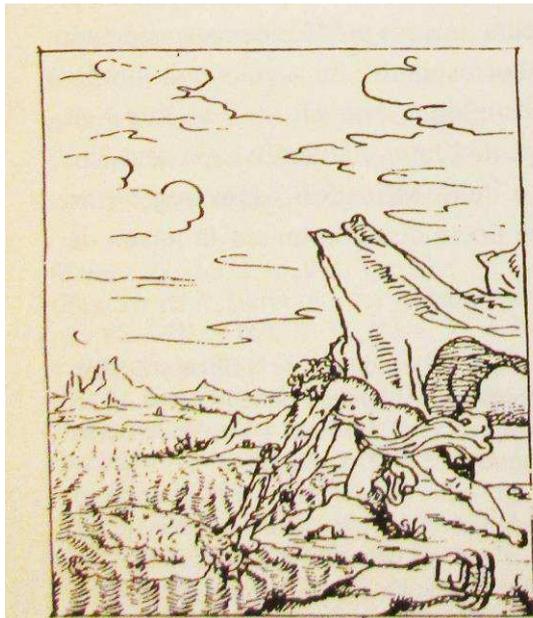
**Plate 37.** S. Trissosin, *Splendor solis*  
(16th cent.)



**Plate 38.** S. Trissosin, *Splendor solis*  
(16th cent.)



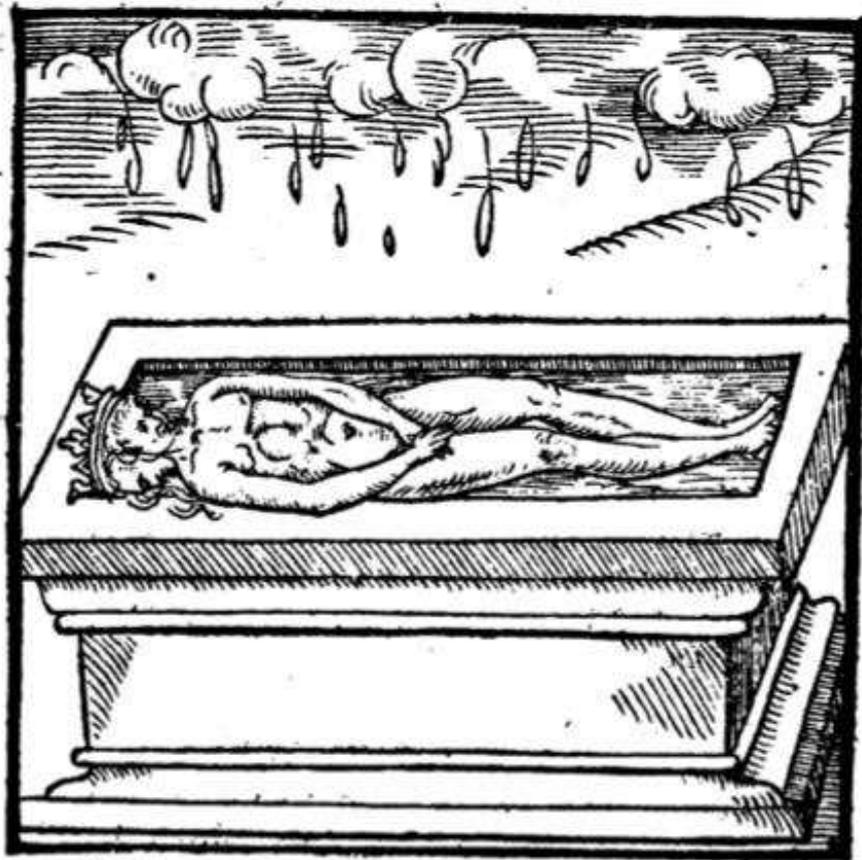
**Plate 39.** M. Palombara, *La Bugia* (1656),  
“The ablution of the king”



PHILOSOPH. 275

ABLVTIO VEL MVN-  
dificatio.

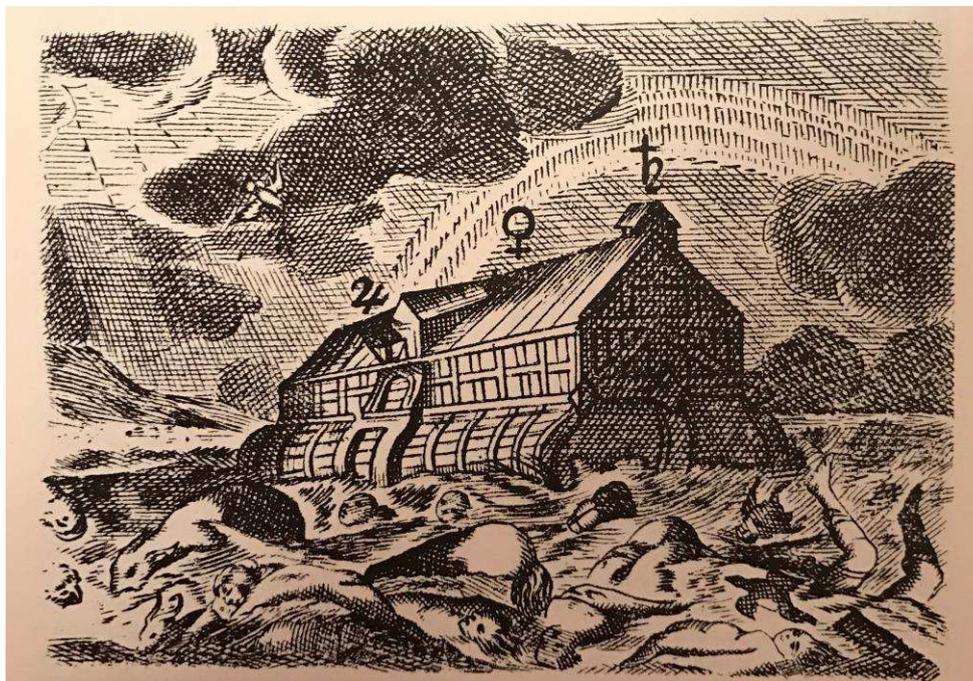
Hie felt der Tau von Himmel herab/  
Vnd wascht den schwarzen Leib im grab ab.



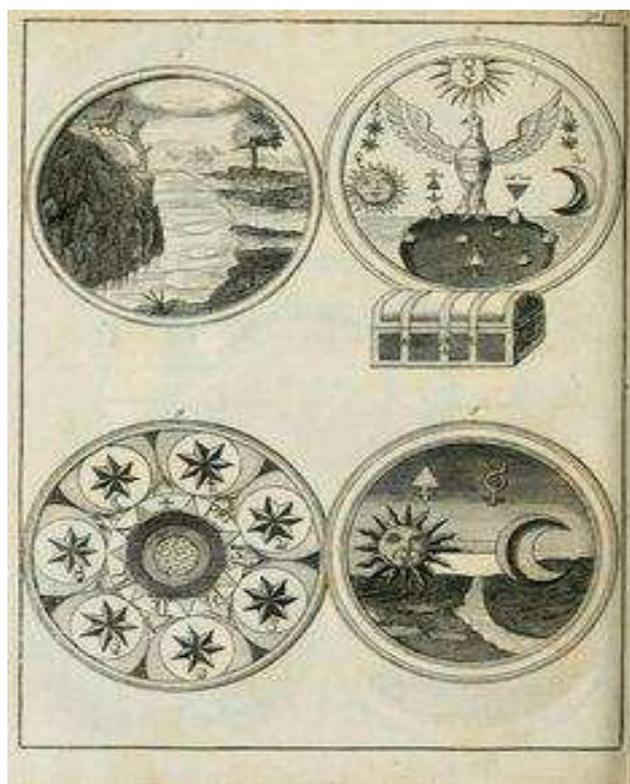
DEALBATIO PRIMI  
lapidis prima.

