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1 Introduction

Descendants of Ḥātim al-Ṭāʾiyy, the warrior-poet of Shammar, were reputed for chivalry, generosity and shrewdness. Their reputation spread to Europe in 1706, through the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. None born of the Ṭāʾiyy line has attained the lasting fame of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī to date. A scion of the Yemenite branch of the Ṭāʾiyy tribe, Ibn ʿArabī was born in Murcia in 1165. He was the direct descendant of the first Arab dignitaries (*buyūtāt*) to settle in the Iberian Peninsula at the outset of Ṭāriq b. Ziyād's war against the Visigoths (711–719). His father ʿAlī secured a post at the Almohad court in Seville for himself and Ibn ʿArabī was expected to follow in his footsteps. Disregarding the opposition of his family, he embarked on the Sufi path instead. He travelled far and wide in search of knowledge – across the Maghreb, Egypt, Hejaz, Anatolia and the Levant. When death found him in Damascus in 1240, he had the following couplet ready to be engraved at the entrance of his mausoleum:

> In every age there is one after whom it is named;
> for the remaining ages I am that one!

Stephen Hirtenstein, who first translated Ibn ʿArabī's epitaph into English, did not think it an exaggeration.[1] Ibn ʿArabī remains a defining voice in philosophical and theological discourses eight centuries after his death. Today, the popularity of his writings is at an all-time high,[2] with Mark Sedgwick suggesting that he gradually came to epitomize Sufism in the West.[3] Equally famous are Ibn ʿArabī's contributions to jurisprudence, poetry and the hermeneutics of the Qur'an. He is seldom regarded as an alchemist, however. Ibn ʿArabī's quest for red sulphur (*al-kibrīt al-aḥmar*), which is a legendary substance that can turn common stones and metals into gold, escaped academic scrutiny at large. The same could be said about alchemical practices in Muslim cultures and societies between the tenth and the fifteenth century.[4] This is where my Element steps in, to map out a portion of this terra incognita.

[1] Ibn ʿArabī's epitaph was quoted according to Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier*, p. 6. Further biographical information on Ibn ʿArabi can be found in Claude Addas's seminal work on the topic, Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ʿArabī.
[2] Abdel-hadi, *Ibn ʿArabī's Religious Pluralism*, p. i.
[3] Sedgwick, 'Ibn ʿArabi and the Contemporary West', p. 389.
[4] In 2016, Regula Forster dismissed prior scholarship on Arabo-Islamic alchemy as 'rudimentary' at best. 'Research was essentially limited to the early period, i.e. the time up to the 10th century, and more recently to the Ottoman alchemy and its interaction with Paracelsian iatrochemistry. Thus, we lack work on the period in-between,' she said. Forster, 'Zwischen Religion und Alchemie', p. 11. Nine years later, we lack it still.

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Alchemy, broadly defined, refers to the art of turning common stones and metals into gold. This Element will examine how the royal art was perceived in Akbarian circles during the mid thirteenth century, in Ibn ʿArabī's lifetime.[5] It builds and expands on the Qur'anic notion of minerals as sentient beings, whom God endowed with the ability to think, speak and feel. Ibn ʿArabī espoused the same views as the Qur'an, which led him to explore religious beliefs and practices of common stones and metals. Minerals were recognized as pious Muslims and alchemists in Ibn ʿArabī's works. He was convinced that iron could turn itself into gold without human interference. Inspired by Ibn ʿArabī, my Element adopts an innovative posthumanist approach to Arabo-Islamic alchemy, inviting the reader to rethink what it means to practise alchemy *and* Islam from the point of view of a mineral. The contribution of this Element to knowledge advancement is threefold: 1) it will introduce the reader to the ontological principles governing the transformation of common stones and metals into gold that Ibn ʿArabī described; 2) it will examine the sources of knowledge, power and authority in Arabo-Islamic alchemy between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries which allow for the posthumanist approach to alchemy; and 3) it will challenge the paradigm of reducing Ibn ʿArabī's alchemical oeuvre to allegories and metaphors for the spiritual ascension of humans, which is prevalent in contemporary scholarship. In short, my Element will bring overlooked elements of Ibn ʿArabī's writings on the kingdom of minerals to the forefront, offering a new understanding of what it means to be a Muslim, an alchemist and a mineral specimen in the sentient cosmos that Ibn ʿArabī envisioned. The ultimate goal is to enrich global perspectives on alchemy and foster intercultural engagement through an exploration of Ibn ʿArabī's teachings.

