

# *ESOTERICISM, ART, AND IMAGINATION*



Edited by Arthur Versluis, Lee Irwin,  
John Richards, and Melinda Weinstein

# **Esotericism, Art, and Imagination**

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## **Philosophic Mercury: Evolution of the Alchemical Feminine**

**M. E. Warlick**

Based on many of the premises of Hellenistic science, the earliest alchemical texts describe physical matter as having both male and female characteristics. They imagine the masculine Philosophic Sulphur as comprising the hot, dry, and fixed qualities of the sun, while the feminine Philosophic Mercury embodies the cool, moist, and volatile qualities of the moon. In the laboratory, the alchemist perfects these two components by separating them from base matter and removing the impurities from each. Then the alchemist reunites the two archetypal substances and fuses them with fire. The result of their union is a child, the "Philosophers' Stone," a mysterious substance that enables further transformations.

While this scenario of the gendered polarization of physical matter is generally true throughout alchemical literature, individual texts often differ in their definitions of the terms "Sulphur" and "Mercury" and in the degree to which each of these symbolic substances plays a role within the alchemical work. Tracing the evolution of these polarized substances and the wide variety of male and female characters that come to represent them reveals shifting attitudes towards gender roles. The earliest alchemical illustrations incorporated religious, courtly and planetary imagery. Mythological figures followed as a result of the Renaissance's revival of classical myths and their interpretations by alchemical authors and artists. Sulphur and Mercury appear as the sun and the moon, Kings and Queens, Adam and Eve, Apollo and Diana, and male and female animals. This article is particularly concerned with "Philosophic Mercury," its origins and evolution, through an analysis of both feminine and masculine images that artists adopted to represent this concept.

The polarized and gendered view of matter within alchemical literature has ancient origins, tracing back to the earliest alchemical philosophers, such as Maria the Prophet, who appears in an engraving

by Matthäus Merian (Fig. 1). Michael Maier first published this engraving in his *Symbola aureae mensae* (1617), and Daniel Stolcius reprinted it in his *Chymisches Lustgartlein* (1624).<sup>1</sup> On the title page to Maier's text, twelve portraits in roundels represent the twelve alchemists from twelve nations who play a significant role in the development of alchemical philosophy. Maria, who represents the Hebrews, holds an honored place at the center top, next to Hermes Trismegistus, to indicate her longevity and importance. We know of her teachings through the writings of Zosimos of Panopolis, c. 300 CE, who claims her as one of his teachers. His writings are preserved in a manuscript in Venice dating between the late tenth to the late eleventh-century.<sup>2</sup> Two related manuscripts, both at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, date from the thirteenth- and the fifteenth-centuries.<sup>3</sup> All three manuscripts contain the writings of Zosimus, other Greek alchemical authors, and commentaries on Zosimus by medieval authors who may have had access to earlier copies of his treatises, including Olympiodorus (early fifth-century) and Stephanus of Alexandria (fl. 620-640).

Zosimus praises Maria's practical skills and recipes, and her invention of many vessels for distillation, including the *triblikos* and the *kerotakis*. She understood the different levels of heat that could be achieved by using hot-ash, dung, and the water bath, which still bears her name, as the *bain marie* or *marienbad*. The Venice manuscript contains some of the earliest illustrations of alchemical vessels, attributed to Maria's designs. Both Paris manuscripts contain similar, although simplified, illustrations of her vessels. Her first image in the west appears in the margin of a fifteenth-century illustrated alchemical manuscript at St. John's College, Cambridge, beside text referring to the *Liber Marie sororis moysi* (*Book of Mary Sister of Moses*).<sup>4</sup> Her identification as the sister of Moses, which had already occurred in Arab texts, was erroneous, although intended to lend greater authority to her writings by suggesting their antiquity. In her philosophical writings, Maria presents the polarized qualities of matter as male and female, fixed and volatile. She states: "Combine together the male and the female, and you will find that which you seek."<sup>5</sup> Both Zosimos and Olympiodorus attribute this gendered view of physical matter to Maria, and it remains a central

feature of alchemical philosophy throughout its development. She was certainly not alone among the ancient philosophers in asserting the polarized aspects of physical matter, but her contributions to establishing the role of gender within alchemical philosophy is significant.