*Senior in epistola Solis & Luna.*

**Plate 41.** G. van Vreeswyck, *De Goude Leeuw* (1672).  
“The biblical waters of destruction and salvation inundating the  
laboratory”



**Plate 42.** J. C. Barchusen, *Elementa chemiae* (1718),  
“Producing the primal matter by putrefaction, or a reversal  
of the creation process”



**The Phases of Dissolution, Putrefaction,  
and *nigredo***

**Plate 43.** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622),  
“The King and Queen in a grave and Time-Saturn”



**Plate 44.** K. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622),  
“The King, the Queen, and Time-Saturn”



Plate 45. *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550)

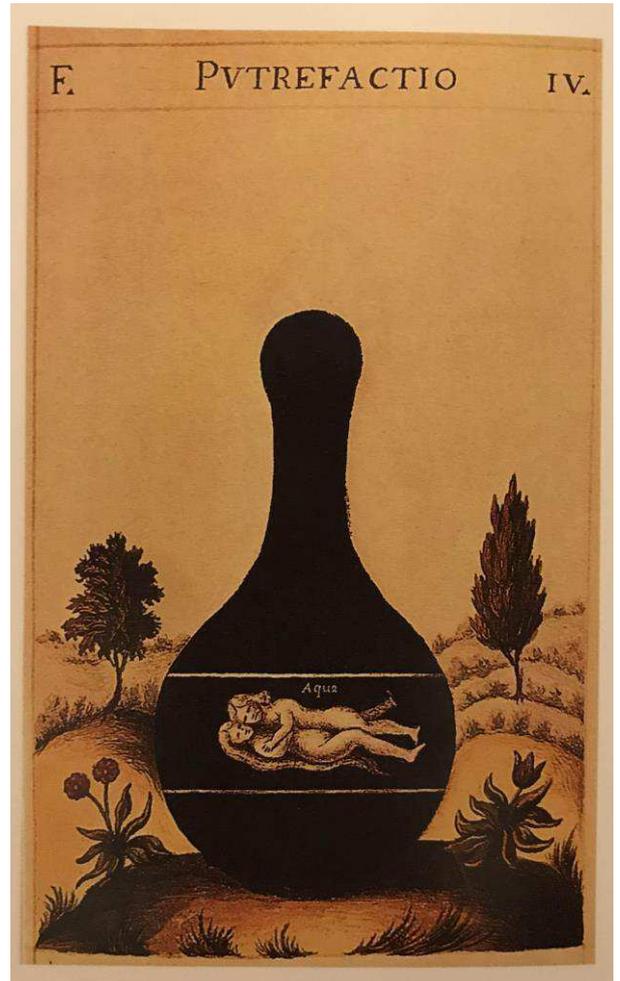
254 ROSARIUM  
CONCEPTIO SEV PV-  
trefactio.

Hieligen König vnd Königin todt/  
Die Seele scheidet sich mit grosser noth.

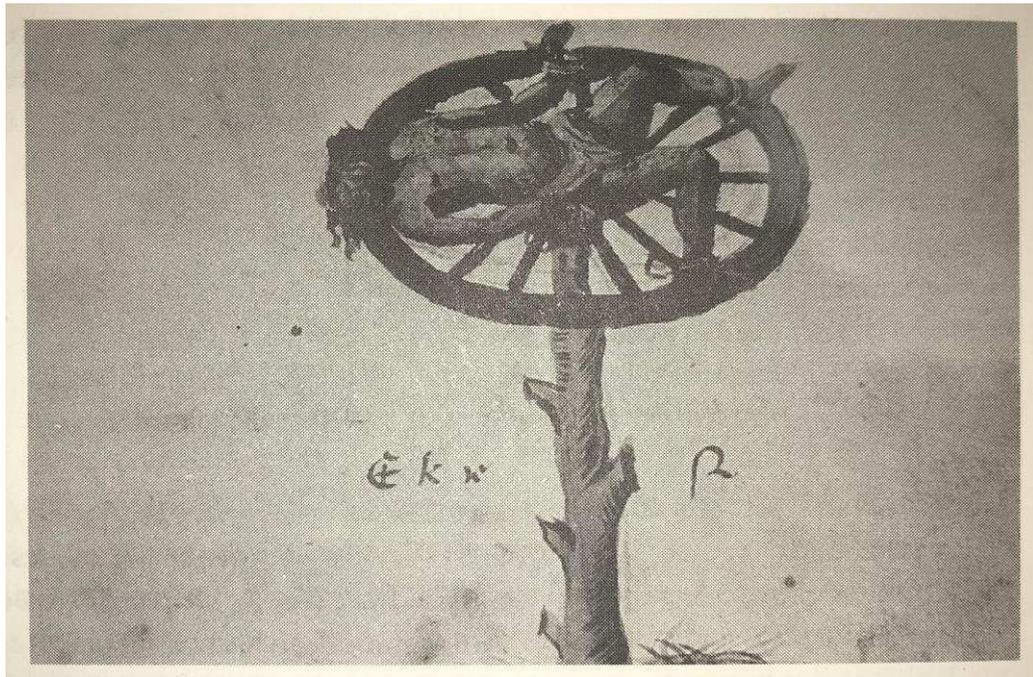


*Aristoteles Rex & Philosophus.*

Plate 46. *Donum Dei*  
(beginning 17th cent.)



**Plate 47.** *Buch von Vunderverken* (17th cent.),  
“A Man on the Philosophical Wheel”



**Plate 48.** D. Stolcius, *Viridarium chymicum* (1624),  
“The nigredo”

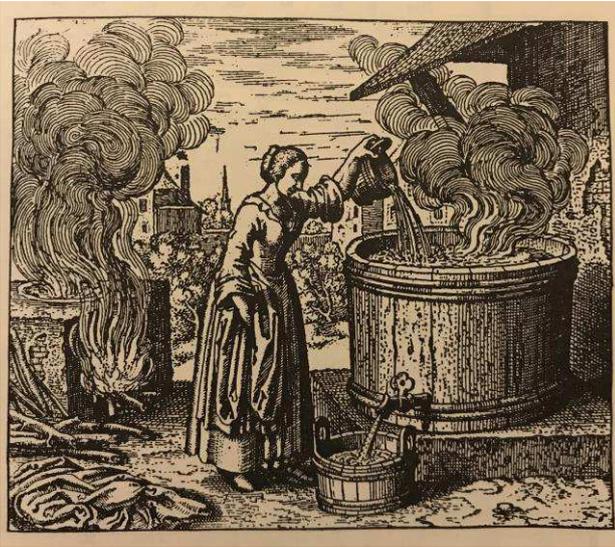


**Plate 49.** *Mutus Liber* (1677),  
“The Prima materia as Saturn devouring his children”



# **Alchemy and Women**

**Plate 50.** M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,  
Emblem 3



**Plate 51.** M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,  
Emblem 22



**Plate 52.** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata*  
(1622)



Plate 53. S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*  
(16th cent.)



