

# **A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery**

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# Introduction

The origins of alchemy in Western culture can be traced back to the world of Alexandria and Hellenistic Egypt around 300 BC, when Greek science was flourishing. In Alexandria at this time, the art of alchemy developed in both Graeco-Egyptian and Hebraic cultures. The Arabs became interested in alchemy when they took Alexandria from the Byzantine Empire, and Islamic alchemical practice became well established by AD 750. It was not until the twelfth century that the art of alchemy began to influence European culture, spreading there from the Arabs in Spain and Southern Italy. Pope John XXII's papal bull of 1317 condemned the practice of alchemy, forcing it to retreat underground. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, it had become an intellectually respectable, if controversial, discipline, and the great passion of the age. At this time alchemy was considered to be a significant scientific and philosophical thought system which provided a mode of perceiving substances, processes, relationships, and the cosmos itself. In its various manifestations – as the inquiry into chemical substances, the search for the new 'chymical' medicines, the scientific observation of the processes of nature, as an esoteric philosophy and cosmology, and as an exploration of the act of creation itself – alchemy flourished in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Alchemical theory was a dynamic force in the various influences which came together to form an intelligent explanation of the world.

Some of the most famous names of the day in England pursued the art of alchemy – Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Edward Dyer, Sidney's sister Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, Sir Walter Raleigh and his half-brother Adrian Gilbert, Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland, the mathematician Thomas Harriot, Edward Kelly and Dr John Dee, George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, Anne, Viscountess Conway, Samuel Hartlib, Isaac Newton, and King Charles II. The rising physicians of the day were the Paracelsian alchemists, and the revolutionary new chemical medicines, which began to replace traditional Galenic herbal practice, were introduced into the pharmacopoeia in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England by these pioneering 'chymists'. It is becoming increasingly clear that Hermetic and alchemical thought deeply influenced Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, and that writers of the stature of Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Marvell, Cleveland, Milton and Dryden drew on the rich source of alchemical imagery for their writing. The satiric reference to alchemy in the work of such writers as Thomas Nashe, Ben Jonson and John Donne is well known. But alchemical metaphor was used to express deep philosophical and spiritual truths as frequently as it was used as a subject for satire and comedy. When, in 'Resurrection Imperfect', Donne wrote of the crucified Christ as 'all gold when he lay down' but 'All tincture' when he rose, capable of transmuting 'leaden and iron wills to good', he was

using alchemical terms to express a deep spiritual vision of the transforming power of Christ's love. And when, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton wrote of the 'arch-chemic sun' whose fields and rivers 'Breathe forth elixir pure' and run 'potable gold' (3.606–9), it is a living, working, spiritual alchemy that is referred to, a spiritual alchemy in contrast to the material alchemy which 'here below / Philosophers in vain so long have sought' (3.595–612). Alchemy provided a vibrant model for denoting physical, psychological, spiritual and cosmological concepts, and the writers of this era naturally drew on its rich symbolism for their art.

The impact of alchemical concepts and imagery on culture has not been confined to late Renaissance Europe. From King Lear's 'Ripeness is all' to the young golfer in P. G. Wodehouse, seeking the secret of the game 'like an alchemist on the track of the Philosopher's Stone', alchemy has provided abundant material for the creative imagination. As alchemy separated itself into a materialist chemistry and an esoteric spiritual discipline in the eighteenth century, what had been a more or less unified 'art' divided into two strands. The materialist chemical project continued, and alchemy's heritage is still present in terms like 'alcohol' and 'bain-Marie', as well as in the discovery of such substances as nitric acid, hydrochloric acid, ammonia, sugar of lead and some compounds of antimony. Nevertheless, the esoteric, spiritual component of alchemy kept on, and has continued to provide a major source of material for research in the field of psychology by such thinkers as Herbert Silberer, Carl Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz in the twentieth century, and for writers and visual artists from Dryden, Pope, Goethe, Joseph Wright of Derby and Browning, through to the nineteenth-century Symbolists, Victor Hugo, Marcus Clarke, W. B. Yeats, August Strindberg, Antonin Artaud, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Laurence Durrell, Ted Hughes, Vladimir Nabokov, Marguerite Yourcenar and Jackson Pollock.