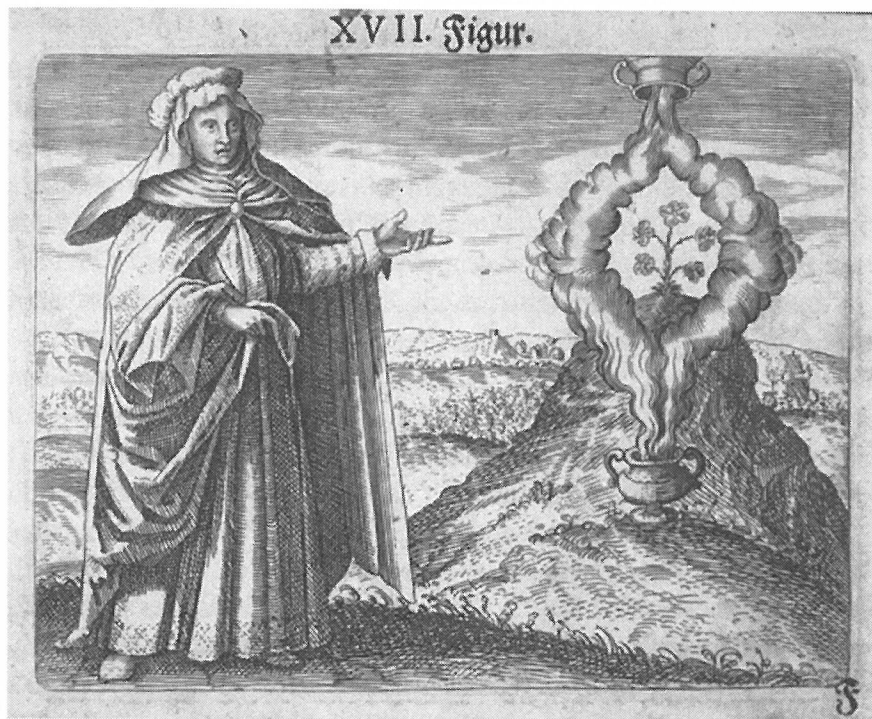


Fig. 1. Matthaeus Merian, "Maria the Prophet," engraving in Daniel Stolcius, *Chymisches Lustgartlein*, (Frankfurt: Lucas Jennis, 1624), University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections Department, SM 1000, n.p., Figure XVII.

In the engraving (Fig. 1), she stands beside a small mountain in which two vaporous clouds circulate around a small plant between two communicating vessels above and below the earth. Derived from Aristotle's theories of dry and moist exhalations that form minerals and metals beneath the earth, this detail suggests the circulating nature of the celestial forces and their products on earth. These two exhalations later congeal into the Sulphur and Mercury theory of the



Arabs, who claimed that Sulphur and Mercury combine with each other in all metals, in changing proportions to produce different metallic qualities. Maria also understood power of herbs, which is indicated in the engraving by the small plant in the center of the two smokes. In her writings, she refers to a small white herb that grows in the mountains. Some have identified this plant as lunary or moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*).

In 1618, J. D. Mylius included in his *Basilica philosophica* one hundred sixty round emblems representing the most famous alchemists, beginning with Hermes Trismegistus and ending with himself.<sup>6</sup> Within the series, arranged in this text in ten pages of sixteen emblems each, only five of the emblems represent women. Maria's emblem appears at the top right edge of the first page, repeating the small detail of the two circulating smokes seen in Figure 1. On the following row are emblems dedicated to other female alchemists of antiquity, Cleopatra of Egypt, Medera, Thaphuntia and Euthica, four women with varying degrees of notoriety in alchemical philosophy. Other images of these female alchemical philosophers exist, but Maria is certainly the best known. It would be easy to dismiss all the female alchemists of antiquity as legendary, but, interestingly enough, their writings frequently draw analogies to human sexuality and pregnancy to describe laboratory processes, particularly in the tracts ascribed to Maria, Cleopatra and Isis. Maria's writings circulated throughout the Middle Ages and she maintained her fame into the seventeenth-century and beyond. Her dialogue with the philosopher Aros on practical matters was included in many of the early printed compilations of alchemical treatises of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth-centuries.<sup>7</sup> No doubt Maier, Mylius and Stolcius highlighted her contributions and included images of her for that reason.

Maria's role as both an alchemical philosopher and practitioner is unusual, and few other women achieved her status within alchemical traditions. The lack of practicing female alchemists is perhaps no different from the scarcity of women in other professions. In Andrea Bonaiuti's *Apotheosis of St. Thomas Aquinas* in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, a chorus line of female personifications sit above male representatives of the professions of

law, theology, and the liberal arts.<sup>8</sup> The women serve as allegories for these male dominated professions, and they function as muses to the male practitioners below. In a similar image from a manuscript in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, a female personification of alchemy sits enthroned above a practicing male alchemist.<sup>9</sup> On either side there are elaborate towers from which silver and red liquids flow through faces of the moon and the sun to form fountains over pools in which female and male nude figures bathe. We will return to these two fountains shortly.

As alchemical philosophy developed from late antiquity, the concepts of Sulphur and Mercury maintained their primacy. Arab philosophers considered Sulphur and Mercury to be the principle components of each of the seven ancient metals (quicksilver, lead, tin, copper, iron, silver, gold), combined in different proportions to produce their different inherent qualities. This view is usually ascribed to the eight-century Arabic philosopher Jābir ibn Hayyān, although his identity and the authenticity of the texts attributed to him have been much debated. More important, in light of the later development of alchemical illustrations, is the transmission of Arabic texts to the Latin west. The revitalization of alchemy in Europe began in the mid twelfth-century when Arab manuscripts, newly translated into Latin, began to flow north from intellectual centers in Islamic Spain and southern Italy. These works included Arab translations of earlier Greek manuscripts, original treatises by Arab authors, and newly inspired works by European authors.