Plate 54. M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,  
Emblem 26



Plate 55. J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata*  
(1622)



Plate 56. L. Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia* (1570), "Alchymia"

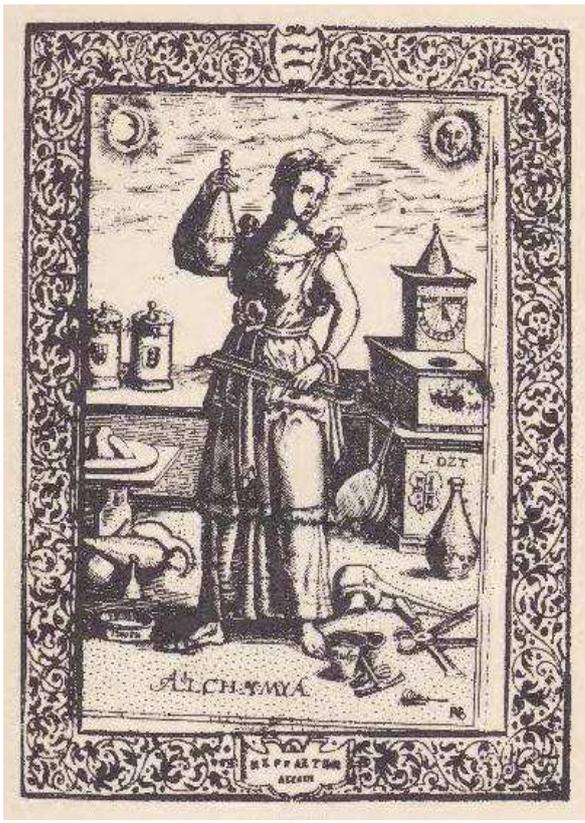


Plate 57. L. Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia* (1574), "Alchimia"



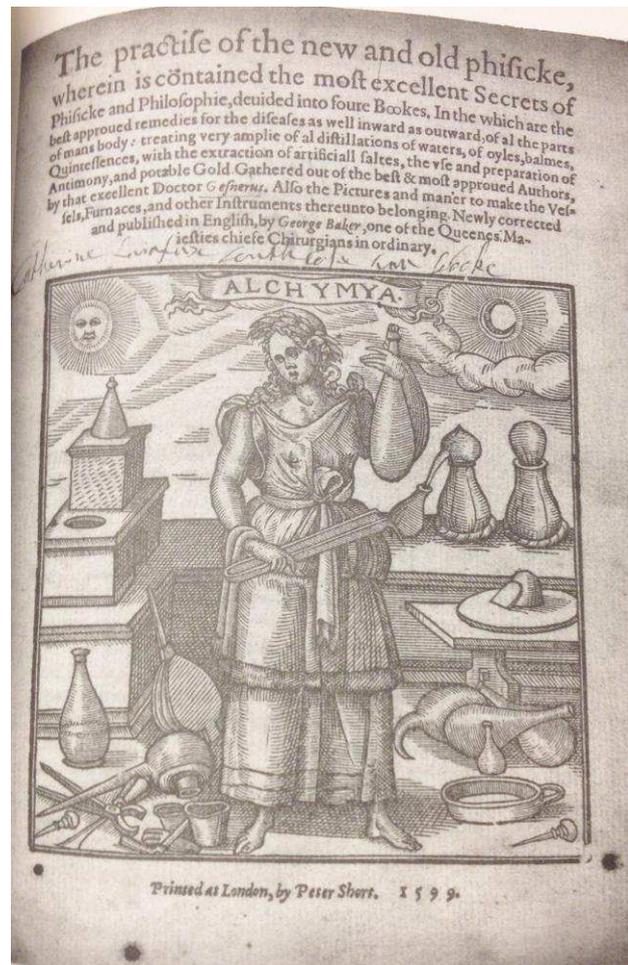
**Plate 58.** Frontispiece to K. Gesner, *The newe Jewell of Health* (1576)

¶ The newe Jewell of Health, wherein is contayned the most excellent Secretes of Phisicke and Philo-  
sophie, deuided into fower Bookes. In the which are the best ap-  
proued remedies for the diseases as well inwarde as outwarde, of all the partes  
of mans bodie : treating very amplye of all Dystillations of Waters, of Oyles,  
Balmes, Quintessences, with the extraction of artificiall Saltes, the vse and pre-  
paration of Antimonie, and potable Gold. Gathered out of the best and most ap-  
proued Authors, by that excellent Doctor Gesnerus. Also the Pictures, and maner  
to make the Vessels, Furnaces, and other Instrumentes thereunto be-  
longing. Faithfully corrected and published in Englishe,  
by George Baker, Chirurgian.



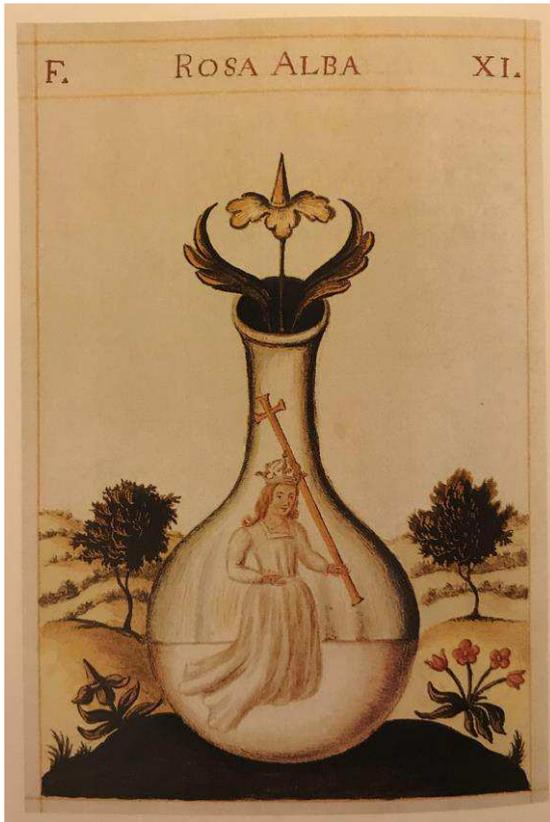
Printed at London, by Henrie Denham.  
1576.

**Plate 59.** Frontispiece to K. Gesner, *The practice of the new and old physicke* (1599)

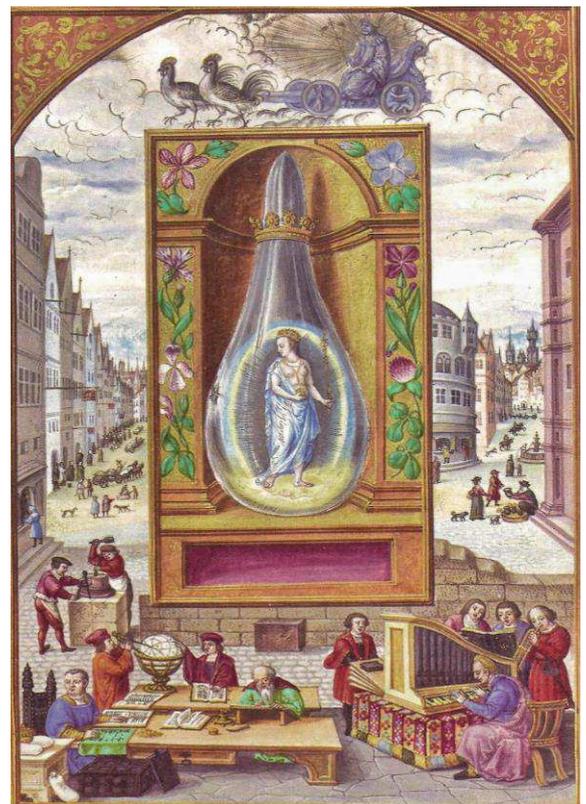


Printed at London, by Peter Short. 1599.