In alchemical treatises from the Middle Ages until the end of the seventeenth century, including tracts by Isaac Newton, alchemical ideas were expressed in coded language, in emblem, symbol and enigma. Martin Ruland states in his *Lexicon alchemiae* (1612), that the alchemists 'discourse in enigmas, metaphors, allegories, tables, similitudes, and each Philosopher adapts them after his own manner' (381). One reason for this practice was the desire of the adept to hide alchemical truth from the 'ungodly, foolish, slouthful and unthankfull hypocrites' (R. Bostocke, in *EP*, 62). Thus the expression of ideas was made deliberately obscure. The alchemists openly stated that they were using an enigmatic mode of discourse. Geber wrote: 'Wheresoever we have spoken plainly, there we have spoken nothing, but where we have used riddles and figures, there we have hidden the truth' (McLean, *Rosary*, 47). Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* parodies such alchemical discourse. Subtle answers Surly's contemptuous question, 'What else are all your termes, / Whereon no one o' your writers grees with other?':

*Was not all knowledge  
Of the Egyptians writ in mystick symbols?  
Speake not the Scriptures, oft in parables?*

*Are not the choisest fables of the Poets,  
That were the fountaines, and the first springs of wisdom,  
Wrapt in perplexed allegories? (2.3.202–7)*

The use of symbolic language by the alchemists was also due to the fact that the material and metaphorical worlds were as yet undivided. From the earliest treatises, alchemy had been as concerned with the metaphysical as with the physical. The spiritual component of Alexandrine and Islamic alchemy entered the European West as an integral part of that science. The alchemist's aim was to explore the inner workings of nature, and this meant delving into the very secret of God's creation. Zosimos of Panopolis (third–fourth century AD) wrote in the sequel to *The First Book of the Final Reckoning* that 'the proper, authentic, and natural tinctures' were to be obtained by 'plunging into meditation' (JA, 55). Alchemical symbols expressed the philosophical properties residing in matter as well as the outer form of that chemical matter. Such a philosophical experience of matter existed beyond the scope of the rational mind, and could only be adequately expressed in symbol, emblem, paradox and allegory. Later scientists and philosophers were to see the alchemical vision of correspondences and the idea of the continuum of spirit and matter as a blurring of the boundaries. Carl Jung wrote that 'The alchemy of the classical epoch (from antiquity to about the middle of the seventeenth century), was, in essence, chemical research work into which there entered, by way of projection, an admixture of unconscious psychic material' (PA, 476). It may be argued, however, that such writers as Gerhard Dorn, Heinrich Khunrath, Robert Fludd, Thomas Vaughan, John Donne and John Milton were consciously aware of expressing purely spiritual truths in alchemical symbolism. The Renaissance world view of dynamic correspondences between substances, objects and states of mind was not necessarily the result of unconscious projection, but a valid perception of an inner, subtle connection existing between things.

Certainly alchemical symbols are ambiguous, multi-dimensional and flexible, with a tendency towards eluding any attempt to define them once and for all. The 'pelican', for example, refers to a form of circulating still, but is, in other contexts, a symbol for the red elixir, or for the stage in the opus known as the 'multiplication'. The 'king' can symbolize common gold, the raw matter of the Stone, 'our sulphur' or the red stone. The definition of the alchemical king undergoes changes in meaning as the substances he symbolizes undergo transformation. In like manner the name of the alchemical vessel changes according to the particular 'chymical' changes that are occurring within it. During the dissolution, death and putrefaction of the Stone's matter, the vessel is variously known as the coffin, grave, prison, den, ship or bath, but during the generation of the philosopher's stone from the conjunction of 'male' sulphur and 'female' argent vive, the vessel is referred to as the bed, nest, egg, womb, globe or garden in which the roses bloom. Mercurius, symbol of the magical transforming substance in alchemy, changes shape and name during the many different phases through

which it passes in the process of the opus. This paradoxical substance plays the role of both agent and patient, male and female principle, dissolver and coagulator, duplicitous and faithful servant, poison and elixir. Some of the symbols for Mercurius are the dragon, serpent, mermaid, whore, virgin, wife or white woman, flower, hermaphrodite, fleeing hart, tears, rain, sweat, dew, sea, river, fountain, bee, Cupid, lion, priest, and philosophical tree. The changing imagery aptly expresses the instability of the substance represented. The multiplicity of images used to symbolize one substance or vessel may be seen as an attempt to convey the fluid, changing, transforming nature of reality.

