

ALCHEMICAL SHAKESPEARE

“Kissing with golden face the meadows green, / Gliding
pale streams with heavenly alchemy.” -Sonnet 33

One path alchemy took is as the precursor of, and to this day remains the spirit of, modern chemistry. This is a practical alchemy that developed dyes, tinctures, and medicines, and may even have been able to make gold, or at least what passed for gold. The other path is an alchemy that was as much a form of internal transmutation (what C.G. Jung calls individuation) as it was a chemical process, initiating one's psyche, or soul, into the making of a so-called Philosophers' Stone. It is, like any artistic process, at once objective and subjective, which I call bi-plasticity. This term not only has the properties of transformation, but also has the ability to fulminate. That is, a dedicated creativity is, of necessity, both constructive and destructive: in the act of creating something “new” something old must be destroyed, not just objectively, but also subjectively.

Historically there are many branches of alchemy, including major Arab contributions to what became a Medieval European practice. and Chinese Daoist Alchemy, whose thesis, “The Secret of the Golden Flower,” set C.G. Jung on his journey into “Our Art.” (The alchemists often spoke in terms of “Our,” being secretive of their recipes, and generous in their sacrifices.) But the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus is the semi-mythical founder of Western Alchemy, and author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which was lost for centuries, only to be discovered by a Macedonian monk in 1463, just in time for the Renaissance. It is the Greek Hermes-Mercurius, god of the crossroads, of liminal space, he who bridges the gaps, enabling one's mind to pass through various realities, and who made “a magical vision of nature” possible.

The magical vision of nature was taken up by English poet and playwright William Shakespeare, who lived at a time (1564-1616) when alchemy, along with stage magic and witchcraft, was a practice accepted among both commoners and the monarchy. Just like there is no one alchemical formula, there is no one Shakespearean text. Although, like good scientists, most alchemists wrote down their formulas, even if in obscure metaphorical terms, many times in the form of poetry, Shakespeare did not keep manuscripts of his plays. Thus, we have no plays written in the bard's hand. So there are, for example, three “authentic” versions of King Lear.

Although there are references to alchemy in many, if not most, of Shakespeare's plays, two are especially influenced by alchemical tropes: King Lear and The Tempest. Both were written within a decade of his death. In Lear, the alchemical process begins with, as Jungian analyst Robert Macdonald says: “an ailing King in need of renewal (who is) melted down in order to be transformed.”¹ The King represents the *prima materia*, the material confusion with which the alchemical process begins. For Lear is indeed confused. He rejects Cordella, his favorite daughter, because he doesn't want to hear

the truth she's telling him, saying, "Come not between the dragon and his wrath." The dragon is the ouroboros, the serpent devouring his own tail, which Jung says is "the basic mandala of alchemy;" that is, the king beginning to devour his sanity, metamorphizing into a therianthrope.

The poet Samuel Coleridge wrote:
Shakespeare goes on creating and
evolving, B out of A, and C out of B,
and so on, just as a serpent moves,
which makes a fulcrum out of its own
body and seems forever twisting and
untwisting in its own strength."²



In this first stage of his madness, Lear divides his kingdom between his two other daughters and their husbands, who flatter him, as Cordella didn't, only to later betray him. Lear has become a king as only a figurehead; inwardly he is Impotent, or, in alchemical terms, unripe: gold that is dark beneath the glitter of a deluded ego, a sulfurous mixture of nobility and corruption.

The oldest alchemical parable we know of is Visto Areles,' a 10th Century Islamic text in which an alchemist named Arisleus and another alchemist travel to a kingdom in which reproduction has become impossible. The alchemists tell the king that they can make everything generate, but the king's son and daughter must couple. The king agrees, and, in the process, the son dies. As a consequence, along with the prince's corpse, the alchemists are thrown in a "triple glass prison;" that is, into an alchemical apparatus. The alchemists promise the king they will restore the boy's life if his sister is also imprisoned with them.