Throughout the thirteenth century, significant new alchemical texts appeared. Albertus Magnus (1193?-1280), and Roger Bacon (1214?-1294) renewed the ancient debate concerning art versus nature, that is, whether human industry could create products, equal to, or even superior to, those produced through natural means. William Newman has explored the origins and impact of one of the most important late medieval texts, the *Summa perfectionis*, composed at the end of the thirteenth or very early fourteenth-century and formerly attributed to the "Latin Geber."<sup>10</sup> While some had claimed this text was a translation from the Arabic author Jābir ibn Hayyān, the true identity of this author had long perplexed scholars. Newman asserts that he was a Franciscan monk, Paulus of

Taranto, who also authored a *Theorica et Practica*, a text that shares common sources and similar practices with the *Summa*. Influence of the *Summa* on several important late medieval alchemical texts can be found, including texts ascribed to Albertus Magnus, Arnald of Villanova (1240-1311), and Ramon Lull (1232?-1316). The *Rosarium*, attributed to Arnald, lifted entire sections from the *Summa* verbatim, without acknowledgement, and this text would have significant influence on the later development of alchemical imagery.

Both the *Summa* and the *Rosarium* promoted the "Mercury alone" theory, which asserted that Mercury alone could produce the universal elixir.<sup>11</sup> This theory revalued the role of Mercury in the creation of both silver and gold. According to these authors, gold could be produced from pure refined Mercury, with just a touch of Sulphur remaining to give it its golden color. While they gave prominence to Mercury, they still maintained, like the Arabic authors before them, that Mercury and Sulphur combined in differing proportions to produce all metals.<sup>12</sup> It is important to reiterate that the concepts of "Mercury" and "Sulphur" are not these actual physical substances, but rather the polarized properties of metals represented by those terms. It will be asserted here that the "Mercury alone" theory will influence the images of Mercury found in later illustrated alchemical manuscripts.

The last three decades of the thirteenth century witnessed an increasingly hostile attitude towards alchemy, culminating in a bull, issued by Pope John XXII in 1317, against alchemists who might attempt to counterfeit coinage.<sup>13</sup> In addition, there was a growing trend to theologize alchemical texts, which did not always meet with ecclesiastic approval. Yet, such official warnings did little to curb the enthusiasm for alchemical philosophy and experimentation. Soon after the papal bull, Petrus Bonus of Ferrara (Giano Lacinio, fl. 1323-1330) wrote his *Pretiosa margarita novella* (The New Pearl of Great Price), c. 1330, which offered a strong defense of alchemy, and that position would continue to develop over the next three centuries. While authors often qualified the degree to which they accepted the possibility of metallic transmutation, there is no doubt that metallurgy, geology, dyeing, glassmaking, medicine,

pharmacology, and other related experimental sciences were all steeped in alchemical philosophy and that these professions shared many laboratory procedures.

Alchemical imagery began to appear in the late fourteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Earlier alchemical manuscripts were sparsely illustrated, including the Greek manuscripts containing the writings of Zosimus mentioned above. If illustrated at all, early alchemical manuscripts contain only scattered drawings of vessels or graphic symbols for laboratory substances and operations. The sudden impulse to illustrate alchemical manuscripts has never been fully explained, and it must be said at the outset that studies of these manuscripts by textual scholars and by art historians are still very much in their initial stages. Little is known about the relationships between versions of these texts, and even less about the artists who illustrated and copied them. Newman suggests that the turn to more figural and allegorical representations of the laboratory work grew from a need to evade the antagonistic climate that had characterized alchemical debates in the late thirteenth century. He finds that as subsequent alchemical texts departed from the "disputational ambience of the medieval university" they began to loose intellectual rigor.<sup>15</sup> For literary scholars and art historians, however, this is the moment when alchemy becomes even more interesting. Artists took their images from religious, astrological and allegorical prototypes and adapted them to a new alchemical context, and from these early texts a good deal of subsequent alchemical imagery would be derived.

One of the first illustrated alchemical manuscripts was Constantine of Pisa's (13th century) *Liber secretorum alchimie* (*Book of the Secrets of Alchemy*). The University of Glasgow owns a Latin manuscript of the text. Another copy, now in Vienna, had been translated into Flemish as *Bouc der heimelicheden van mire vrouwen alkemenen* (*Book of the Secrets of My Lady Alchemy*).<sup>16</sup> This manuscript also contains an untitled treatise by Gratheus and a short tract, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, which are also illustrated. Constantine references the illustrations in his text, and he clearly intended to include them from the outset. There are religious images, such as the head of Christ, the hand of God, and scenes inspired by Genesis, including the Garden of Eden with Adam, Eve, and a



female headed serpent, and newly created animals. Comparisons between Christ's death and resurrection and alchemical operations had already appeared in the texts of Arnald of Villanova and Jean de Rupescissa,<sup>17</sup> and such textual and visual analogies to Christianity would continue in later alchemical treatises.