The philosopher's stone, which was seen as an embodiment *par excellence* of all that is unchanging, eternal, and unified, was also known by a multiplicity of names. *The Epistle of John Pontanus* (1624) stated: 'The Philosophers Stone . . . hath many names' (240). It was even considered a mark of originality to create a new symbol for the Stone. Some of the names occurring in the alchemical texts are: elixir, tincture, rose, lily, red lion, medicine, tree, fountain, ruby, red king, sun, son, daughter, homunculus, orphan, bird, phoenix. Such a state of affairs might provoke a rationalist to exclaim as Surly does in Jonson's *The Alchemist*: 'What else are all your termes, / Whereon no one o' your writers grees with other?' (2.3.182–3). In his study *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture* Michael Bath addresses the problem of using a multiplicity of names to symbolize one concept. Discussing emblematics and Henry Hawkin's *Partheneia Sacra* (1633), Bath writes that it may seem problematical that the Blessed Virgin is variously presented as a nightingale, palm tree, pearl, dove, phoenix, swan, ship, rose, lily, dew, star, moon, rainbow, mountain and bee: 'The answer, I want to argue, is not simply that this is allegorical opportunism of a kind which was to eventually expose emblematics to the Enlightenment's charges of arbitrary ingenuity; it is rather a consequence of taking the mutable variety of the created world as a source of symbols for immutable and unitary truths. Far from being opportunistic or arbitrary, the instabilities of this representation are those of the inherited epistemology on which it is based' (243). Alchemical writing, like that of the emblem tradition to which it is closely linked, is a writing which delights in the variety of the created world, while simultaneously recognizing the world as a manifestation of God's unity. The author of *Zoroaster's Cave* stresses the idea of unity in multiplicity in alchemical theory: 'Although the wise men have varied names, and perplex their sayings, yet they allways would have us think that of One Thing, one Disposition, one Way. The wise men know this one thing, and, that it is one, they have often proved' (66).

Twentieth-century readers have tended to be perplexed by the alchemists' practice of using a multiplicity of images to represent a single concept, by their use of the same name for different substances, and by their apparent disagreement regarding both the quantities of material needed and the exact sequence of the stages of the opus. This confusion is partly the result of our unfamiliarity with the emblematic mode of perceiving and communicating information, a mode which was

current in European thought from the Middle Ages until the late seventeenth century. The emblematic mode aside, certain alchemists of this period were nevertheless aware that contradictory information in the treatises could present a problem. Arthur Dee wrote in *Fasciculus chemicus* (1631) that he thought it worth his labour to ‘reconcile . . . the appearing contradiction’ between George Ripley’s instruction that the alchemist take equal parts of earth and water and John Dastin’s view that the water should exceed the earth nine times (FC, 92–3). He pointed out that if one knows enough about alchemy the surface disagreements are easily solved. In Corollary 8 of the *Fasciculus* he wrote that ‘to the unexperienced Reader . . . contradiction may appear between Raimund and Ripley’ on the subject of fermentation. Raimund affirmed two ferments, one sun (gold), the other moon (silver), while Ripley added a third, the green lion, also called ‘Laton’. But what, asked Dee, is Laton if it is not immature gold and silver? Therefore the contradiction is solved.

Fortunately most alchemical writers seem to be in accord on the principal points and processes of the opus, if not on all the detail. By understanding these general principles, it is possible for the twentieth-century reader to interpret the individual symbol. The image of the moon, for example, may signify common silver, ‘our argent vive’, the white queen, the albedo or the white elixir. If the context in which it occurs is understood, the symbol can be decoded.

Probably the first ‘encyclopaedia’ concerned with alchemy in the West was a twenty-eight-volume work by Zosimos of Panopolis and his sister Eusebeia around 300 AD. There have been a number of alchemical dictionaries, both published and in manuscript, from the sixteenth century onwards, including Gerhard Dorn’s *Dictionarium Theophrasti Paracelsi* (1584), Simon Forman’s unpublished two-volume alchemical lexicon and his ‘Principles of Philosophi, Gathered’ (1597), Martin Ruland’s *Lexicon alchemiae* (1612), *A Chymicall Dictionary* (1650) (an abbreviated translation of Dorn), William Johnson’s *Lexicon Chymicum* (1652) (based on Dorn, but extended), Isaac Newton’s unpublished ‘Index chemicus’ (1680s), William Salmon’s *Dictionaire Hermetique* (1695), A. J. Pernety’s *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermetique* (1758), A. E. Waite’s ‘Short Lexicon of Alchemy’ (1894), Albert Poisson’s *Théories et Symboles des Alchimistes* (1891) and, most recently, Mark Haeffner’s *A Dictionary of Alchemy* (1991).

