



The Skeptics SA guide to Alchemy

Alchemy: A pseudo-science comprising complex metaphysical and philosophical concepts. The precursor of chemistry, it combined aspects of religion and science, and it is often difficult to identify where one area ended and the other commenced. The principles of alchemy had been known in ancient China, and appear to have entered Europe sometime around the end of the Roman Empire. It was extensively developed in Europe after 1000 AD by the Arabs, and later by the Europeans themselves.

Like many of the ancient 'arts' it presented a facade of a profoundly intellectual endeavor, although in fact, most Alchemists were swindlers who sought to use their alleged skills to gain wealth and power defrauding gullible patrons.

That is not to say however, that there were a few genuine individuals whose objectives were wisdom rather than monetary rewards. The true alchemist had a vision of the world that made them very humble, and set them apart from the rest of mankind. These few spent their life studying obscure books and conducting what was, because of the chemicals they used, often dangerous research.

Although the best known aspect of alchemy of converting any ordinary metal, like iron or

lead into gold, the exact objectives of alchemy were much more complex and diverse. There were essentially two categories of Alchemists:

- the Soufflers, whose objective was primarily their attempts to find the Philosopher's Stone, in order to obtain wealth by converting ordinary metals like iron or lead into gold
- the Alchemists, whose prime aim was the gathering of knowledge, wisdom, and the completion of the Great Work

The philosophical side of alchemy identified this physical objective of converting common metals into gold as merely an analogy of the conversion of the ordinary man into something finer and much more precious. Such beliefs were fueled by ancient myths, such as the Golden Fleece, which they believed contained the secret of the Great Work.

They followed many of the teachings of the Cabbala. Their concept of the Hermetic World was of the Divine World, (the upper part), the material world, (the lower part) and the Central Circle, being the Circle Of The Great Work, half on high, half below.

The Alchemists were much involved in esoteric symbolism. They adopted the Egyptian concept of the Uroboros, (the unbroken circle), as

well as many other ancient symbols, describing all their activities and substances in arcane terms using esoteric names for the most common substances. Lead became Black Crow, Sal ammoniac was White Eagle, while Mercury became Celestial Dew. They believed that the world contained a 'living soul', (the Anima Mundi), and this 'soul' formed a connection between the physical world and the Creator. This Anima Mundi was linked to God in the same way that man is linked to women. They built various strange furnaces, in which they hoped to achieve their objectives, such as making the Powder Of Projection, more commonly known as, the Philosopher's Stone, which they believed had both curative and toxic properties. They represented it as a fertilizing agent or the Elixir of Life, which made plants grow and bear fruit in a short space of time, e.g. a few hours. The Philosopher's Egg or Vase, in which the Great Work took place was filled with raw materials to produce the seven metals, and developed into three variations of 'a bird more sublime than all the others,' the double egg of Crede Mihi, and then a concept of classical origin of the dragon and serpents.

The Primordial Strength, (symbolized by the serpent) had to be massacred before the Great Work could come into being.

The theme of the 'king' or 'killing of the king,' referred to the sublimation of matter, and to the Alchemist it had a very precise meaning. The 'king' as primordial matter, devoured the son, before the power incarnate could be saved it had to be impregnated with that of the father. (It was an allegorical variation of the Christian theme where the Son of God had to sacrifice himself before becoming one with the Father).

The idea that this stone could transform any metal into gold was based upon the idea that, because all substances in the universe had been involved in the Chaos, then every single substance in the universe contained a form of life. It should be realized that, in that age, they knew little about the origins of living organisms. Life was believed to be a spontaneous act, (it was believed that flies were born out of rotten meat), so the idea that every substance was capable of being changed into some other substance appeared logical.

This explained why they were certain that lead could be changed to gold. By 'converting' the inherent nature of the lead, refining it into a purer form in the same way that a sinful man could be changed by the converting power of religion and his own faith, into a different, finer person, common lead could be converted into the finest of metals, royal gold. Each metal carried within itself a Ferment, which they believed, could be extracted; thus Royal Gold could produce Gold Ferment.

Another aspect of their belief concerned the conjunction of opposites. Like the Chinese

Skeptics SA

idea of Yin and Yang, they believed that natural opposites could combine to create balance, and form new substances, just as male and female that are so different can unite to create new life. Unfortunately, the secret to this uniting remained ever elusive, described by their quotation, that it would only become possible when, 'that which was hidden should become known.' To hide the fact that they really did not know what they were talking about, the followers of this art presented their writings in the most abstruse terminology, claiming that only those who were properly enlightened would be able to understand what had been written. Yet, in fact their writings were nothing more than complete nonsense, recorded in such an abstract way that it was unintelligible. Consider the following quotation, taken from *The Rosarium*, an ancient alchemical text, which claimed to 'explain' how to create the Philosopher's Stone:

Out of man and woman make a round circle and extract a quadrangle and from the quadrangle the triangle. Make a round circle and you will have the philosopher's stone.

Alchemy was not only practiced by magicians and pseudo-scientists as there is evidence that Christian monks also dabbled in this pseudo-science, as is shown by this old poem:

St Dunstan stood in his ivied tower,
Alembic, crucible, all were there;

In their long history only one alchemist stands out — Paracelsus, who discovered ether about 1540. Although an Alchemist he was also a

brilliant scientist. Rather than blindly accepting ancient ideas as factual, he introduced empirical testing, and in doing so sounded the death knell of alchemy. Of all the other alchemists, their efforts were a total waste of time and money. They spent lives searching for something that was never there. Their theories concerning the concept of matter and the origins of life were based upon false religious and philosophical assumptions, and once science started to develop their ideas were revealed for what they were, totally unworkable, superstitious nonsense.

Even a scientist as great as Isaac Newton wasted a fortune and years of his time, attempting to prove alchemical theories.

Laurie Eddie

Skeptics SA

The South Australian branch of the Australian Skeptics

For further information on the Australian Skeptics and the journal, *the Skeptic*, contact:

Email: <info@skepticssa.org.au>

Web site: <www.skepticssa.org.au>