Constantine illustrates a triangular diagram of the known world and incorporates astronomy, primarily in its practical aspects. He draws analogies between the properties of the planets and the metals, and urges alchemists to pay particular attention to the phases of the moon, who like medical doctors, should take lunations into account when performing operations to ensure success.<sup>18</sup> Two of illustrations contain a series of circular diagrams with human heads that represent the planets and their related metals. The planet Saturn (Lead) is represented as a head with three faces, two profiles and one facing forward, anticipating later double-headed androgynous figures. Jupiter is a crowned king, connected to copper, and Venus is a crowned Queen, connected to tin, reversing the more typical relationship between these planets and their metals found in later alchemical literature. Mercury (quicksilver) is represented as bearded bishop. Constantine emphasizes the role of Mercury which must be refined and congealed, as Avicenna had explained. Drawing on Aristotelian concepts of animal reproduction, Constantine refers to the generation of metals as a reaction between a liquid menstruum which is solidified in a fetus by masculine semen.<sup>19</sup> Animals are included in three of the circular diagrams to suggest their initial creation by God, but there are no explicit sexual images here. Obrist identifies two other figures in circular diagrams as male and female personifications of the soul and of nature. The illustrations in the Gratheus treatise, including the resurrected Christ, a king and a queen on either side of a large giant with a club, a child in a vessel that resembles a uterus, battling male and female figures and two battling lions, all have descendents in later alchemical imagery.<sup>20</sup>

In the early fifteenth century, two fully illustrated manuscripts appear rather suddenly, the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (*Book of the Holy Trinity*) and the *Aurora consurgens* (*Rising Dawn*). Both manuscripts contain male and female figures drawn from Christian and secular prototypes, as well as newly formulated images, such as

the half male-half female androgyne. In both manuscripts, images of women play a prominent role. The author of *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* was a Franciscan monk named Ulmannus, and several versions, including the Berlin copy, end with an image of St. Francis receiving the stigmata.<sup>21</sup> The production of this manuscript is closely connected to events surrounding the Council of Constance, which took place between 1414-18. Ulmannus wrote his text between 1410 and 1419, and upon its completion he presented it to the Markgraf Friedrich I of Brandenburg. The Emperor Sigismund, who presided at the Council, also received a shortened version during this time. The Council was convened to attempt to heal the Great Schism and to clarify the contemporary dispute on papal succession. The council also conducted the trials of Jan Hus and Johann of Prague, and they burned both men for heresy. Within this inflammatory climate of religious persecution it is important to note that the Christian imagery within this manuscript was not considered improper, and in fact, it served larger religious and political motives, reinforcing the power of the Roman Catholic Church and the Hapsburg Dynasty.<sup>22</sup> It is a legacy of much later occult revivals that alchemy today has been described as a heretical practice linked to witchcraft, sorcery and other black arts. On the contrary, monks and nuns practiced alchemy during this period and felt that its precepts were very much in line with their religious beliefs.<sup>23</sup> The Franciscans promoted the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and while Marian theology was not a focal point of discussions at the Council of Constance, the Franciscan authorship of this manuscript may help explain Mary's important role within it.

Adam's and Christ's suffering and resurrection represent the destruction of primal matter and its eventual purification into the Philosophers' Stone. Early in the series, male figures are tortured, and Christ is crucified on the cross. A female serpent, adapted from scenes of the Garden of Eden, stands beside Eve and pierces Adam with her sword, like the caustic acids that break down primal matter and begin the process of purification. The version at the John Rylands Library in Manchester adds a furnace and vessels into this image to reinforce the analogy to laboratory operations.<sup>24</sup> Christ's resurrection from his sarcophagus represents the ultimate perfection

of the masculine and the production of gold.

The *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* also contains several androgynous figures, half-male and half-female, joined by a vertical line down the center. In one, a King holds a spiraling serpent while the Queen on the right holds a gold chalice containing three golden serpents. They stand on two fountains from which flow red and green streams to nourish trees on either side, whose blossoms contain the heads of the sun and the moon. A two-headed dragon beneath this androgyne drinks from the two fountains. They can be traced back to the two exhalations of Aristotle, pictured in the emblem of Maria the Prophet. Another androgyne, formed of a joined King and Queen holding a sword and a crown, battle the seven deadly sins, whose names surround the figure as a reminder that evil temptations like pride, anger and gluttony can lead to the destruction of the soul.<sup>25</sup> This androgyne stands above a diabolic four-headed monster, with the heads of Adam and Eve rising from this creature to entwine around the legs of the couple.

