

THE SCIENCE
OF ALCHEMY

“SAPERE AUDE”

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The Science of Alchemy

Spiritual and Material

An essay by

‘Sapere Aude’

Published in 2010 by Inner Garden

First Edition



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THE SCIENCE OF ALCHEMY.

BY S. A.

The subject of Alchemy is one of great interest, both to the members of the Eastern Theosophic school and to Hermetists; but it is preferable to approach the consideration of the science of Alchemy from the standpoint of the Western Occult Philosophy, handed down to us from the sages of medieval Europe, and which they obtained from three principal sources. First, from the Arabs, who almost alone preserved the ancient sciences through the dark ages. Secondly, from Jewish scholars, Rabbis of Hebrew culture, who had received the traditional lore now identified by the name 'Kabalah,' that tradition of high magic to which ancient Chaldea and Babylon so largely contributed. Lastly, from Egypt, the ancient Egypt of the Pharaohs, ruled by those mighty priest kings of old, whose wisdom instructed Moses, and whose training enabled him to supersede all minor professors of magical arts, and to rule with some success a turbulent and rebellious people – the early Hebrews.

If we look upon the subject from the point which affords the widest view, it may be said that Alchemy has two aspects: the simply material, and the religious. The dogma that Alchemy was only a form of chemistry, is untenable by anyone who has read the works of its chief professors. The doctrine that Alchemy was religion only, and that its chemical references were all blinds, is equally untenable in the face of history, which shows that many of its most noted professors were men who had made important discoveries in the domain of common chemistry, and were in no way notable as teachers either of ethics or religion.

Firstly, then, Alchemy must be regarded as a science uniting ancient chemistry with a religious basis.

Secondly, it is convenient and permissible to discuss the merits and aims of Alchemy from a Triple point of view, for it has a Cosmic, Human and Terrestrial side. Cosmic, in that by analogy its conclusions when true must be universal as well as particular. Human, because as aforesaid, it has a religious side; and Terrestrial, when it is concerned with mere earth, metals and minerals.

Thirdly, as Blavatsky said, Alchemy, like many of the religio-scientific myths of antiquity, is a suitable subject for consideration under Seven Heads. For Seven is the number of the Key whose action is most general throughout the universe.

Fourthly, the Hermetic Kabbalist will be justified in demonstrating to his *pupil* the complete fitness of the Sephirothic scheme of the Decad to illustrate the secrets of Alchemy, even as he has found that the Sephiroth have never failed to furnish a symbolic allegory of all the forms of manifested creation.

Yet, fifthly, there is the Key of the Twelve; but this special form of attribution is somewhat limited in use; referring to time and space, rather than form or thought.

No attempt can here be made to follow up these several schemes to their logical conclusions. Space will alone permit of a superficial view of the common exoteric knowledge of the science and of its professors; followed by a glance at Alchemy in its most material aspect, its relation to chemistry, and the reconciliation of chemistry to Alchemy; and alternately a short consideration of the subject as a form of religious and ethical instruction.

Chemistry, the modern science which investigates the constitution of material substances, is the lineal descendant of Medieval and Ancient Alchemy. The syllable AL is the Arabic definite article – like the Hebrew He’, meaning ‘The’ chemistry, the *Higher* chemistry; treating of the essential

nature of the Elements, metals and minerals; while modern chemistry rejoices rather in being a science devoted to utilitarian and commercial uses. The earliest use of the word 'Alchymy' is believed to be found in the works of Julius Firmicus Maternus, an Astronomer, who lived in the time of the Emperor Constantine.

Firmicus wrote: 'he should be well skilled in Alchymy, who is Born when the Moon is in the house of Saturn.'

The Imperial Library of Paris is said to possess the oldest Alchymic Volume known; it is by Zosimus of Panopolis, written in Greek, and entitled, *The Divine Art of making Gold and Silver*, and was written about A.D. 400.

The next oldest tract upon Alchymy known to exist is by Aeneas Gazeus, written in Greek, about A.D. 480. The Medieval authors often call Alchymy the 'Hermetic Art,' implying an origin from Hermes Trismegistus of Egypt, the prehistoric demigod, or inspired teacher, to whom we owe the 'Emerald Tablet,' which has been not inaptly described as being a *résumé* of all alchymic science on a single page.