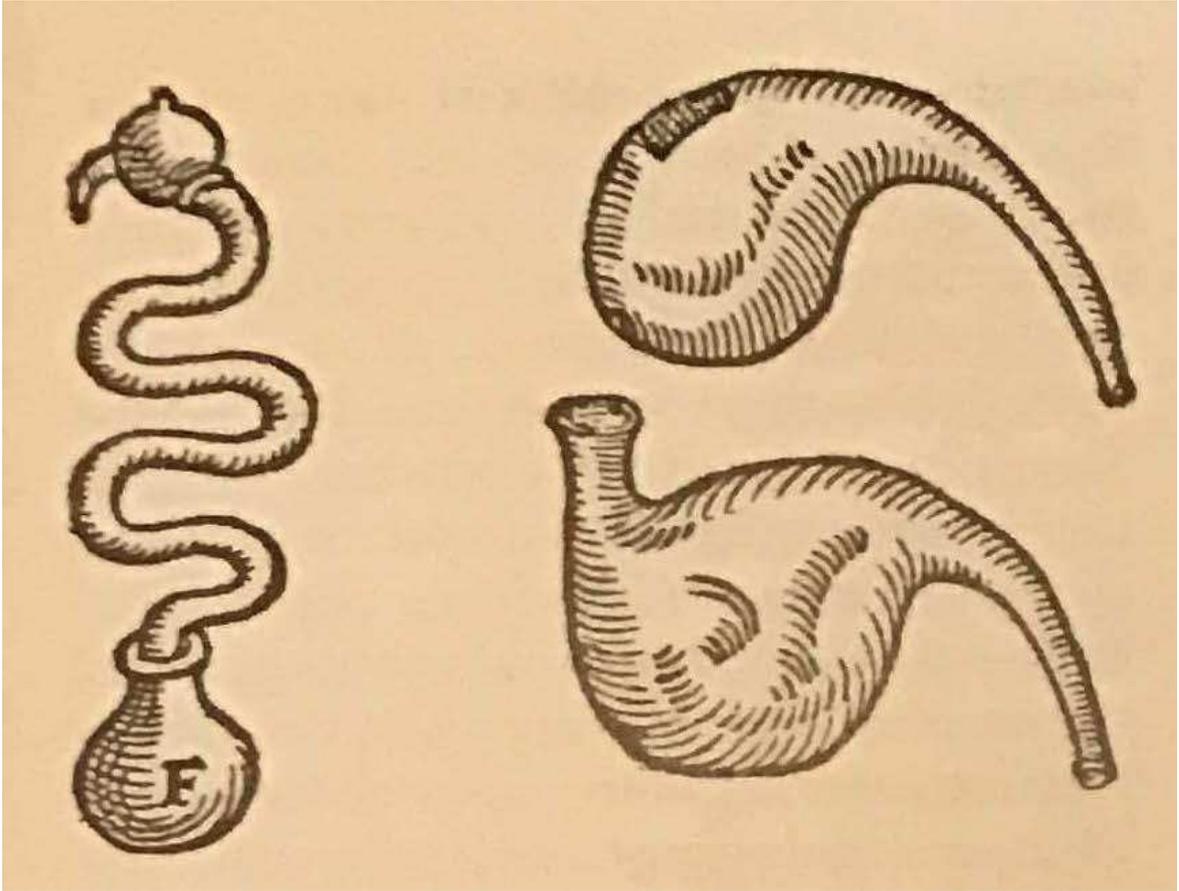
**Plate 60.** *Donum Dei* (beginning 17th cent.),  
“The Queen as Rosa Alba”



**Plate 61.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*  
(16th cent.), “The White Queen”



**Plate 62.** G. della Porta, *De distillationibus* (1609),  
“The Mercurial Serpent and the Uterus”



# **Alchemical Art and Nature**

**Plate 63.** M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 42,  
“The Alchemist following Nature”



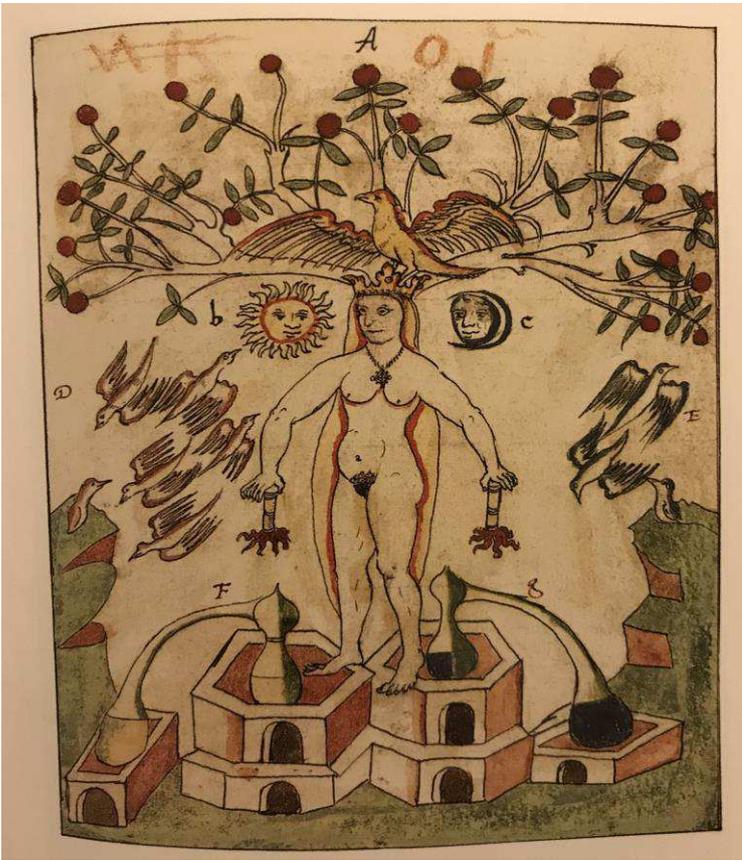
**Plate 64.** J. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata*  
(1622), “The Alchemical Tree”



Plate 65. *Alchemica* (16th cent.),  
“Nature-Alchemy”



Plate 66. H. Reussner, *Pandora*  
(1588), “Nature-Alchemy”