Throughout the text, images of Eve and Virgin Mary represent the feminine aspects of alchemical substances and processes. Within a green shield, Mary hovers over the crucified Christ, behind a golden double-headed eagle. Close connections are drawn between the Virgin Mary and Christ, as representatives of the feminine and masculine polarities of the work. Elsewhere Mary is conflated with the Woman Clothed with the Sun, from Revelations (12:1-17), who fought with a satanic dragon to protect her unborn son. In the version at the Wellcome Institute in London, she stands on the moon with rays of the sun radiating behind her, signifying that she encompasses both polarities. A small crucifix and Fleur de Lys rise above her.<sup>26</sup>

Her ultimate triumph is pictured as the Crowning of Mary.<sup>27</sup> In this image, she kneels above the shield of the crucifixion. Christ and God the Father place the crown on her head, while the dove of the Holy Spirit swoops down and offers assistance. Surrounding this figural grouping are the symbols of the four evangelists, the eagle of John, the lion of Mark, the angel of Matthew and the ox of Luke, which throughout the text are compared to planets, metals and virtues. In opposition to the female serpent and Eve who represent dissolving acids and feminine impurities that must be purged, the

Virgin Mary represents the perfection of the feminine and her crowning becomes one of the most significant illuminations within this text. Although most of these images were based on earlier Christian prototypes, the Crowning of Mary as part of the Trinity was virtually unprecedented. Christ often crowns Mary in Gothic art, but to conflate her Crowning with the Trinity appears in only one apparently unrelated precedent. After appearing in this manuscript, the Crowning of Mary with the Trinity became a popular Christian image throughout the remainder of the fifteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

The *Aurora consurgens* (Rising Dawn), also from the fifteenth-century, incorporates both religious and secular imagery.<sup>29</sup> This manuscript inspired Carl Jung to construct his twentieth-century theories of the parallels between alchemy and human psychological development. His disciple, Marie-Louise von Franz, translated the Zürich text and traced its many biblical and apocryphal sources.<sup>30</sup> She endorsed the traditional authorship of the *Aurora* to St. Thomas Aquinas. While his connection to this text is no longer supported, no one as yet has identified its true author. Like the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, religious prototypes were used as models, including the Virgin of Mercy (Misericordia), who in this manuscript appears as a Queen with her open cape guarding male personifications of the seven metals, while a male alchemist looks on. Artists used similar images to represent the Virgin Mary and her worshipers and Saint Ursula and her 11,000 virgins, and this well-known religious model was easily adapted to the new alchemical context.

Elsewhere, a crowned woman with the red face of the sun personifies alchemical wisdom and nurses two elderly philosophers. This scene is related to images of the lactating Virgin Mary, and to the allegorical figure of Ecclesia. The female body serves as the matrix in which the Philosophers' Stone is nourished to maturity. In one illustration, a bleeding woman within a zodiac circle holds up her menstrual clothes to the sun, placed beside the Lion, the sign of Leo. In another illustration, a winged pregnant woman, related to the Woman of Revelations seen in the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, stands on the moon with rays of the sun behind her. She opens her bodice to reveal her child, formed with the caduceus of Mercury. Other scenes refer to the destruction of the physical body, such as



one in which a nude man and woman dismember each other. In another battle scene, a knight, with the red head of the sun and riding a lion, battles a nude woman with the silver head of the moon, now tarnished black, who rides a griffin.<sup>31</sup> Each figure holds a shield that contains symbols of its opponent. The sun carries a shield with three moons, while the moon's shield contains the shining face of the sun, signifying that both Sulphur and Mercury contain small elements of each other.

Parts of the text of the *Aurora* are derived from the "Song of Songs," an erotic Biblical poem that had long been used as an analogy for Christ's relationship to his church and to the Marian cult that rose during the Gothic period.<sup>32</sup> The author of the *Aurora consurgens* adapted the sexual romance in the poem to illustrate alchemical operations. In two separate scenes the couple makes love, folios that are often defaced by later readers, uncomfortable with the explicit sexual imagery. These scenes of sexual union represent the union of male and female matter within the vessel and echo the language of the interpenetration of these substances during the laboratory operations. These sexual images enjoyed a great longevity in alchemical imagery following the publication of the series of twenty related woodcuts, entitled the *Rosarium philosophorum*, within *De alchimia opuscula* in 1550.<sup>33</sup> These woodcuts create a narrative of the romance of the Queen (Mercury) and the King (Sulphur), who meet each other, remove their clothing, bathe in a pool and then make love, twice, beside their symbols of the moon and the sun, to signify their fusion and the production of silver and gold. This series ends with the Crowning of Mary and the Resurrection of Christ, adapted from the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*.

Planetary imagery within alchemical manuscripts also begins early. The sun and the moon are perhaps the most persistent representations of Sulphur and Mercury, as found in an illustrated manuscript in the Laurenzian Medical Library in Florence, dating to the fifteenth century. Although damaged, this text contains many images of the masculine sun and feminine moon. In one, they face each other on either side of a vessel, labeled with four letters, IAAT, to indicate the four elements, ignis; aer; aqua; and terra (fire, air

water and earth).<sup>34</sup> In this image, the moon is an old woman, wearing a medieval wimple, which is sometimes confused by copyists who draw her with a beard instead. The sun, with its dry heat and daily predictability represents masculine Sulphur, while the cool and volatile moon represents feminine Mercury. The sun and the moon, often drawn with human faces, appear throughout alchemical imagery and often accompany the figural representations of these concepts. One of the most beautiful is a folio from the *Splendor Solis* (Splendor of the Sun) in which the Queen, dressed in blue with a touch of red stands beneath the cool moon, and the King, dressed in red with a touch of blue, stands beneath the fiery sun.<sup>35</sup> Images of the seven ancient planets often use women to represent the moon and Venus, although male substitutes can also be found, as in the Misericordia image in the *Aurora consurgens*, mentioned above, in which the seven planets are all men.

