Alchemy Paper

A Novel Approach on the Analysis of the Legitimacy or Illegitimacy of the Practice and Philosophy of Alchemy

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There are a variety of cultural contexts that surround the study and practice of Alchemy which challenge and complicate its perceived legitimacy. Juxtaposing literary works from different time periods that provide complex and varying cultural perspectives on alchemy against the more historically objective perspectives of major alchemical proponents such as Newton and Dee provides a multi-faceted way of looking at what is now generally seen as an illegitimate and archaic pseudo-science.

Historical Summary

While the direct goals of alchemy were never really achieved, alchemists did accidentally make several discoveries that are vital to modern science, and how we live. Alchemy was first practiced in Ancient Egypt where around 1900 BC Hermes Trismegistus (“Thrice Great”) wrote the emerald tablet in which he claimed to have knowledge of the three wisdoms (alchemy, astrology, theurgy) (Skully 322). Ever since the discovery of this tablet people from all over the world were trying to obtain two basic goals from alchemy or the Hermetic Method. These goals were either trying to perfect transmutation (obtaining precious metals from lesser metals) or increasing human life (both extending human life, and creating an elixir of immortality). Although these goals were never directly achieved alchemists did contribute many discoveries to science. In Ancient India Alchemists learned that they could identify metals based on the color flames turned when the metals were burned, this discovery began the idea that alchemy should develop into understanding the elements and how they react instead of changing one to the other, what would become chemistry. The welsh philosopher Thomas Vaughan discovered that certain potions applied at the time of death seemed to miraculously restore people to health, which lead to the idea that alchemy’s true purpose was to treat disease and not grant immortality (Dobbs 66).

Alchemical Symbology and Secret Societies

Compared to other scientists- physicists, mathematicians, biologists- chemists have traditionally had difficulty communicating their work. Their discoveries and achievements are comprised of a specialized language of symbols and formulas, poorly understood by the general public. This issue dates back to the founding of chemistry and its precursor, alchemy. Modern chemistry developed from European alchemy, which stemmed from Arabic alchemy, Greek alchemy, and Egyptian alchemy. The use of symbols extended past the time of ancient alchemy for many reasons. The use of symbols, as compared to words, allowed for the researcher to save time and space when writing. Also, alchemists were aware of the implications of their discipline and did not want the uneducated public to read and understand their script.

Aristotle founded the concept of the four basic elements shown as triangles; water, earth, fire and air. The known seven metals were assigned symbols as well. These symbols were associated with their corresponding planets. Other substances were also given symbols. However, it has been proven to be difficult to understand the relationship between the icons and the properties of the substances.

Alchemy worked in secret laboratories, wrote their work in a private language comprised of symbols and were not excessively open to the public. Alchemy was viewed in a negative light for hundreds of years during which most considered it as an irreversible mental illness caused from an insane desire to obtain riches, leading to misery and social isolation. Alchemy was a dangerous science, where at the time those who practiced it could be sentenced to death. The Laureate Poet Francesco Petrarck, who was a famous scholar of the late Middle Ages, commented on the manner in which alchemists carry themselves:

Some of them avoid conversation with other citizens and stay on their own, anguish and sad, because they are used to think only of bellows, pliers and coal and to associate only with the members of that heretical company; and at last, they become nearly feral.

Though alchemy was never accepted as a discipline in academia, chemistry eventually was. The first chair of chemistry was established in Cambridge, UK, in 1702, lead by Giovanni Francesco Vigani who was a close friend with Isaac Newton, professor of physics in Cambridge and secret alchemical practitioner. Therefore, in 1702 alchemy officially transitioned to chemistry and emerged as its own independent field of study.

Key Scientists

Engaging in reading and practicing alchemy in the late 16th century in England surrounded a large part of John Dee’s life. Dee was a master of mathematics and astronomy, as advisor to Queen Elizabeth, and his skills in navigation were vital towards exploration of the New World. One of Dee’s greatest alchemical works was his 1564 Hermetic work titled Monas Hieroglyphica or “The Hieroglyphic Monad.” Overall, the symbol represents Dee’s vision of the unity of the Cosmos and is a combination of esoteric and astrological symbols. This book contained a Cabalistic explanation of his glyph, which symbolized the “mythical unity of creation.”

Alchemy Literature

Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist, like any early comedic drama, gains its humor from moments of thinly-veiled deception and caricaturized “types,” such as the evil alchemist. Jonson’s play is commonly accepted as biting satire of alchemy, its proponents—namely John Dee—and the human vices associated with it, chiefly greed. The “evil alchemist” archetype is assumed by Subtle, who in turn is surrounded by Face, a dishonest butler, and Doll, a prostitute as well as a series of merchant-class characters all in pursuit of wealth. Critics of the work suggest that the comedy in this play arises out of the firm belief held by the community of characters. Of the relationship between the characters, one critic suggests,

In the microcosm of Lovewit’s house, Subtle, Doll, and Face make up a sort of society or republic at war with the outside world…Dragger, a petty shopkeeper, and Dapper, a small-time gambler and lawyer’s clerk, are revealed as fools through their inflated hopes for wealth (Finnigan).

Within this community, Surly is presented as the only real skeptic of Subtle and his seemingly fallacious justifications for his science. As a character, Surly is essential to the drama; the complicity of the other stock characters in this con game run by Subtle and Face requires the skeptic to point out the ridiculousness of the other characters’ greed-induced blindness to rationality. Jonson gives to us a scathing mockery of figures like Newton and Dee who spent their lives playing, what he sees, as a thinly-veiled con game, mocking the delusion of the endeavoring alchemist and the greed of those who surround him.