The alchemical writings of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī cannot be studied apart from his views on magic (this is yet another terra incognita to be mapped out in this Element). Ibn ʿArabī taught that the occult properties of stones, plants and letters are the roots of jinn magic (*sīmiyā*'), which is a blameworthy knowledge as far as Sharia is concerned.[6] Jinn are the fire spirits described in the Qur'an, whimsical and brash. These spirits know all about magic and nothing about morals. Sufi practices, by contrast, are

[5] A note on terminology: Ibn ʿArabī has been referred to as *shaykh al-akbar*, the Greatest Shaykh, as of the thirteenth century. His followers thus came to be known as 'Akbarians'. A comprehensive analysis of Ibn ʿArabī's sobriquets and the titles he held can be found in Hirtenstein, 'Names and Titles of Ibn [al-]ʿArabī', pp. 109–131.

[6] Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 1, pp. 273–274. Henceforth: FM.I: 273–274.

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rooted in adherence to Sharia and proper moral conduct.[7] Students and successors of Ibn ʿArabī showed little incentive to rival the jinn working their magic with precious stones and metals. Magic was generally looked down upon among Sufis and there are lines of text echoing this sentiment in Ibn ʿArabī's books as well. However, Ibn ʿArabī also taught that dabbling in sorcery (*siḥr*) can be praiseworthy at times.[8] 'There are as many definitions of magic and divination as there are people writing on the subject', Emilie Savage-Smith observed.[9] Ibn ʿArabī adopted a broad definition in his works, encompassing (almost) every successful intervention performed by a contingent life form aiming to suspend the laws of nature and break the conventional order of things (*kharq al-ʿāda*).[10] Most interventions he described center around arcane properties of the letters of the Arabic alphabet. Observing skies and horoscopes and working with the forces of nature and the ninety-nine names of God were among the alternative methods he suggested.[11] Ibn ʿArabī made no distinction between jinn magic and sorcery, and he used the word 'siḥr' (sorcery) as a synonym for 'sīmiyā'' (magic).[12] Thaumaturges' race was of no importance to him: what makes a sorcerer is their ability to defy the laws of nature and bend the world to their will. The coveted ability to turn iron into gold meets this criterion. A closer examination of the premises leading to this assertion might be warranted, however, given that alchemy tends to be described as 'natural philosophy' and a 'predecessor of chemistry',[13] rather than 'magic'. This is the topic for the section to come (Section 2).

Scholars have long recognized the dual nature of alchemy encompassing both theory and practice.[14] Ibn ʿArabī himself placed greater value on

[7] This interpretation draws from Ibn ʿArabī's definition of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), which can be consulted at FM.II: 128.

[8] FM.II: 135.

[9] Savage-Smith (ed.), *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, p. xiii.

[10] FM.II: 135. Note that at no point did Ibn ʿArabī equate direct divine interventions with sorcery. He referred to indirect divine interventions – e.g. when God empowers His prophets to act in His name – as '*muʿjizāt*'. The latter were only ever performed when the authority of a certain prophet was challenged, and laymen were incapable of replicating them (which is not the case with alchemy). FM.I: 235–236; FM.II: 374.

[11] FM.II: 371.

[12] For instance, see FM.II: 135.

[13] For instance, see Ulmann, *Die Natur*, pp. 10–11 and Forster, 'Arabic Alchemy', pp. 270–271. The word 'magic' is rarely featured in contemporary definitions of alchemy. Ibn ʿArabī's works were penned 800 years ago, however, when smiths were traditionally regarded as thaumaturges. 'Because of their ability to control forces of transformation and destruction, metalworkers often had important role in society and were called to perform magic,' Chris Gosden observed. See Gosden, *The History of Magic*, p. 304.

[14] Alchemical practices, Michela Pereira noted, 'so much resembled well-established craftsmen's labor (metal melting, working on minerals, glassmaking) that for a long period, the

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knowing how gold is brought into existence – whether through divine agency or human intervention – than on the power required to execute alchemical transmutations. Nonetheless, he maintained that mastery of alchemy equals theory and practice combined.[15] The theoretical knowledge he had in mind extends beyond the transformation of divine spirit into prime matter, stones and metals (a subject outlined in Section 5). Permanent alchemical transmutations cannot be undertaken without expertise in metallurgy and mineralogy, prompting alchemists to seek this knowledge as far as Egypt (Ibn ʿArabī's reflections on the kingdom of minerals and the origins of alchemy will be examined in Sections 3 and 4). An overview of theories expounding the nature and origins of red sulphur (Section 7) will be accompanied by Ibn ʿArabī's instructions on how to refine coarse matter so as to make it resemble the divine spirit in perfection (Section 6). The concluding section of the Element pivots on Ibn ʿArabī's notion of alchemy as an affront to God and a crime against humankind, while also delineating the rare circumstances under which the righteous (*ṣāliḥūn*) may be permitted to practise it.