The images found in the early illustrated manuscripts deserve a fuller analysis, as do their relationships to other fifteenth and sixteenth century illustrated manuscripts series including the *Pretiossa Donum Dei* (Most Precious Gift of God), Lambsprinck's male and female animals, and the *Ripley Scrolls*. Still, this glimpse at the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* and the *Aurora consurgens* reveals that their artists transformed the polarized concepts of male Sulphur and female Mercury into a variety of male and female figures adapted from religious, allegorical and even sexual prototypes. Figures representing the male Sulphur and the female Mercury are typically balanced one to one within these scenes, as they battle and as they make love.

At the same time, both manuscripts contain several significant images of women alone. These women retain the influence of the "Mercury alone" theory of the late Middle Ages. They include the Woman of Clothed with the Sun from Revelations in the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, who stands beneath the crucifixion, and the related woman in the *Aurora*, pregnant with her child Mercury. Other representations of this powerful "Philosophic Mercury" display maidens with long flowing blond hair to signify their virginity, as artists represented married women with bound hair. A manuscript in Leiden, which combines images from the *Buch der heiligen*

*Dreifaltigkeit* and the *Aurora*, includes such a maiden, who stands on two winged fountains and calmly subdues in her hands a small dragon with flaming breath.<sup>36</sup> A related image in Glasgow depicts a nude woman holding an entwined serpent in one hand and a chalice with serpents in the other. She also stands above two fountains, whose streams pour into a single vessel.<sup>37</sup> In a Paris manuscript related to the *Rosarium philosophorum*, a woman identified as "Philosophic Mercury" holds a chalice with serpents in her right hand, a waxing crescent moon in her left, and stands above a fused sun and the moon.<sup>38</sup>

These women share features with the female personification of Nature, who appears in a number of alchemical illustrations. Perhaps the most famous is in a manuscript by Jean Perréal (1455-1530), dated 1516, in which Nature, looking decidedly grumpy, cautions the alchemist, dressed in a brown robe, to follow her teachings.<sup>39</sup> His laboratory can be seen within the rounded arch at the right edge of the illustration. The elaborate branches of the entwined tree behind her contain small gold letters that identify its symbolic components. The roots draw sustenance from the mineral, plant, and animal worlds, and primal matter is heated in her small furnace. The four elements, earth, water, air and fire form the ellipse in which she sits and they remix and intertwine above her to form at the top the "Work of Nature." Her crown contains glyphs of the seven ancient planets. In the accompanying poem, she warns the alchemist that only by following her path, will he achieve his goals. The same sentiments can be found in an engraving included in Michael Maier's *Atlanta fugiens*, first published in Oppenheim in 1617.<sup>40</sup> Here, the wise alchemist lets Nature be his guide as he follows in her footsteps on a moonlit night.<sup>41</sup>

Many of these features are combined in an allegorical figure of "Philosophic Mercury," in the University of Glasgow's Ferguson MS 6 (Fig. 2). This manuscript, entitled *Spruch der Philosophien*, contains several earlier series of alchemical illustrations, including the *Aurora consurgens*, and the *Rosarium philosophum*, illustrated with minimal text. While it dates to the late sixteenth-century, c. 1580, a number of medievalizing features in the illustrations suggest that the copyist was drawing from early versions of these



manuscripts. In the image, a nude woman stands atop a rainbow that links two pools flowing red and white, colors also connected to the male and female polarities. Her long flowing blond hair and her nudity indicate her virginity and purity. The sun and moon are suspended in the tree above her. There intertwined branches are reminiscent of the tree in Perréal's image of Mother Nature, as well as the astrological glyph for the planet Mercury and the caduceus of the god Mercury. In her hands she holds two golden chalices to catch the flow from her breasts, red and black, the latter perhaps based on a tarnished silver original. Small towns face each other on either side of a river that goes underground at her feet. These towns, with their brick walls and towers, suggest illustrations of alchemical furnaces, which often mimic castles and fortifications. Two paths lead to the doors of these buildings, and while the edges of the image are now abraded, these paths reinforce connections to the two fountains below, and ultimately the two exhalations, pictured in the emblem of Maria the Prophet (Fig. 1).

Figures above fountains typically include the male-female androgynes and the beautiful young women who represent "Philosophic Mercury," discussed above. In the *Splendor Solis*, 1582, the figure atop the fountains becomes an armed soldier, who wears the colors of the different stages of the work as it progresses from black to white to yellow and red.<sup>42</sup> This soldier is not alone in a trend to adapt or replace many of the female figures found in earlier manuscripts with male figures, particularly during the great proliferation of new alchemical engravings published in Frankfurt and Oppenheim by Lucas Jennis and the de Bry family in the early seventeenth-century.<sup>43</sup> These printed texts compiled, synthesized and interpreted earlier alchemical treatises, while embellishing them with new imagery. These authors were influenced by the revival of classical mythology. An increasing array of male gods, soldiers, heroes and practicing alchemists appeared to represent substances and operations of the work.