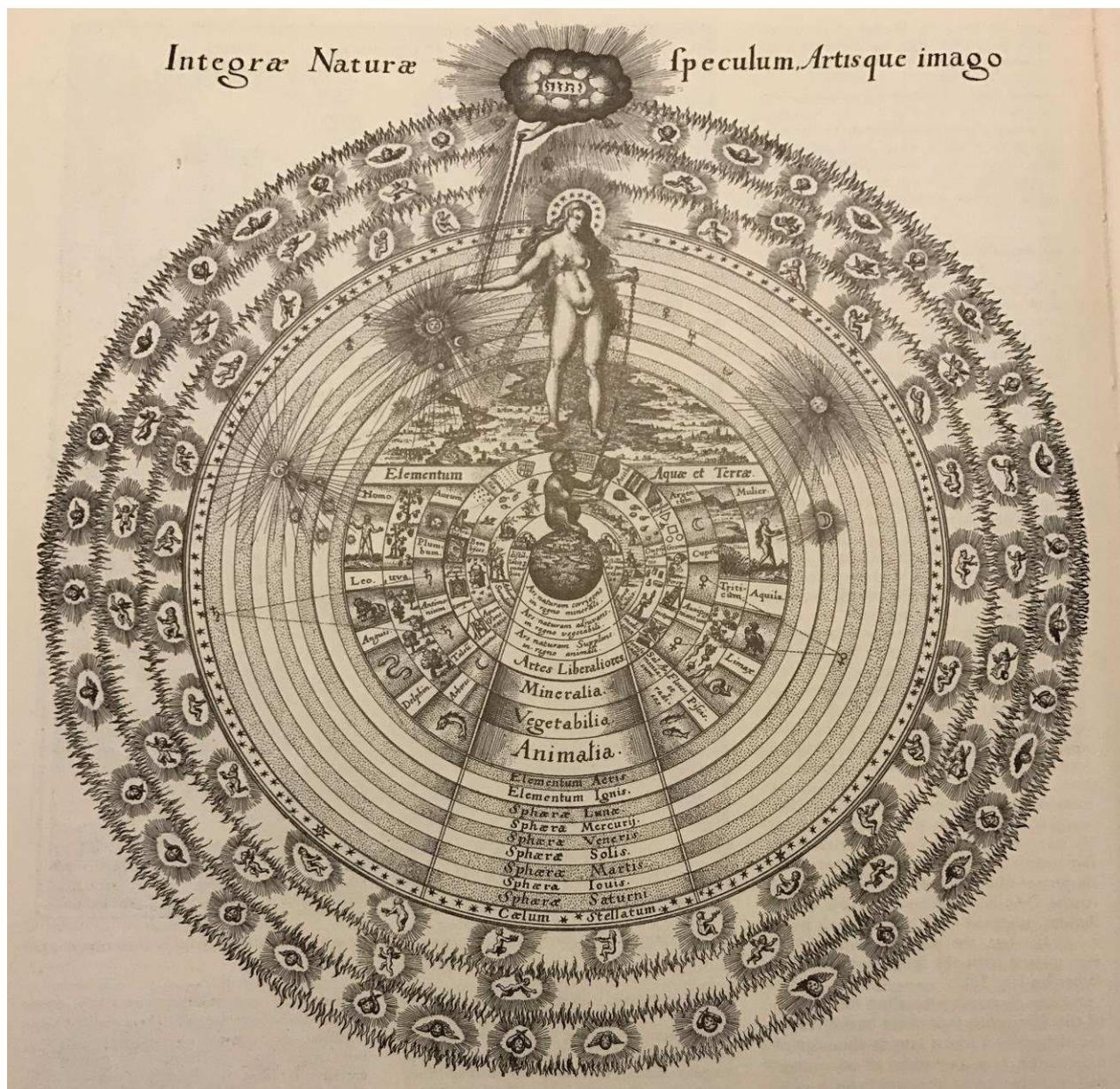




**Plate 69.** A. Eleazar, *Uraltes chymisches Werk* (1760),  
“The Alchemist and the Alchemical Flowers”



Plate 70. R. Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi historia* (1616-21),  
"Integrae Naturae speculum Artisque imago"

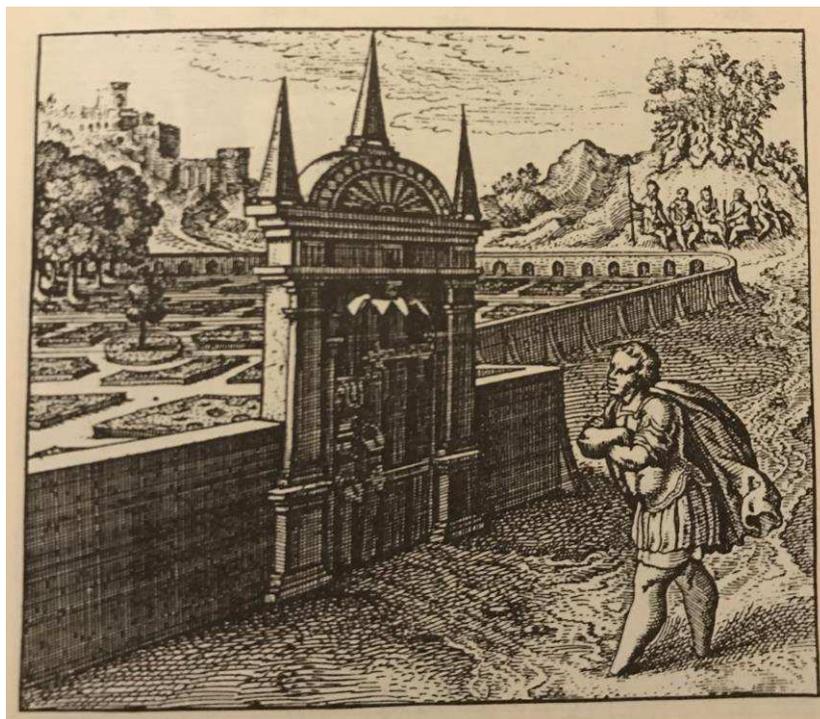


# **Other Plates**

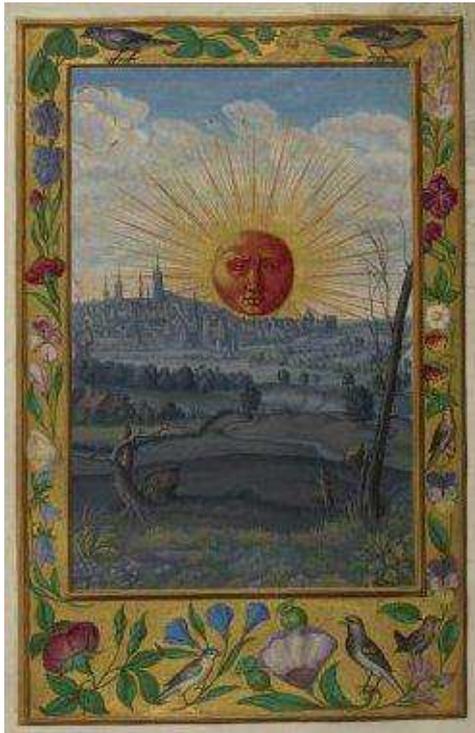
Plate 71. M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,  
Emblem 12



