ALCHEMY AND HERMETICISM: AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS ISSUE

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In the historical development of alchemy, practical and theoretical knowledge are strictly associated, and the alchemists' self-definition as 'philosophers' implied from the beginning a conscious distance from both craftsmanship and mere theory. As can be seen from a survey of proceedings of conferences on the history of alchemy from 1986 onwards, many scholars have, over the past two decades, offered strong evidence of the complexity of alchemy in its historical development, while at the same time defending its overall philosophical meaning. Thus the traditional association of alchemy and 'Hermeticism', which had often been considered a testimony to the permanence of an esoteric and unhistorical 'tradition', has given way to a more refined view of the multiple interrelations between alchemy and the development of philosophical and scientific ideas.

This renewed scholarly interest in alchemy is found to coincide, in our days, with much more sweeping historiographical development in the study of Hermeticism. The depth of the transformations in the latter field can be easily assessed by comparing two general presentations of the Hermetic writings, i.e. the first chapter of Frances A. Yates' Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition of 1964, and Brian Copenhaver's introduction to his 1992 translation of the Corpus Hermeticum into English. The most relevant novelty,

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3 B. Obrist, "Vers une histoire de l'alchimie médiévale," Les crises, 3-43.

which bases itself upon research carried out over the past three decades, is the substitution of the formerly accepted distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘learned’ Hermeticism by a view that links more closely ‘technical’ and ‘theoretical’ Hermetic treatises, whose relationship—albeit still under discussion—is no longer perceived in terms of a mere opposition.\(^5\) Notwithstanding Copenhaver’s scant consideration for alchemy, his thoughtful remarks about “salvation in the largest sense” as the “common concern of theoretical and technical Hermetica alike” should best be kept in mind when dealing with the interaction between alchemy and Hermeticism.\(^6\)

The first clear affirmation of the philosophical character of alchemy can be traced back many decades, to a time well before the revival of studies of the past twenty years. As early as 1934, A.J. Hopkins brought to light the correspondence between Hellenistic alchemy and the teleological structure of being in Aristotle’s philosophy.\(^7\) Aristotelian features—doctrines from the Meteorologica and, even more so, from Aristotle’s biological books (De generatione et corruptione, De animalibus and Parva naturalia)—are certainly a primary component of the development of alchemy in the Greek, Arabic and Latin textual traditions.\(^8\) Yet it can hardly be questioned that it was not Aristotle, but Hermes, who was the philosophical author to whom alchemists referred when they began to retrace the origin of their wisdom.\(^9\)

The name of Hermes as the mythical founder passed from Byzantine to Islamic and later to Latin alchemy, where it conveyed


\(^{6}\) Copenhaver, Hermetica, xxxvii.


\(^{9}\) According to J. Letrunt (“Chronologie des alchimistes grecs,” in Alchimie, Art, histoire et mythe, 11-93: 64-65, 81), the acknowledgment of priority to Hermes in alchemical writing was first given by an anonymous Byzantine author of the 8th-9th century.
philosophical contents of still undefined but indisputably not just classical (Greek) origin. Hermes' teachings, engraved on a precious emerald table, were believed to lead alchemists (and, with them, magicians and other secret-hunters) to the knowledge of the unity of the All and to the discovery of the innermost arcana naturae, whose possession was eagerly desired at least from late Antiquity onward in order to improve humanity's (or simply one's own) life.\(^\text{10}\)

The legend of the 'Three Hermes' and his supposed link with Pythagorean and Mosaic wisdom made of Hermes an outstanding exponent of ancient wisdom well before Ficino's translations in the second half of the fifteenth century.\(^\text{11}\) The alchemical side of this fame is well shown by the definition of Hermes Trismegistus as the first alchemist after the flood in the anonymous Conversatio philosophorum, which is preserved in a manuscript written four years after the first printed edition of the Corpus Hermeticum.\(^\text{12}\) Much earlier, the prologue to the alchemical Testamentum Morieni had introduced into the Latin culture of the twelfth century the Hermetic myth: after the flood Hermes had been the first to teach both the liberal and the mechanical arts and especially astrology and alchemy.\(^\text{13}\) His doctrines were conveyed in a corpus of philosophical treatises as well as in writings on astrology, magic and medicine and in fragmentary quotations within alchemical texts of the Hellenistic period.

In Arabic alchemical writings, Hermes had a complex role as the author, source and also the symbolic subject of the opus, as Paola Carusi shows in her contribution to this volume. In the Latin world, he was associated with cosmological ideas diverging from


\(^{12}\) Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, ms lat. VI.215 (3599), A.D. 1475, f. 155 r-v : "Post vero diluvium [...] omnium phylosophorum caput et pater Hermes scribens in sui (sic) epistola brevi sed non lei: 'Verum sine mendacio.' " The "short but not trifling letter" quoted is the *Tabula smaragdina*.