Chemist and historian of alchemy, Lawrence M. Principe, writes: "The prepared substance or mixture is the philosophical egg (*ovum philosophicum*) on account of both the shape and the size of its belly, and its function in 'giving birth' to the stone."³ After 80 days the boy is reborn, the alchemists are freed, and the kingdom becomes fertile again.

In all alchemical parables there is sacrifice that leads to redemption. It is as if what James Hillman calls "personifications" were circling through the apparatus, their passion the very heat that purifies them. "You sulphurous and thought-executing fires," Shakespeare wrote in Lear. (Act III Scene 2).

The alchemical fire is a furnace of emotions. How different this from the dispassionate, detached therapist interpreting dreams; or the scientific method of apparent non-involvement, and its cold calculations; while the alchemist's laboratory takes us back to the roots of the word laboratory: Laborare = to work; orare = to pray.

How do we find this place of work and prayer? In his important essay, "The Alchemical Dreamworker: Reflections on Freud and the Alchemical Tradition," Randolph Severson, wrote:

After years of searching, one might be smuggled down an unused corridor in the oldest part of the monastery to a bolted door hidden in the shadows, or one could find oneself in the library of some elegant English lord such as John Dee. There the pungent smell of cooking chemicals would take the breath away, and the mysterious instruments would dazzle wondering eyes.⁴

John Dee (1527-1608) was one of the most famous, and infamous, intellectuals living during Shakespeare's lifetime. An amalgam of Stephen Hawking and Timothy Leary, Dee entered Cambridge at age 15, and by age 23 he was lecturing to large audiences on Euclid geometry. He became Queen Elizabeth's chief science advisor and astrologer. As a mathematician, he invented strategies of navigation that made possible England's domination of the seas, and thus the British Empire. He began the British Intelligence Service, and it's been rumored that Shakespeare was one of his spies. Dee also accumulated the largest library in Europe, especially on esoterica, larger than the holdings of Oxford and Cambridge combined.



Many scholars believe that Shakespeare based the character Prospero, in his play, *The Tempest*, on John Dee, and Dee's library included Prospero's Magic Books.

Although Prospero was not an alchemist but a magician, like John Dee he sought to control the forces of nature.

The obsession to control the forces of nature (which is at the heart of the so-called "hard sciences") is where Dee's journey into infamy went into high gear.

One day in 1582, when Dee was in his mid-fifties, a charismatic 27-year-old man named Edward Kelley, a self-declared medium and alchemist, knocked on the door of Dee's home at Mortlake, in the then suburbs of London. Dee had been trying, unsuccessfully, to contact angels as a scryer, or crystal-gazer, and Kelley professed the ability to successfully summon angels forth. For the next seven years Dee's and Kelley's lives were intertwined.

In 1583, living under the delusion of being guided by angelic instructions, Dee gave up his position at Queen Elizabeth's court, left his house in the incapable hands of his brother-in-law, and with Kelley and their families left England for Eastern Europe, where they unsuccessfully sought the patronage of King Rudolf II, who was called The Mad Alchemist. Dee's "angels" then instructed the two men to share everything, including their wives. Even though both men, and especially their wives, found this revolting, for a short time they followed their angelic masters.

This exchange of sexual partners is akin to when, in *Visto Areles*, brother and sister, who represent Sol and Luna, sulfur and mercury, in the opus, engage in an incestuous relationship, and Robert MacDonald speaks of “Lear’s symbolically incestuous relationship to his daughters, where he expects them to function as daughter, mother and lover,”⁵ which in the alchemical opus is followed by death; or, rather, the fall into their unconscious. This stage of the opus is called putrefaction, when the psyche enters its dark night of the soul, the *nigredo*, in which “black is blacker than black.” This stage is where many alchemists saw their “Great Work” fail. It is also where the relationship between Dee and Kelley began to disintegrate.