Mary Shelley takes a less comedic and more romantic approach than Jonson in her brief criticism of alchemy in her novel Frankenstein however, critics ascribe the same “type” to the titular character that Subtle receives:
Victor Frankenstein has become the archetype of the “evil alchemist,” portrayed as “arrogant, power-crazy, secretive, and insane in their pretensions to transcend the human condition and the limits of ‘permitted’ knowledge” (Haynes).

Though Victor Frankenstein’s alchemical studies are not in the forefront of the novel, they do provide the foundation on which it rests. The first several chapters outline Frankenstein’s self-education in the natural philosophers and their alchemical studies. The aspect of self-education is important here in the same way that Surly is necessary for Jonson, because Frankenstein’s studies, done in isolation, do not have the more objective, skeptical framework that exposes the more incredulous aspects of the philosophies. This outside framework is not provided until Frankenstein attends a university and comes across a particularly skeptical professor who provides the mockery:

Every instant that you have wasted on those books is utterly and entirely lost. You have burdened your memory with exploded systems and useless names. Good God! in what desert land have you lived, where no one was kind enough to inform you that these fancies, which you have so greedily imbibed, are a thousand years old, and as musty as they are ancient? I little expected, in this enlightened and scientific age, to find a disciple of Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus. My dear sir, you must begin your studies entirely anew (Shelley).

This episode results in an instability both in Frankenstein’s system of beliefs but also in his own self-estimation, which one critic frames in the historical framework:

Frankenstein came out of this period of great turmoil, following the French Revolution and then the rise of Napoleon...Old institutions had to be ripped up and created again and in different ways. Shelley provides a more complicated view of the alchemist than does Jonson. Where Jonson’s characters are caricatures and juxtaposed sharply against the society that mocks and ridicules their selfish desires, Shelley presents us with a much more human view of the alchemist. Shelley’s alchemist, though ultimately antagonistic, is sympathetic in that we can see his view of alchemy uncolored by the society’s prejudice first, and see that, at least in Frankenstein’s view, that he isn’t being self-serving, but rather in search of knowledge and understanding:

Sir Isaac Newton is said to have avowed that he felt like a child picking up shells beside the great and unexplored ocean of truth. Those of his successors in each branch of natural philosophy with whom I was acquainted appeared, even to my boy’s apprehensions, as tyros engaged in the same pursuit (Shelley).

At the same time, Victor Frankenstein’s voice colors the narrative and attempts to wash over the intense egoism imbedded in most of his self-reflections, as with the excerpt above, exposing him as the same kind of alchemist as Subtle, delusional, self-absorbed, and mocked by the ideologies of society, expressed by his professor.

In a way much different than both Shelley and Jonson, W. B. Yeats provides a more aesthetic defense of alchemy in his Rosa Alchemica, which is grounded in his own involvement in the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn, a secret alchemical society to which he belonged. As the most contemporary writer of the three, it may seem strange that he should be providing any sort of defense of alchemical belief systems in a time of rapidly modernizing science, however, critics comment on the historical context, suggesting:

As the Reformation produced a ferment of religious uncertainties, alchemy enjoyed a renewal of interest. Europeans sought in alchemy the mystical and ritualistic spirit that was being neglected in revised forms of worship. However...this renewed zeal for the mystical side of alchemy tended to ignore the physical side of alchemy (Allen).

It is this spiritual kind of belief in alchemy which Yeats is defending; although Yeats was known to have practiced occultism, attempting automatic writings and other rituals, but this ought not to be confused with the practice of alchemy as it existed as a precursor to chemistry, it is in philosophy only. This appreciation for the spiritual is highlighted in a passage from the story:

I understood the alchemical doctrine, that all beings, divided from the great deep where spirits wander, one and yet a multitude, are weary: and sympathized, in the pride of my connoisseurship, with the consuming thirst for destruction which made the alchemist veil under his symbols of lions and dragons, of eagles and ravens, of dew and of nitre, a search for an essence which would dissolve all mortal things...and at their perfect labour my mortality grew heavy, and I cried out, as so many dreamers and men of letters in our age have cried, for the birth of that elaborate spiritual beauty which could alone uplift souls weighted with so many dreams (Yeats)

The popularity of spiritual and symbolic schools of thought that permeated the elitist circles that Yeats frequented did not challenge the alchemical doctrines like the societies to which Shelley and Jonson belonged did; there is no Surly or University Professor to scoff at Michael Robartes. As a result, Rosa Alchemica completely gives into the delusion mocked by Shelley and Jonson and does not confront its own egoism and elitism. We can see the ways in which the narrator and Robartes have enveloped themselves in a symbolic and aesthetic illusion of grandeur that has no room for action, pragmatism, or any of the banality that makes up daily life. Yeats rests on the opposite side of the spectrum from Jonson, with Shelley lying between them. Diametrically opposing Jonson who poses the subjective view of the alchemists against the objective stance of the field, Yeats merges the subjectivity of the alchemical view with the narrative, providing a perspective of the alchemist that, unlike with the other two authors, remains unchallenged by the outside world, indeed partitioning himself from it through his hyper-symbolism.

Each of these portrayals of the alchemist is colored by the cultural contexts that surrounds it: Jonson expresses the views of the Enlightenment, extremely critical of any religious or spiritual doctrine and striving to search for empirical knowledge through reason; Shelley expresses the views of the Romantic Period, exploring the human emotion and sensibility that complicates the entirely reason-driven perspective; and Yeats expresses the views of the occult revival of the 19th century, celebrating spirituality in the face of a rapidly modernizing and dehumanizing world.

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