Several factors could be cited to explain this growing prominence of male figures in the engraved alchemical imagery. Scholars have charted the increasing polarization of gender roles that characterize





Fig. 2. "Alchimia, (Lady Alchemy)" *Spruch der Philosophien*, German, late 16th c., paper, 220 x 160 mm, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections Department, Ferguson MS 6, fol. 4v.

the sixteenth and seventeenth century, supported by both ecclesiastic and secular authorities. Women remained excluded from universities, just as university education became the prerequisite for newly organized professions. As the public roles of women within these professions were curtailed, the private roles of women within the domestic sphere were encouraged. These societal forces impacted the new alchemical images,<sup>44</sup> even as their artists, often well aware of the previous repertory of manuscript imagery, adapted earlier images for an exploding market. It is important to assert, however, that the shift towards more masculine imagery at the onset of the Scientific Revolution was neither strictly linear nor absolute. Women continued to play important roles in these engravings, particularly with the appearance of new female mythological characters. Female personifications of the planets continue and the male-female androgyne is often repeated. Other images reveal these shifts more clearly. The Virgin Mary virtually disappears in images produced within Protestant contexts, although she continues to appear in texts produced in Catholic countries, even into the late nineteenth century.

The evolving gender roles within these new engravings deserve a much fuller investigation, but one telling comparison can be offered, Emblem X of Michael Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*, in which a male alchemist brings a flaming torch to a fire, while two representations of the male god Mercury observe (Fig. 3). This text contains fifty engravings arranged in emblematic fashion, with each entry containing a short motto, an engraving, an epigram, a short musical composition, and an explanation of the image. The use of the god Mercury to represent alchemical concepts of Mercury draws from earlier sources. After Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) published translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the fame of the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary founder of alchemical philosophy continued to grow. His fame remained strong into the seventeenth-century, even though Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614) was already casting doubts on the antiquity of these texts. Through complex chain of associations, the Egyptian god Thoth and the mythical Hermes Trismegistus became conflated with the Greek god Hermes and the Roman god Mercury.

EMBLEMA X. *De secretis Naturæ.*  
 Da ignem igni, Mercurium Mercurio, & sufficit tibi.

49



EPIGRAMMA X.

**M** Achina pendet ab hac mundi connexa catena  
 Tota, suo quod par gaudeat omne pari:  
 Mercurius sic Mercurio, sic jungitur igni  
 Ignis, & hac arti sit data meta tua.  
 Hermetem Vulcanus agit, sed penniger Hermes,  
 Cynthia, te solvit, te sed, Apollo, soror.

G

HÆC

Fig. 3. Matthæus Merian, "Give Fire to Fire, Mercury to Mercury, and it is enough for you," engraving in Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*, (Oppenheim: Johann Theodor de Bry, 1618). University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections Department, Euing Bd 16-g.6, p. 49, Emblem X.



Male Mercuries had appeared in earlier manuscripts, such as Constantine's planetary bishop mentioned above, but in the new engravings his presence increases dramatically.

The motto of this emblem reads, "Give fire to fire, Mercury to Mercury, and it is enough for you."<sup>45</sup> The message emphasizes that "like generates like," repeating an old alchemical adage that "barley generates barley, as gold generates gold."<sup>46</sup> The discourse reads like an attempt to reconcile conflicting concepts in earlier alchemical literature. It contains a critique of Galenic medicine, in that the sudden applications of oppositional medicine, such as adding heat to a frozen limb, can create disastrous results. Rather, it encourages Paracelsus's alternative approach that "like cures like," suggesting that frozen limbs might first be helped through immersion in cold water. Paracelsus's (1493-1541) voluminous writings had a profound effect on alchemical philosophy. His view of women shared much with Lutheran theology, and while he expressed a negative view of human sexuality, he recognized the significance of the Virgin Mary's virginity and purity in her role as the mother of Christ.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps most significantly for alchemical imagery, Paracelsus had emphasized the three-fold nature of matter, adding "Salt," as a concept for the body that unities Sulphur and Mercury, soul and spirit. Tripartite descriptions of matter were not new to alchemical philosophy, even Maria mentions them, but Paracelsus's emphasis on Salt as an essential component of the Sulphur-Mercury duality was virtually unprecedented,<sup>48</sup> and it infiltrated alchemical philosophy and imagery in a variety of ways. Here it is suggested by the caduceus of the god Mercury, on which two serpents entwine around a single rod.