Plate 72. M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,  
Emblem 27



**Plate 73.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis* (16th cent.), “The Rising Sun”



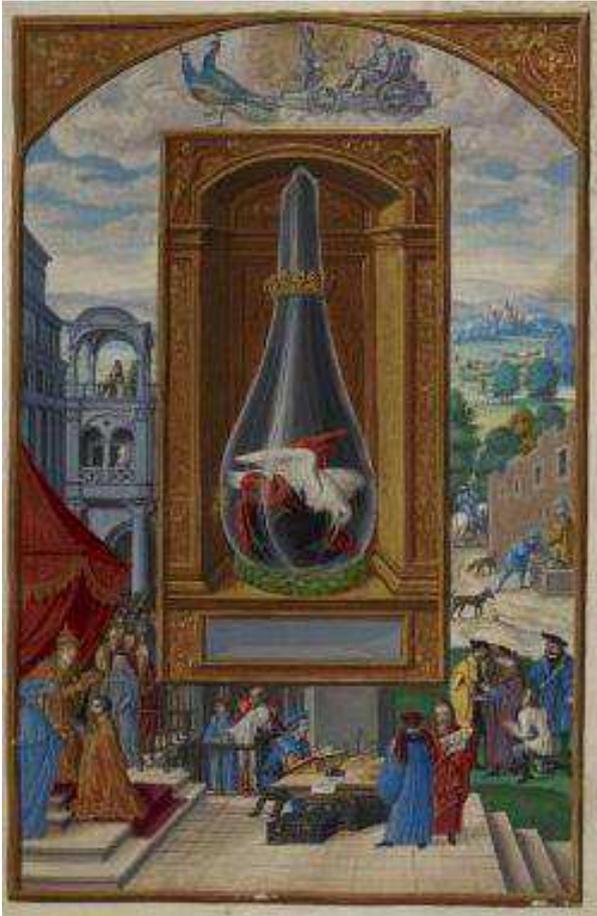
**Plate 74.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis* (16th cent.), “The Black Sun”



**Plate 75.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis* (16th cent.), “The Peacock’s Tail”



**Plate 76.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis*,  
“The Amorous Birds of Prey”



**Plate 77.** *Aurora consurgens* (16th cent.),  
“The Amorous Birds of Prey”



**Plate 78.** S. Trismosin, *Splendor solis* (16th cent.),  
“Children at play”



Plate 79. M. Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblem 16,  
“The Serpent uroboros”

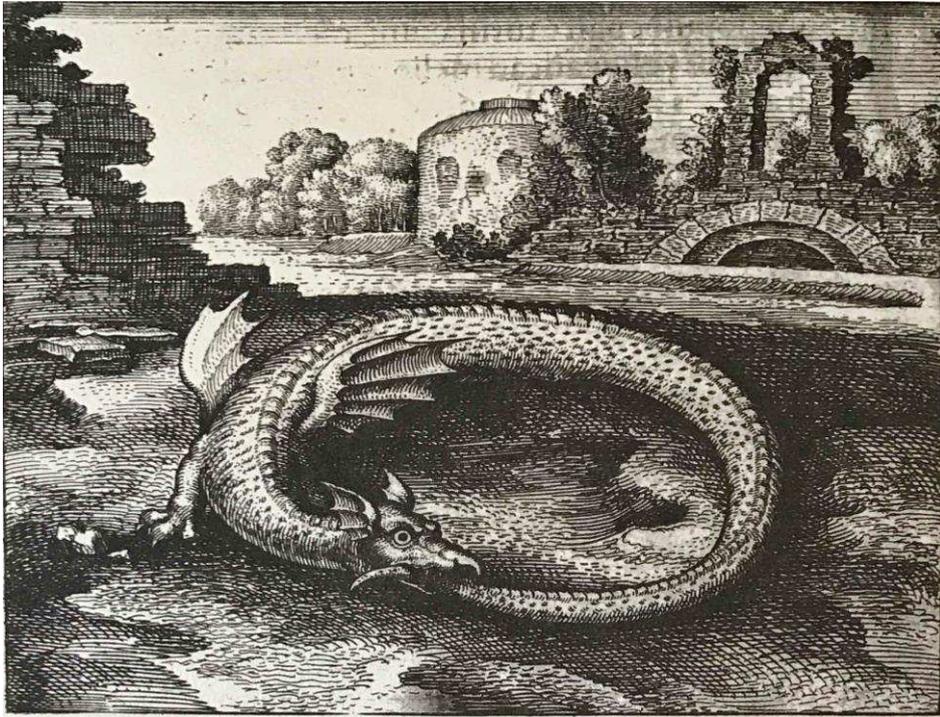


Plate 80. “Mercurius and the caduceus”

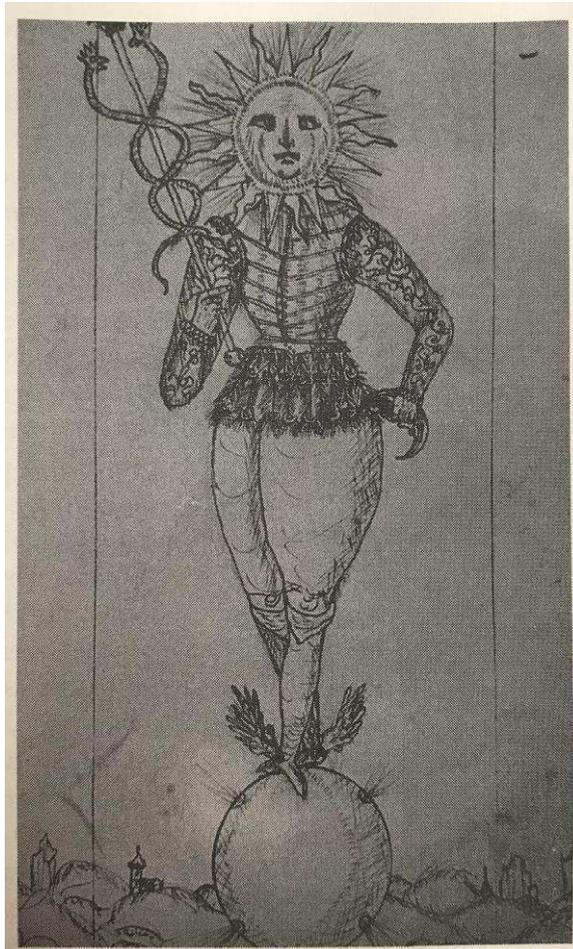


Plate 81. Manuscript (15<sup>th</sup> cent.), "The Alchemist carrying a living statuette"

lxvj

In nomine sancte trinitati  
 pncipi q cognominamus  
 reg roberto nrm lapidari  
 allocuti sumus et recolim  
 olissimū lapidē magnū  
 ou ppendas scias q t na  
 as unde lapis p̄oxy et or  
 cum qb. Tercio quo dicta  
 ista teua nouens q nrm q  
 sis ē sciendū q et qualis  
 q̄ utuolat q per artificū  
 rectificatu et acutu seu  
 ptabilis ortus uino rub  
 bene uideri poterit insigni  
 diti abba sancti bndicti apud parisiū  
 ardū illustre anglorū In illo ca q me  
 gen aquardat de tota combustio nigra  
 aquel sapientes trauit p ait de mgnū  
 intelligit p rectificationes nrm instruy  
 cationes nrm instruy hūmūta s̄ euan  
 receptoua bntes ut demonstrat in nro tes  
 fili tu nō as mess̄ si nō tam solamer  
 plenu tractat **p̄ns diuidit** iduas p  
**T** s̄bet p̄ns diuidit in duas ptes p̄nt  
 ticha Prima ibi p p̄ns Sa ibi

Plate 82. B. Aneau, *Picta poesis* (1552),  
Emblem "Sine iustitia, confusio"



Plate 83. G. Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems*  
(1586), Emblem "Sine iustitia, confusio"