Aristotle’s and supporting the idea of an emerging alchemical philosophy. Hermetic doctrines were thus firmly connected to the alchemical opus, a fact that accounts for the presence of alchemical treatises among Arabic as well as Latin writings attributed to Hermes.\textsuperscript{14}

Whatever its material and concrete operations, the aim of alchemy was to produce an agent of perfection which could transmute metals into gold and grant perfect health and even rejuvenation to human bodies.\textsuperscript{15} Alchemists were well aware that such an agent did not exist in nature, although they grounded their enterprise on a deep knowledge of nature’s course and often attempted to reproduce it step by step (but not always: the Islamic Razes and the Latin Paul of Taranto were eminent exceptions). A long-lasting discussion about the relationship of ars and natura in the alchemical opus characterized the more theoretically relevant alchemical writings,\textsuperscript{16} and a significant yet scarcely read text was a key to that debate at the beginning of Latin alchemy: the Ars alchimiae, also simply called Liber Hermetis, like the far more renowned astrological text of Greek origin.\textsuperscript{17}

The underlying idea was that the access to the secrets of nature which Hermetic philosophy granted, would lead to an operative knowledge capable of transforming that same nature on which it was grounded and of producing something superior to what nature herself could ever bring forth. Breaking the structure of material things, the alchemists thought they could turn concrete substances back into their original state of formless matter and then give it a new and more perfect form. Admittedly, some alchemists wanted only to induce nature to give a new form to alchemically ‘prepared’ matter, while others considered their opus as an artificial production of things equal to, or even better than, natural

\textsuperscript{14} For the Arabic alchemical writings attributed to Hermes see F. Sezgin, Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums, 10 vols. (Leiden, 1967-84), 4: 38-41. The edition of Latin alchemical writings is planned in the collection “Hermes Latinus” (Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis), directed by Paolo Lucentini.


ones. According to this most radical version, alchemy was reputed to produce something new by means of laboratory manipulations of natural substances. Alchemically produced things were deemed to be artificial in the full sense of the word, i.e. not existing in nature as such, since they were endowed with two opposite perfections which could never coexist in natural beings, namely incorruptibility and life (i.e. the capability of transmitting its own perfection).

This sweeping view of the alchemical opus clearly shows the epistemological difference between alchemy and all classical philosophies; it also brings out the deepest implication of its reference to Hermes as to the father of alchemy. The legendary Hermes of the alchemists was the inventor of all the sciences and arts, but in pre-philosophical, mythical thought he also represented the unity of the All, and this symbolic feature deeply underlies both technical and theoretical Hermetic treatises. Hermes’ appeal to alchemists as well as to Renaissance philosophers and magicians was rooted in his being a powerful symbol of the unity of the divine, human, and natural world. It is this unity that makes human activity capable of penetrating the secret levels of all natural dynamics and of driving it on to the highest goal of which the human mind can possibly conceive of: the restoration of matter to its primeval perfection.

The historical development of both these features is here illustrated by the papers dedicated to Renaissance authors and texts. Chiara Crisciani studies the association with alchemy of an outstanding exponent of humanistic Hermeticism, Ludovico Lazza-relli; Vittoria Perrone Compagni focuses on Agrippa of Nettesheim, analysing the role of alchemy in his project of the reformation of magic; and Zweder von Martels looks closely at an important source of Renaissance alchemy, Augurellus’ Chrysopoeia.

If we consider that the notion of utility had been rejected by ancient philosophy and the sciences derived from its principles had been characterized by the purity of their theoretical goals, we will understand that in alchemy we find a different orientation of reason at work which was rooted in myth and whose ultimate fruits would be its association, on one side with magic, and on the other with the new pharmacology. The popular diffusion of the latter is

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18 For the mythical features of Hermes see K. Kerényi, Hermes Guide of Souls, The Mythologem of the Masculine Source of Life (Dallas, 1976).
discussed in the present volume by William Eamon on the basis of the representative figure of Leonardo Fioravanti. Indeed, the warrant of this mental orientation had for many centuries been the mythical figure of Hermes, whose eminent role continued to be acknowledged even in the seventeenth and eighteenth century debates over alchemy and chemistry. As Ferdinando Abbrì shows, several authors invoked the name of Hermes Trismegistus, Egypt, and the antiquity of alchemy in rhetorical support of the autonomy of chemistry.

By retracing the historical path of the association between Hermeticism and alchemy, the contributions collected in this volume intend to offer new points of view on both fields. Their reappraisal of the link between the operative and the philosophical character of alchemy and of the symbolic figure of Hermes in the pre-modern world shows a relevant aspect of the historical development of the myth of Hermes, whose many facets match the unceasing quest of human reason for the transformation of the natural world.

All but one of the papers here assembled were presented at a seminar held in Florence, at the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, on November 27th, 1998.¹⁹ I should like to thank Michele Ciliberto, President of the Istituto, for his initial suggestion which started the organization of the seminar, and for the generous support offered by the Istituto; and the editors, who consented to publish the papers in this special issue of Early Science and Medicine. I also wish especially to thank William Eamon for his unfailing and precious help without which my editorial task might have proven to be impossible.

¹⁹ The seminar was an outcome of the research "LAPIS. Lineamenti dell’alchimia: progetto per un’indagine storica" (1997-99), coordinated by M. Pereira and sponsored by the Italian Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche. Pereira’s paper had been presented in a slightly different form at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America at Kansas City (USA); part of it was incorporated into the introduction to the Florence seminar. Antonio Clericuzio, who took part in the seminar with a paper entitled “‘La barba bianca della chimica’. Discussioni seicentesche sull’origine dell’alchimia,” was unfortunately unable to submit it for publication in the present context.