During the earliest Christian times all the sciences flourished at Alexandria, where men of learning were fostered by the rulers; but with Roman predominance there came a change, so far at least as Alchymy is concerned, for the Roman Emperors, partly from jealousy of the subject city, partly because they feared the reality of the Pharaonic claim to gold making, and that by such means the Egyptian nation might be supported in its efforts. at independence, issued orders for its suppression. History tells us that the Emperor Diocletian ordered that all books relating to the Egyptian ancient arts and sciences should be collected and destroyed.

From this time, science took refuge among the Arabs,

whose sages cultured it for centuries, and introduced the sciences into Spain, whence they spread into Germany, where Alchymy, one of the Eastern sciences, was adopted by the monks, who seem in many places to have been permitted to study and investigate, although the clergy in general persecuted laymen who practised the art.

Lenglet du Fresnoy, who made a long and patient investigation among the old Alchymic authors, states as the result of his researches, that he has traced ten famous authorities previous to the Christian era, setting aside the almost unknown works of the Egyptian Magi, whose remains are found among the papyri of Egyptian mummies and the inscriptions of the Tombs of the Nile Valley; Berthelot has lately, in Paris, published a volume of most instructive extracts from these most ancient documents. Lenglet discovered twenty one alchymic authors in the first 1000 years after Jesus, five in the 11th century, three in the 12th, eleven in the 13th, fifteen in the 4th, seventeen in the 5th, thirty in the 16th, and sixty-seven in the 17th century of our time.

Amongst the most famous names of European Alchymy we note that several were men who rose to hold high dignities in the church: such were Pelagius, Lynesius a Bishop, Heliodorus a Bishop, Cremer, Ripley a Canon, Albertus Magnus a Dominican, Aquinas, Basil Valentine a Benedictine, Raymond Lully a Franciscan, Trithemius an Abbot of Spanheim, and Pope John XXII.

A SHORT CATALOGUE OF THE MORE FAMOUS
ALCHYMISTS IS HERE GIVEN.

Geber, an Arab philosopher	Circa	730	A.D
			.
Rhazes, an Arab physician	”	920	”
Alfarabi, an Arab chemist	”	954	”
Avicenna, the Arab physician	”	1030	”
Kalid, a king in Egypt	”	1110	”
Albertus Magnus, Bishop of Ratisbon	”	1289	”
Thomas Aquinas, a theologian	”	1260	”
Artephius	”	1160	”
Alain de Lisle	”	1298	”
Arnold of Villanova, Professor at the University of Barcelona	”	1305	”
Peter of Abano, or Apone	”	1300	”
Raymond Lully, a Spanish prelate	”	1314	”
Roger Bacon, the inventor of gun powder	”	1270	”
Pope John XXII*	”	1316	”
Jean de Meung, author of the <i>Romance of the Rose</i>	”	1340	”
Nicholas Flamel, a benefactor of the poor of Paris	”	1415	”
George Ripley, Sir, a canon of the Church	”	1490	”
Basil Valentine, prior of a monastery	”	1450	”

* Villani says he left a fortune of 25,000,000 florins

Bernard of Treves or Trevisanus	”	1490	”
Trithemius of Spanheim; an abbot	”	1516	”
Cornelius Agrippa, a very famous occult philosopher	”	1536	”
Paracelsus, physician and professor	”	1541	”
Agricola	”	1555	”
Denis Zachaire	”	1560	”
Dee, John, an English clergyman	”	1608	”
Kelly, Edward, a notary	”	1595	”
Seton the Cosmopolite	”	1603	”
Sendivogius, Michael	”	1636	”
Libavius, Andrew	”	1609	”
Oswald Croll	”	1617	”
Michael Maier, author of the <i>Atalanta Fugiens</i>	”	1619	”
Jean d’Espagnet, author of the <i>Hermetic Arcanum</i>	”	1620	”
Robert Fludd, theologian and mystic	”	1638	”
Van Helmont, Jean Baptiste	”	1643	”
Eireneus Philafethes, i.e., Thomas Vaughan	”	1645	”
George Starkey	”	1646	”
Elias Ashmole, the antiquary	”	1648	”
Rudolf Glauber, physician	”	1650	”
Robert Boyle, chemist	”	1668	”
Olaus Borrichius	”	1675	”

Matthieu Dammy, one of the last famous Parisian Alchymists	”	1739	”
Jean Christophe Kunst, a German professor	”	1737	”

In 1404, here in England, the art of transmutation was made a felony by 5, Hen., IV. c. 4; this Act was repealed in 1689.