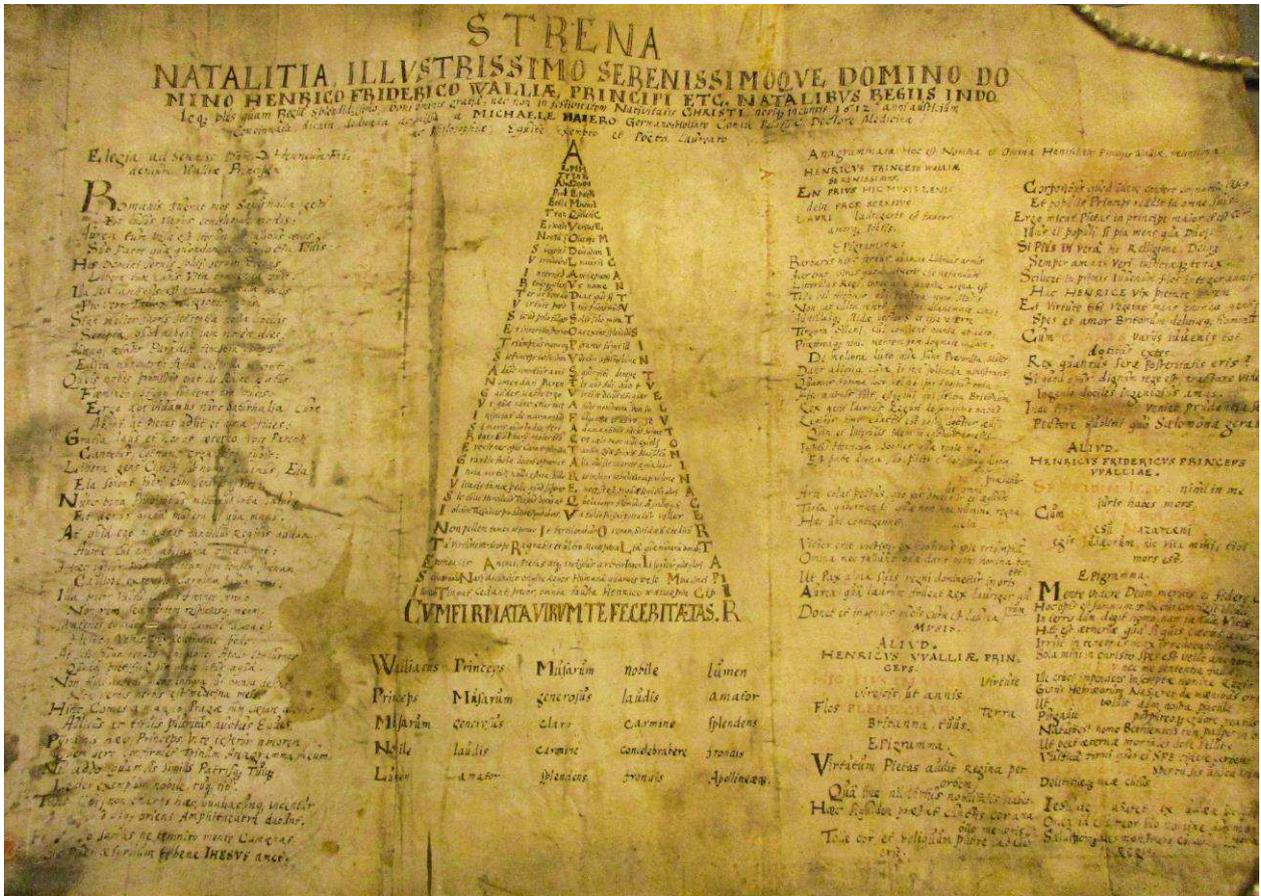
122

*Sine iustitia, confusio.*

*Ad costem Indicos.*



Plate 84. M. Maier, *Strena natalitia* to Prince Henry of Wales (1611)



Plates 85-86 Printer's Devices  
(England, 16th cent.).

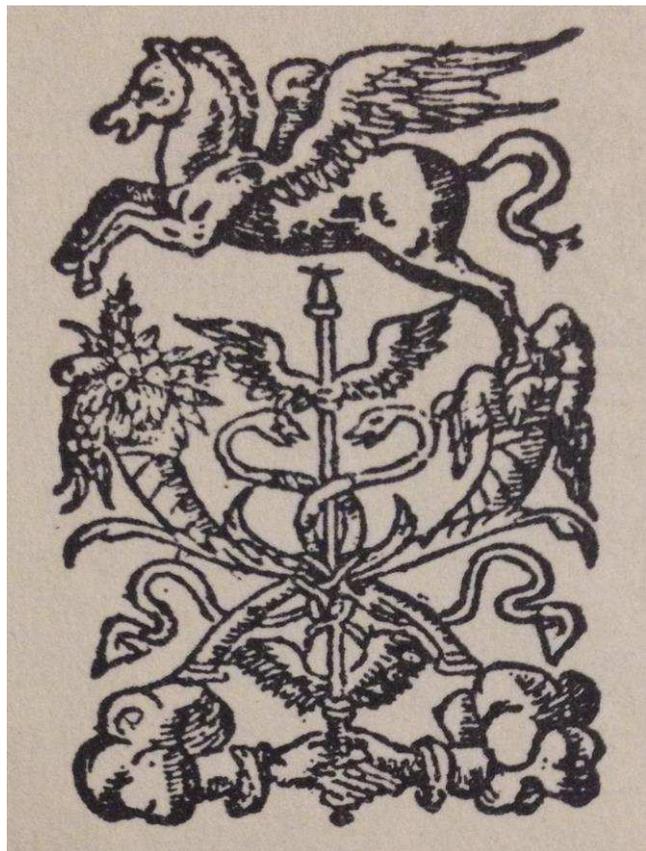


Plate 87. T. Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchymy* (15th cent.),  
"The Master offering a book to the disciple"