The concern of this present dictionary is with documenting the rich store-house of alchemical symbolism, making it available for the use of historians of literary culture, philosophy, science and the visual arts, as well as for the informed general reader with an interest in alchemy and Hermeticism. It focuses on the intellectual and literary references of alchemy – alchemical imagery as reflected in literature, the visual arts and in the writings of the alchemists themselves. The corpus of alchemical writing is vast, and includes Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Greek, Indian, Italian, Korean, Latin, Spanish and Slavic texts. Jack Lindsay’s *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (1970) systematically examines the early alchemical Greek texts. The Arabic tradition has been researched by E. J. Holmyard in *Alchemy* (60–104), and the Indian medieval tradition explored by David Gordon White in *The*



*Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (1996). C. G. Jung has studied the work of the German alchemists in *Psychology and Alchemy* (1968), *Alchemical Studies* (1967) and *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (1963). Joseph Needham has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of alchemy in the Eastern tradition, while J. C. Cooper has recently added to this work with his publication, *Chinese Alchemy*. For a detailed list of studies on the different alchemical traditions, see Alan Pritchard, *Alchemy: A Bibliography of English-Language Writings* (1980), 135–279.

The earlier alchemical texts come from the period before the concept of individual authorship became widespread. Even when authorship is known, the dates and biographical details of many of the alchemists remain uncertain. Many texts are anonymous; many were written pseudonymously and transmitted through manuscript copies over the centuries. To complicate matters further, alchemical treatises were frequently ascribed to such authorities and famous figures as Isis, Cleopatra, Moses, Hermes, Plato, Theophrastus, Aristotle, Arnald of Villanova, Geber, Roger Bacon, St Thomas Aquinas and Raymond Lull, though these treatises are not now generally believed to have been written by these figures. Many texts draw on and recycle the work of previous tracts – for example, the *Turba philosophorum* (tenth-century Islamic), the *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550), and Johann Mylius's *Philosophia reformata* (1622). Arthur Dee's *Fasciculus chemicus* draws on no fewer than thirty earlier works.

This dictionary is designed for twentieth-century readers of English, and in selecting from the vast corpus of alchemical writings I have chosen primarily to cite those works in the Western tradition translated into English or written in English. I have focused on works current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when alchemy flourished and the publication of alchemical books in Britain was at its height, peaking in the 1650s and 1660s. This period saw the publication of works of the earlier alchemists that had previously circulated only in manuscript, as well as new contemporary materials. These are arguably the main texts which influenced the poets and dramatists of the period. Of course they were able to draw on the major continental Latin compilations such as *Artis Auriferae* (1593), *Musaeum Hermeticum* (1678) and the *Theatrum chemicum* (1602–61), texts which are the basis of Jung's monumental alchemical studies. In J. W. Binns's *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age* (1990), the English Renaissance neo-Latin culture is explored.

The foremost seventeenth-century collection of English alchemical texts is Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* (1652). Works cited in the dictionary from this collection by Ashmole are: *John Gower Concerning the Philosopher's Stone*, the translation of the *Secreta secretorum* by John Lydgate, *Dastin's Dreame* by John Dastin, *Bloomefield's Blossoms* by William Bloomfield, the anonymous *Liber patris sapientiae*, *The Hunting of the Greene Lyon* by Abraham Andrewes, *The Ordinall of Alchemy* begun in 1477 by Thomas Norton, *The Breviary of naturall philosophy* written in 1557 by Thomas Charnock, *The Magistery* by William Backhouse, *Verses belonging to an Emblematicall Scrowle* and *The Vision of Sr: George Ripley* by Ripley.

Other works cited in the dictionary include *The Mirror of Alchimy*, attributed to Roger Bacon, first published in English in 1597; ‘Tractatus . . . de Lapide Philosophorum’, attributed to St Dunstan; *The Compound of Alchemy* by Sir George Ripley, dedicated to Edward IV; *Tractatus duo egregii, de Lapide Philosophorum, una cum Theatro Astronomiae Terrestri* by Edward Kelly; ‘A Treatise Touching the Philosopher’s Stone’ by Edward Cradock; ‘Of the Division of the Chaos’ and ‘Compositor huius libri ad lectorem’ by Simon Forman; ‘Benjamin Lock, His Picklock to Riply his Castle’; *Alchymiae complementum* by the great-grandson of Thomas Norton, Samuel Norton; ‘A Light in Darkness’ by Thomas Tymme; and *Fasciculus chemicus* (1629) by Arthur Dee. Dee’s book is a collection of quotations from earlier alchemists and alchemical texts including Aristotle, Morienus, Senior, Avicenna, Albertus Magnus, Geber, Raymond Lull, Bernard Trevisan, Basil Valentine, Arnald of Villanova, ‘Clangor buccinae’, ‘Ludus puerorum’, ‘Rosinus ad Sarantem’, ‘Semita semitae’, and ‘Consilium coniugii’. I have also drawn on the ‘Sententiae notabilis’, ‘Praxis’ and a commentary on the *Emerald Tables* manuscript treatises by Isaac Newton, who wrote more than two million unpublished words on alchemy.