In its most material form the science of Alchymy taught that all substances were essentially and primordially derived from one basic ‘*hyle*’ or foundation. From this basis differentiation arose, and by myriad steps the immense variety of material substances – such as we now see around us – originated by progression. From the common minerals were developed the metals, also in gradation of purity and excellence, until an acme was reached in the two so-called Perfect Metals – Silver and Gold. From this theory arose the Art of Alchymy, the Art of Transmutation, by which it was sought to produce Silver and Gold from other metals the next below them in the series, notably from Mercury, Antimony and Lead. Many indeed were the processes devised, but there was a general consensus of opinion that the last three stages of the chemical process were notable by a series of colour changes, from Black, through White to Red; this red matter was the Philosophers’ Stone, or Red Elixir, which could not only transmute Silver into Gold, but could also procure health and prolong life.

Modem chemistry has, above all things, prided itself on its complete severance from the Alchymy of the Ancients. No modem science has shown more intolerance towards its ancestors than the chemistry of our era has shown to the discoveries of those Egyptian, Arabian and Medieval sages who were the founders of chemistry in the dim and distant

past.

The discovery of the elements has been the grand achievement of modern chemistry, and sure and certain renown has for half a century been granted to any chemist who has added a new Element to the existing catalogue. But if we may trust one of the most eminent chemists of the day, Professor Crookes, the future will change all this system, and a niche in the Temple of Fame will in the future be allotted by preference to one who succeeds in dividing one of our present elements into its constituents. The Chemistry of the Future is to destroy the present theory, and to gain the power of reducing all compounds, and all the Elements to one primordial matter, to be named PROTYLE. In other words the most ancient chemical doctrine of the πρώτη ὕλη, or FIRST MATTER, is to become paramount. This, then, is the Reconciliation of the Future.

No sooner is the modern Doctrine of Elements laid aside, than the discoveries of the Primordial Matter, the Transmutation of Metals, and the Elixir of Life reappear and once more enter the range of the possible. Ancient Alchymy claimed no Elements, in our modern sense. An element being defined as 'a body which cannot be decomposed,' or 'a something to which we can add, but from which we can take away nothing,' or 'a body which increases in weight with every chemical change,' or 'a body different from all others, yet having constant characters itself, and indivisible except into parts of itself.' True, the word element was applied to the group of four properties which they so highly esteemed, *viz.*, Fire, Air, Earth, and Water. But a close study of the oldest authors show that these four names are types of four modes of matter, and further that they are four correlative terms, implying states mutually related and dependent, and in no way independent and opposed entities. They were names of

the four states,

Heat and Dryness	=	Fire,
Heat and Moistness	=	Air,
Cold and Dryness	=	Earth,
Cold and Moistness	=	Water,

as is amply demonstrated even by Aristotle, who shows that the one matter, simple, or combined with its developments, may exist in each of these states.

The Alchemist affirmed the existence of the Primum Ens, or First Being, or First Matter; two opposites or contraries; three principles; and four elementary states of matter.

Beyond these came the seven metals, as forms of matter, essentially stable, except in the hands of the skilled operator, to whom might be given the power of Transmutation, or of changing one of them into the other. Gold as the most perfect one was the effect of the greatest transmutation, which process once known rendered all others of no importance. Hence all the efforts of the greatest Alchemists were directed to this the crowning achievement of the work. For this process one substance was requisite, the Philosopher's Stone, the Quintessence, Son of the Sun, our laton: this was to be derived from the Philosophical Mercury, Salt and Sulphur, and had to pass in the process through the colours Black and White to the Red. This Stone, all powerful for Transmutation, was expected to be also the basis of the Great Elixir of Life when employed to affect living beings, and so confer the power of indefinite prolongation of earthly existence.

Historical proof may be wanting that the Stone of the Philosophers was ever found and used, but no candid observer can doubt that the life, long labours of the Alchemists, and especially their discoveries in Synthesis, and

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