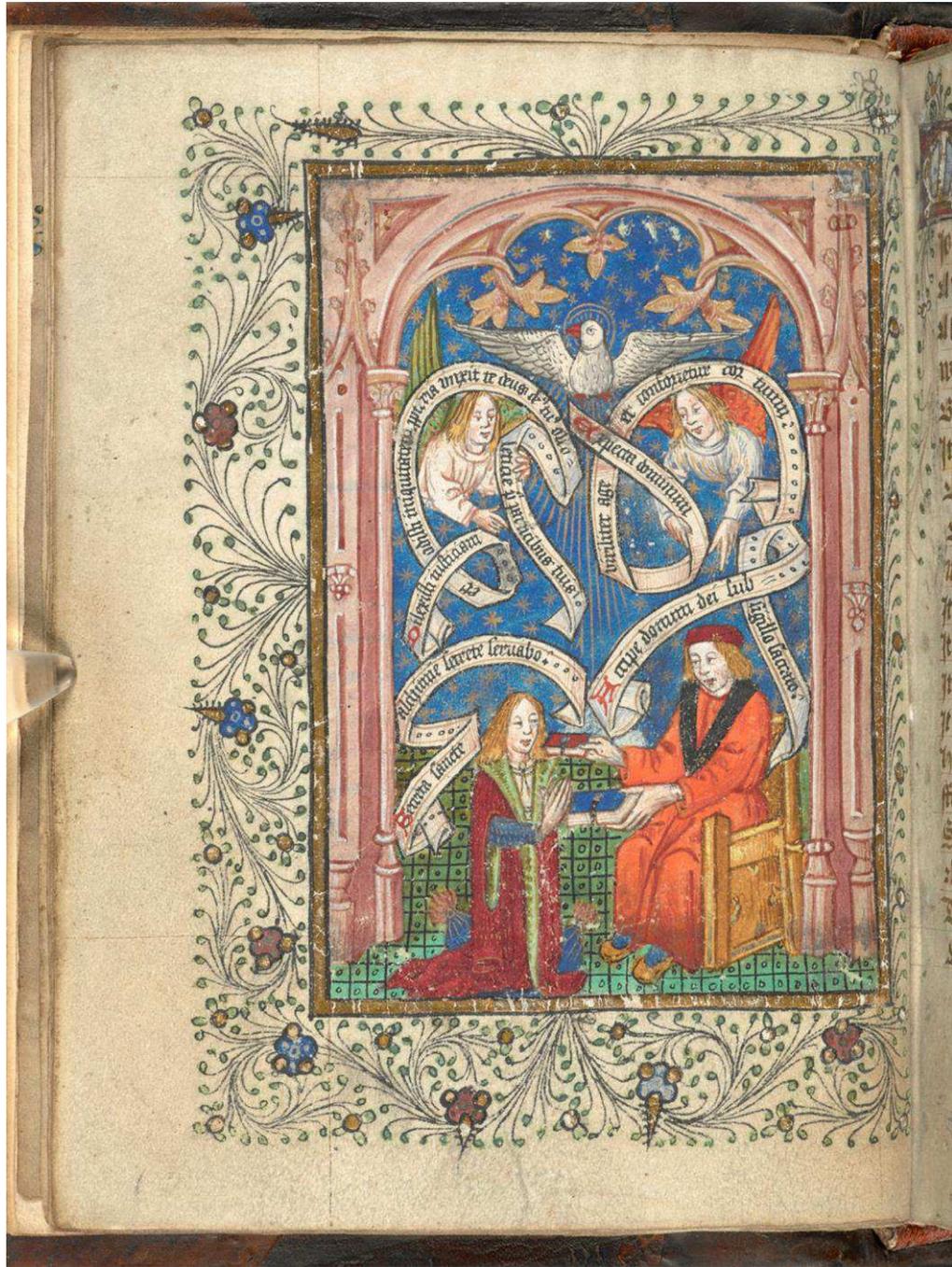


Plate 88. H. Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1602),  
“The Alchemical Laboratorium”

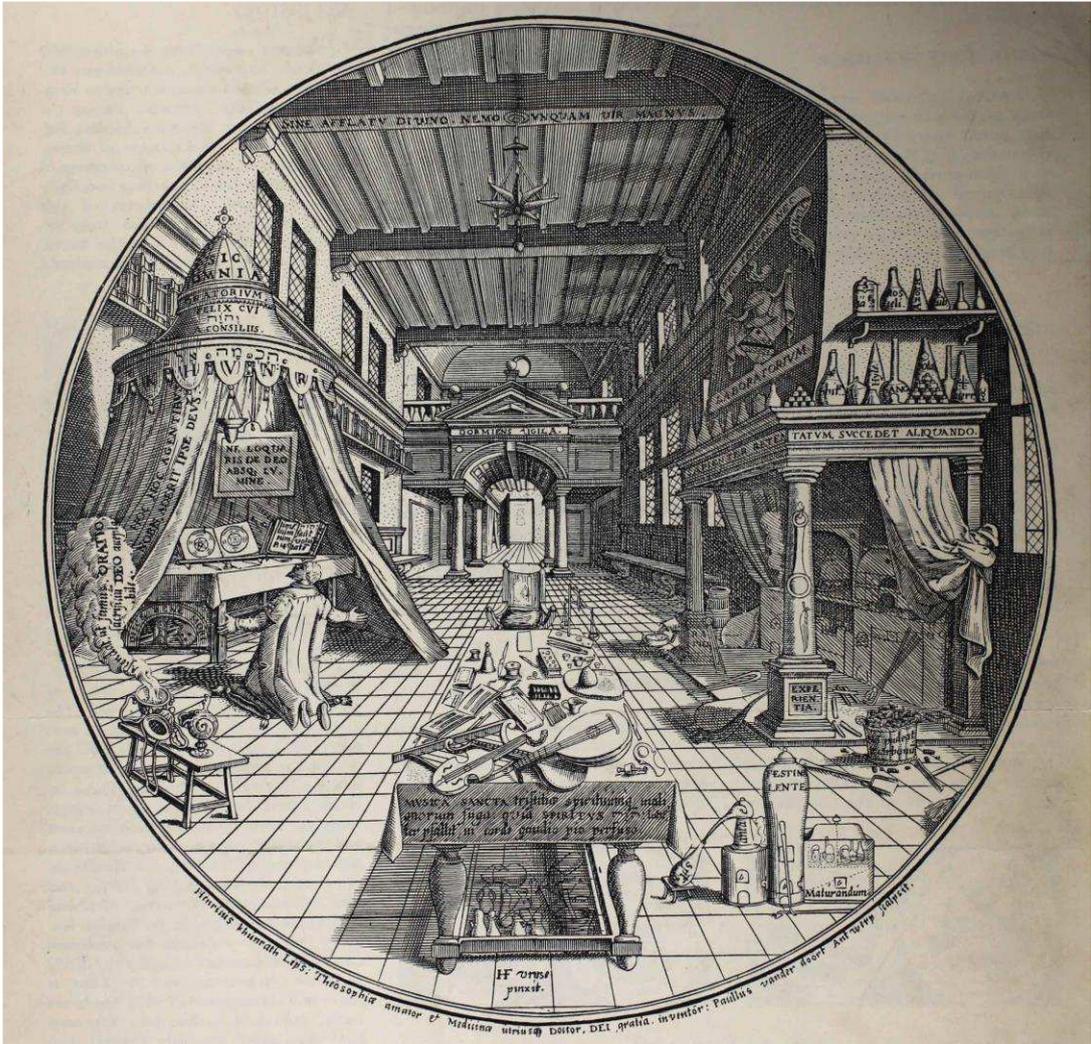


Plate 89. Title-page to A. Libavius, *Alchymia* (1606)



Plate 90. Title-page to F. Anthony, *Panacea aurea sive Tractatus duo de ipsius Auro Potabili* (1618)

FRANCISCI ANTONII  
PHILOSOPHI ET MEDICI  
LONDINENSIS  
PANACEA  
AUREA  
SIVE  
*Tractatus duo de ipsius*  
AURO POTABILI,  
*Nunc primum in Germania ex Londi-  
nensi Exemplari excusi,*  
Operâ  
M. B. F. B.  
JACOBUS SERENISS. REX ANGL.  
*Numquid ego ANTONIUM puniam,*  
*quia Deus illi benedixit.*  
HENR. NOLLIUS.  
MEDICINAM UNIVERSALEM  
*negant multi, sed ij plerumq, id faciunt, qui*  
*ipsam assequi non valent.*  
HAMBURGI  
Ex Bibliopolio FROBENIANO.<sup>pe.</sup>  
ANNO c<sup>o</sup> l<sup>o</sup> cxix.



**Plate 91.** Frontispiece to King James I, *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince* (1616)

