

## **Weaving Voices Article (Aug-Dec 2001)**

### *Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney*

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## **What is Alchemy?**

BY JON MARSHALL

THERE IS ALWAYS a difficulty in approaching the problem of the nature of alchemy because of the obscurity of alchemical writings and their occasionally luxuriant symbolism.

Some texts are relatively clear, they describe chemical operations which we can decode today – sometimes with enough detail to figure out where the substances must have come from, because of the impurities which would have produced the results described. However some texts seem to be primarily symbolic, making heavy use of images, and we have little idea about what the writers intended at all. Most commonly texts may start off clearly and become progressively less clear as more secrets are ‘revealed’.

People have suggested that alchemy is about the transmutation of metals (most famously of mercury into gold via the philosopher’s stone), about the preparation of medicines (particularly those that retard ageing or restore youth), about the perfection of the alchemist’s spirit or soul into some kind of enlightenment, or even about work with human sexual energy. Jung, to some extent, argued that alchemy was an unintentional record of the process of individuation, or of the psyche moving towards wholeness, which was constant throughout the world and throughout history – it was present in the dreams of modern people as much as in the dreams of the ancient Greeks. Jung’s view is often credited with making alchemy a respectable topic of interest again.

All of these explanations are useful, but none of them can be considered to be exclusively true for the simple reason that there is no evidence that what we call alchemy, has always been about the same kinds of things in all the different parts of the world it has been practiced in. Often when people write histories of alchemy they tend to ignore those people who considered themselves alchemists but who are not doing whatever the historian considers to be alchemy.

To consider what alchemy is ‘really about’ we must consider the lives of alchemists and observe the waves of interests which engage them. This article focuses on Europe, as there is not the space to consider alchemy in India, China and the Islamic world.

Between 1200 to about 1500, most European alchemists outside of monasteries seem to be interested in the transmutation of metals and the manufacture of gold. Most writers of this period are anonymous or pseudonymous, feely attributing their texts to famous people who often did not write about alchemy at all. After 1500 alchemists became more interested in the manufacture of medicines, particularly chemical medicines, and operate in opposition to the Galenic medical orthodoxy of the time. Some alchemists in this period get involved in what we might call industrial alchemy. They propose commercial gold making ventures the manufacture of copper, and gunpowder and so on. After 1600 we can note alchemists forming groups, which collaborate in experiments, and get involved in politics, or in what we might call the transmutation of society. About this time, or a bit later, there seems to be an increase in the number of people who use alchemical terminology to explicitly talk about spiritual disciplines. Finally, mainly after 1600 or so,

we can notice that alchemy again slides into hiddenness, even though it is being practiced by many of those who are normally considered to be the founders of modern science.

During these periods there are also changes in the way that alchemical theory is elaborated. In the medieval period it tends, in accordance with normal medieval practice, to be deductive. People often start out with a theory which is “obviously true”, and then describe how the alchemist might achieve these changes. Alchemy in this period tends to be based in the four element theory of Aristotle, where Fire, Earth, Air and Water are considered qualities, or forms, that the basic underlying material takes on to become recognizable substances – Earth being the quality of hardness, Water of fluidity etc. Quite frequently transmutation is written of in terms of ‘perfection’ or ennoblement. Slightly more so than the normal medieval writers, alchemists tend to give their experience and opinions as evidence for their work, and during this period they discovered alcohol (spirits) and the mineral acids. The Alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541) was among the first to suggest that the four elements theory of Mercury, Sulphur and Salt. These elements were not common mercury, Sulphur or salt but abstractions – thus the Mercury was the vaporous quality released when you burn something, Sulphur was the combustibility, and Salt was the ash remaining once it had been burnt. This freed alchemists from the older theories, and various other numbers and combinations of elements and primary materials were suggested to be the basis of the work. Biological models also began to be applied – the human being was an alchemical process, just like the rest of the cosmos, and it was frequently argued that metals grew matured, like any other creature, and the alchemist’s work was simply to hurry the process. In Britain many alchemists seem to have proposed what we might call atomic alchemy – suggesting that matter was composed of atoms, which simply needed to be rearranged to produce new substances and more potent medicines. This was the kind of alchemy pursued by Robert Boyle (1627-91) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727).

So, given that there have been many different European alchemies and that they have changed over time, is there any kind of generalities that we can make? Firstly it can be said that alchemy is the study of transformation is not confined to any particular aspect of the world; it may include subjects we have separated. Alchemy also suggests that transformation can be sudden and overwhelming. Secondly, alchemy often recognises that the observer is part of the process of observing and engaging with the world, and that this is a complex and disturbing process. Alchemists frequently suggest, for example, that imagination can potentiate the work and produce changes in it. In other words alchemy often does not admit an unabridged division between mind and body and between self and cosmos. Thirdly it can be suggested that the luxuriant and obscure language of alchemy arises because of the inability of any language to map reality entirely adequately – we might say in complement to Jung that alchemy functioned to compensate for the inadequacies of official discourses about reality, and suggest that it changed as those discourses changed.

Given that such issues will probably always be present for humans, something resembling alchemy will always be with us. What alchemy could still teach us explicitly is the impermanence of our conceptions of the world, that the borders of our selves may be other than we think, and that though there are always mysteries, we can always approach them. Alchemy also implies that it might be possible to have a responsive dialogue with the cosmos, and that we can proceed by allowing things to manifest in their own particular ways, rather than always making such interaction a mode of domination. It suggests, that science, medicine and therapy can become responsive arts.