2 Anything but Magic!

When Sean McLoughlin described the alchemical transmutations Ibn ʿArabī performed as 'a work that is contrary to nature', he did so under the assumption that alchemists intervene to prevent nature from taking its course. McLoughlin saw their interventions as 'the act of strife, a supernatural resonance, and a liberation is born from bonds that normally compel the life process'.[16] But here is the catch: Ibn ʿArabī shared Aristotle's view that all things in existence strive for perfection and the prophet Muhammad exemplified the perfect human being in his works. Buraq, the celestial steed that carried Muhammad to the seventh heaven, is the pinnacle of animal perfection. Ibn ʿArabī furthermore taught that the *wāqwāq* tree epitomizes the perfection of fauna. Within every class of existence, Ibn ʿArabī noted, there is a singular perfect exemplar, and that distinction belongs to gold among minerals.[17] Aztec royalty preferred quetzal feathers to gold and King Petar I of Serbia felt that a crown made of a bronze cannon handle was best suited for the ruler of a warrior nation. Such examples are rare,

place of alchemy in the divisio disciplinarum wavered between the mechanical and the liberal arts'. Pereira, 'Alchemy and the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Late Middle Ages', pp. 336–337.

[15] FM.II: 460–461.

[16] McLoughlin, 'Preliminary Notes on Ibn Arabi and Alchemy', p. 3.

[17] FM.III: 347. See also FM.II: 647.

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however. Most sovereigns crowned themselves with gold and King Petar's subjects, displeased by his unconventional choice (which they attributed to excessive frugality), made sure his crown was gold-coated at least. There is near universal admiration for gold among mankind and Ibn ʿArabī suspected that the rebel-sorcerer Samiri consciously sought to exploit it to lure people to idolatry: 'Before their eyes he fashioned a gold calf from their jewelry, knowing that the hearts of people are attached to their wealth. And so, when he invited them to worship the calf, they rushed to do so.'[18] People who are attached to their wealth, Ibn ʿArabī said, happily turn to murder, and they would not hesitate to kill God himself if they came to suspect Him of hindering their alchemical pursuits. Alchemists dare not practise their art openly, in fear of this ilk.[19] On his side, Ibn ʿArabī maintained that no true alchemist is enamored with wealth. He valued gold nonetheless 'as a symbol of the pinnacle stages of spiritual ascension and rank. Gold possesses the quality of perfect balance, and it is the most noble of metals,' he said.[20] Were a mineral to be left to its own devices, it would take around 36,000 years for it to reach the perfection of gold.[21] This is a lengthy process to be sure, but it does not violate the laws of nature (as opposed to sorcery).

Supernatural impacts of sorcery were referred to as miracles by Ibn ʿArabī. There is a curious statement in Ibn ʿArabī's book *al-Futūḥāt* indicating that a spiritual feat must be one of a kind to be classified as 'kharq al-ʿāda', which is the term Ibn ʿArabī used as a synonym for sorcery and the breaking of conventional order of things. 'The breach happens only once and repetition signals convention,' he said.[22] Thus, one could argue that repeated alchemical transmutations cannot be regarded as sorcery – although Ibn ʿArabī did not apply this standard to the spiritual feats of his acquaintances, who could make themselves immune to fire and conjure living beings and objects out of thin air repeatedly. In other words, a certain lack of originality was not always a detriment for a spiritual feat to be seen as a breaking of the conventional order of things, as far as Ibn ʿArabī was concerned.[23] An alchemical transmutation could be deemed miraculous even if Ibn ʿArabī's standards were to be applied

[18] FM.I: 574.
[19] FM.II: 420–421. As Section 8 will demonstrate, Ibn ʿArabī believed that God obstructs most alchemical transmutations.
[20] Ibn ʿArabī, *Sḥarh tarjumān al-ashwāq*, p. 165.
[21] FM.I: 592–593.
[22] FM.II: 372.
[23] For instance, see FM.II: 370–371.

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strictly – not because it *happened*, but because of the swift conclusion of synthetic transmutations in a controlled environment. For instance, some of the most elaborate transmutations that al-Rāzī (d. 925) described take up to forty days to complete – which is miraculously short when compared to the average duration of natural transmutations (36,000 years according to Ibn ʿArabī).[24] Another factor to be considered is that climate change and weather conditions can get in the way of natural transmutations. As a result, most minerals will never turn into gold outside of the laboratory.[25] An alchemist facilitating the transmutation of iron into gold could thus be regarded as a thaumaturge for bringing the whole process to the optimal conclusion swiftly.