Kelley and Dee parted company in 1596, with Kelley going to Prague, where, in 1590, King Rudolf knighted him, then imprisoned Kelley to keep him from selling his secret for making gold. (To the end of his life, Dee believed that Kelley was able to make gold.) Kelley died trying the escape from prison.

Meanwhile, Dee returned to England, where his reputation as a scientist, along with his home, was in shambles. Some of his most treasured books were stolen by former students, whom his brother-in-law had let peruse. As if this wasn’t enough, Dee’s wife was pregnant with Kelley’s child.

In his seminal essay, “The Therapeutic Value of Alchemical Language,” James Hillman writes that: “When alchemy speaks of degrees of heat, it does not use numbers. Rather, it refers to the heat of horse dung, the heat of sand, the heat of metal touching fire. These heats differ, moreover, not only in degree but also in quality: heat can be slow and gentle, or moist and heavy, or sudden and sharp...Heat is not abstracted from the body that gives it.”⁶

Thus, in the final scene, in which Lear is reunited with his daughter, he laments: “I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears / Do scold like molten lead.” Alchemical words must reach temperatures that bring the opus to a hard boil, at which point they may explode into an extraordinary metaphoric lexicon...or fizzle out.

Hillman proposes a vocabulary that “the work of soul-making,” or the making of a Philosophers’ Stone, requires; ingredients such as: “corrosive acids, heavy earths, ascending birds...sweating kings, dogs and bitches, stench, urine, and blood. How like the language of our dreams,” he opines,” and unlike the language into which we interpret the dreams.”⁴ He asks us to see “how necessary alchemy was for providing a basis for (Jung’s) depth psychology because...No term means only one thing. Every alchemical phenomenon is both material and psychological at the same time.”⁷

Shakespeare was a student of history, current events, popular culture and mythology. For example, King Lear may have been the legend of Leir of Britain, a pre-Roman Celtic king, and we know that *The Tempest* was based partly on a 1609 shipwreck off the then uninhabited island of Bermuda.⁸ (Shakespeare writes in a “wildman” named Caliban, who is indigenous to the island, so that the landing of Prospero and his party speaks to 17th Century England’s ambition to colonize the known world, with the help of John Dee’s inventions.

I think it's appropriate to conclude with the last lines of a poem by a contemporary poet who not just talks about alchemy, appropriating its images and symbols, but offers a contemporary alchemical language, here to address the tragic 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

We join the poem at its last stanza, where the poem it becomes internalized, as in "spiritual alchemy," circulating within her body:

I taste bone and salt
On my snaky tongue;
Fire sparks in my hot stomach:
Oil mixed with bile, pebbles and seawater,
Amniotic fluid, a bed to root
Lightning, a fork consummating planets
Breathing above the beaten earth.

Garden of Death, the sea,
Sucks up pain, hurls trident
And a huge wet belly at rocks,
At stinking sand,
Into the beach's open mouth.⁶

Endnotes

1. MacDonald, R. "Prima Materia in Shakespeare's King Lear." <https://robertmacdonald.org/alchemy-2>
2. Coleridge, S. *Table Talk*, 2 Vols, ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton University Press, 1990) p. 464.
3. Principe, L.M. *The Secrets of Alchemy*. Chicago & London 2013. p.123.
4. Severson, R. "The Alchemy of Dreamwork: Reflections on Freud and the Alchemical Tradition." *Dragonflies*. Irvine, TX, Spring 1979.
5. MacDonald, Ibid.
6. Hillman, J. *The Therapeutic Value of Alchemical Language: A Heated Introduction* *Alchemical Psychology*. Putnam, CT., 2010. p.13
7. Hillman, Ibid. p.14
8. See, H. Woodward, *A Brave Vessel*. New York, 2010.
9. Rowland, S. From, "Those Are Pearls That Were His Eyes: (Gulf of Mexico, April 20, 2010)"

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