On occasion I have drawn more widely from the alchemical corpus. I have used material from the early Greek alchemists, Zosimos of Panopolis, Ostanes (a legendary Egyptian priest), Morienus, Maria Prophetissa and Archelaos, as well as the Arabic alchemists, Khalid or Calid, Abu’L-Qasim, and Artephius, whose identity is obscure but is thought to be twelfth-century Arabic. I have also used the work of Italian, French, Catalan, Dutch, German, Swiss, Czech and Polish alchemists, including Petrus Bonus, Giovanni Baptista della Porta, Laurentius Ventura, Lacinius, Bernard Trevisan, Giovanni Baptista Agnelli, Nicolas Flamel, Jean de la Fontaine, Denis Zachaire, pseudo-Jean de Meun, Lambsprinke, Nicaise Le Fevre, Arnald of Villanova, Raymond Lull, Theobald de Hoghelande, Basil Valentine, Paracelsus, Gerhard Dorn, Martin Ruland and many others.

Since this dictionary is designed for a wide-ranging general readership (as well as for the scholar) I have not burdened the text with Greek, Arabic or Latin quotations, and have used the standard available English translations. However, as some translations, particularly those of A. E. Waite, tend to be rather free, it is suggested that for scholarly purposes the reader consult the originals.

Each entry in the dictionary includes a definition of the symbol, an example of the symbol used in alchemical writing and, where possible, a quotation from a literary source. Both an exoteric/physical and an esoteric/philosophical perspective are provided. In attempting to define a symbol, I have indicated where there are a number of different meanings, depending on context, and also where there is agreement or difference amongst alchemical authors. Quotations from the alchemical authors have been included, not only to give support to the definition, but also to give a sense of the content and characteristic rhythms of alchemical language as it is expressed in the treatises available in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Literary quotations from Chaucer to

Nabokov demonstrate the impact of alchemical thought on the literary imagination through the centuries. They provide an indication of the extent of alchemical reference in literature, and offer guidance towards the elucidation and interpretation of literary texts that have, in the absence of alchemical decoding, proved obscure. The citations from such modern writers as Wodehouse, Nabokov, Durrell, Clarke, Hughes, Amis, Yourcenar and Wilding show that the idea of alchemy persists in the popular imagination.

Examples of visual emblems and symbols are also included since, for the Renaissance, chemical, philosophical and spiritual truths were as readily expressed by visual emblems as by verbal formulation. Alchemical treatises were often, though not always, accompanied by graphic woodcuts, copperplate engravings, or hand-painted emblems of the startling images representing the key stages of the opus. Some tracts – for example, the ‘*Coronatio naturae*’ and the *Mutus Liber* – are composed entirely of visual material. The visual component was an integral part of the alchemical work. This dictionary reproduces a representative selection of visual emblems from alchemical treatises, some of which have not been reproduced since their first appearance. Jacques van Lennep’s *Alchimie* (Brussels, 1985) is a major source of alchemical visual images and any serious student will want to consult this invaluable collection of over a thousand emblems. In selecting the fifty illustrations for the present dictionary I have chosen to represent the classical alchemical emblems, but I have also made a point of including twenty emblems not reproduced in van Lennep. Drawing on the unique holdings of the Ferguson collection at the University of Glasgow for all but eight of the illustrations, I have been able to include not only different versions of manuscript emblems represented in van Lennep, but also emblems from series not represented at all in that collection.

Each entry has been made sufficiently complete and independent of the others, with detailed cross-referencing. Entries on the key concepts – the prima materia, the chemical wedding, the philosopher’s stone, Mercurius, and the stages known as the nigredo, albedo and rubedo – provide basic information about the main ideas of the alchemical opus for those unfamiliar with alchemical theory.