Some alchemists, Ibn ʿArabī said, also work on creating precious stones: emeralds, rubies, sapphires and the like. Describing alchemy as 'natural philosophy' would not be erroneous per se since permanent transmutations require an in-depth knowledge of mineralogy, prime matter and climatology (see Sections 4 and 5), and since Ibn ʿArabī broadly defined philosophy as the love of wisdom (*ḥubb al-ḥikma*).[26] That being said, Ibn ʿArabī explicitly referred to alchemical transmutations as '*kharq al-ʿāda*, which constitutes a miraculous breach of the laws of nature' in *al-Futūḥāt*.[27] Thus, he implicitly identified alchemy with sorcery. 'Karamāt' is another term Ibn ʿArabī used to describe alchemical transmutations and the knowledge required to undertake them.[28] Here it ought to be noted that 'karamāt' was the established term for saintly miracles among Sufis. The word 'sorcery' (*siḥr*) was reserved for the accomplishments of a competing shaykh instead. Indignantly, Sufi shaykhs protested against the impertinence of the ulama who counted them among sorcerers, the friends of the Devil (*awliyāʾ al-shayṭān*). The gist of their argument Ibn ʿArabī repeated is that God's friends can learn from Him directly. Sorcerers must rely on other humans, books and

[24] Marlow Taylor (trans.), *The Alchemy of al-Razi*, pp. 124–277. Elias Ashmole (d. 1692) shared this view as well. An alchemist merely speeds natural processes up, he said. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*, pp. 14–15.

[25] FM.I: 592–593. This is not to say that nature is hostile to minerals: lightning, gusts of wind, the warmth of the Sun and clouds all seek to purify Earth and its inhabitants. FM.I: 121–122. However, benevolent forces of nature do not always have a positive effect on the spiritual growth of minerals. More often than not, climate and weather will hinder the transformation of iron into gold in nature.

[26] FM.II: 532. Alchemists were generally referred to as *ḥukamāʾ* in the early modern and medieval religious works and literature in Arabic. Hassan, *Studies in al-Kimiyaʾ*, p. 7.

[27] FM.II 460–461.

[28] FM.II: 420–421.

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jinn to deduce a method to turn the world upside down.[29] Ibn ʿArabī was recognized as a recipient of divine knowledge since he was around fifteen years of age, and his fame has grown since. So when Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) levelled accusations of sorcery against him, a chorus of defenders swiftly emerged.[30] The provocative statements Ibn ʿArabī made complicated the efforts to vindicate him completely. Among other things, he noted that 'although God's friends do not label what they do as "sorcery", opting for the term "karamāt" instead, their feats causing the conventional order of things to break align precisely with the definition of sorcery by religious scholars'.[31] Ibn ʿArabī spoke candidly about the spiritual feats he *himself* had performed (e.g. chasing away the angel of death to save the lives of his friends) and he made some of his talismans available to general public. This caused no small embarrassment to his supporters,[32] prompting them to take drastic measures at times.

Not all witches were burned out of history. This was the fate befitting social outcasts, widows and the poor. Fāṭima bt. al-Muthannā, who was the spiritual mother of Ibn ʿArabī, fit the criteria. When Fāṭima was accused of sorcery, stones rained down on her.[33] There are other ways to erase witchcraft from cultural history than exposing books and bodies to fire, however, and hatred was not the single driving force behind the erasure. Ibn ʿArabī's students in particular did not wish to destroy but to protect their shaykh. Some of the talismans he made available in his holographs thus came to be removed from *every* subsequent edition of the text,[34] and his writings on celestial magic and demonology have been systematically ignored. Contemporary scholars adopted a similar approach. 'It is peculiar, to say the least, that a vast and complicated domain of religious and intellectual activity … should have been ignored by the academy as if it did not exist – or threated as if it *should* not exist,' Hanegraaff said with regard to Western esotericism.[35] Diane Purkiss went

[29] See FM.I: 263, FM.II: 360–370, 461. See also Ibn ʿArabī, K. al-Mīm (MS Veliyuddin 1759), ff.1.
[30] Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, vol. 3, pp. 171–172.
[31] FM.II: 135. A hairsplitting analysis of the subtle differences Ibn ʿArabī made between *siḥr* and *karāmāt* at times can be found at Rašić, 'Fāṭima, the Righteous Sorceress', pp. 364–381.
[32] Consult Ruspoli, *Le Livre des théophanies d'Ibn Arabî*, p. 108, on the reception of Ibn ʿArabī's talismans among his followers. On death-thwarting rites in Akbarian Sufism and Islam, see Rašić, *Azrael*.
[33] FM.I: 274; Ibn ʿArabī, *Sufis of Andalusia*, pp. 143–146.
[34] Further information on one such talisman can be found at Rašić, 'Summoned Letters, Disjointed Letters and the Talisman of Ibn ʿArabī', pp. 1–15.
[35] Hanegraaf, *Western Esotericism*, p. 2.

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