The discourse also deals with the oppositions of fire and water, with the god Mercury now representing the watery, mercurial side of the equation. To explain the polarities of Mercury (water) and fire, Maier reflects back to the philosophical oppositions of Empedocles, of combat and friendship, hatred and love. From the elements of water and fire, the other two elements arise, air and earth, to produce the Stone. Mercury is the matter and fire provides motion and gives shape to matter. Maier states that just as there are two kinds of fire, one internal to a body and the external fire, heating a vessel, there are

two kinds of Mercury. De Jong's commentary connects this emblem to Geber's Mercury-Sulphur theory, and while it does place water and fire, or Mercury and Sulphur, in opposition, it only obliquely refers to Geber's "Mercury alone" theory, through a quotation from the *Aurora consurgens*, "You should draw the quintessential from the Mercury, otherwise, your work is in vain. And therefore the Mercury is described as threefold." Unities, dualities and trinities are thus conflated in this emblem and its discourse. Its complex exegesis tells us much about the new climate of alchemical philosophy, and its attempts to reconcile the diversity of previous authors. The engraving illustrates these conundrums since the male god Mercury now symbolizes the dual nature of Mercury, and the tripartite unity of Body, Soul and Spirit, in his caduceus.

The transformations in representations of the alchemical Mercury suggest both the continuity and instability of the alchemical feminine. Additional questions could be raised concerning the sexuality of the god Mercury, and his parental role in fathering the Hermaphrodite with Aphrodite, a legend illustrated in Emblem XXXVIII of *Atalanta fugiens*. The motto reads, "Like the Hermaphrodite, the Rebis is born out of two mountains, of Mercury and Venus."<sup>49</sup> Adapting the classical myth to a new alchemical interpretation, Mercury here becomes the father and Venus the mother of the Philosophers' Stone.

Gender and sexuality remain central to alchemical imagery within this new phase of printed texts and their engravings. A fuller study of that transition is needed, but tracing the transformations of gendered alchemical imagery from its inception to these engravings reveals much about the fluctuating interpretations of the feminine in alchemical philosophy. Increasingly, masculine imagery predominated within these seventeenth-century engravings, but that doesn't mean that the feminine was displaced. Rather, her appearance in these engravings becomes more nuanced, in ways that reflect the shifting roles of women at this time. Identifying the underlying assumptions about gender and sexuality can help to clarify the feminine role within alchemical representations of the physical work, as well as the role of the feminine within alchemy's ultimate task of spiritual transformation.



## Notes

1. Michael Maier, *Symbola aurea mensae duodecim nationum* and Daniel Stolcius, *Chymisches Lustgartlein*. The Latin version of Stolcius's text is entitled *Viridarium chymicum figuris cupro incisus adornatum, et poeticis picturis illustratum*. All three texts were published in Frankfurt by Lucas Jennis.
2. *Marcianus graecus*. Z. 299.
3. *Parisini graeci* 2325 and 2327. The latter of the two Paris manuscripts formed the basis of Marcellin Berthelot's nineteenth-century translation and interpretation. Marcellin Berthelot and Ch.-Em. Ruelle, *Collection des alchimistes grecs*, I-III, 1888, reprint ed., (London: Holland Press, 1963). See also Walter Scott, *Hermetica*, IV (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), 104-153.
4. MS G 14, James Montague Rhodes, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of St. John's College Cambridge* (Cambridge University Press, 1913), 214-215.
5. Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 62-63. Patai here also reproduces Berthelot's drawings of Maria's vessels based on those found in the Venice manuscript.
6. Johann Daniel Mylius, *Opus medico-chymicum*, Vol. 3: *Basilica philosophica* (Frankfurt: Lucas Jennis, 1618), University of Glasgow, Special Collections Department Ferguson Aq-d.11, not paginated.
7. Such as "Mariae Prophetissae Practica," in the *Artis auriferae* (Basel: Conrad Waldkirch, 1610), p. 205. See also John Ferguson, *Bibliotheca Chemica*, II, (London: Derek Verschoyle, 1954), 77-78.
8. Diana Norman, "The Art of Knowledge," in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1200-1400*, Diana Norman, ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 217-228.
9. John Rylands Library, Manchester, German MS 1, fol. 6r.
10. William R. Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991).
11. Newman, 204-208. Lynn Thorndike had also noted the predominance of Mercury in the *Rosarium*, while Newman asserts that the *Summa* was the first text to do this. See also Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, III, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 58.
12. Newman, 159-162.

13. Newman, 35.
14. For surveys of the development of early alchemical imagery see Barbara Obrist, *Les Débuts de l'imagerie alchimique (XIVe – XVe siècles)*, (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1982) and Jacques van Lennep, *Alchimia* (Brussels: Crédit Communal, 1985). These texts reproduce most of the early manuscript imagery discussed below.
15. Newman, 39.
16. In the Glasgow version the illustrations are rudimentary and unfinished. In the Vienna manuscript, they are more fully realized, even though the execution of the drawings is still relatively unskilled. See Barbara Obrist, *Constantine of Pisa: The Book of the Secrets of Alchemy*, (Leiden: Brill, 1990), which focuses on the Glasgow manuscript and its illustrations, 44-49. Her earlier discussion of the images in the Vienna manuscript (MS 2372), is found in her *Débuts*, 85-116; 257-261. See also Lennep, 46-54.
17. Obrist, *Débuts*, 61.
18. The practical recipes included in this text, however, rarely give specific astrological advice. Obrist, *Constantine of Pisa*, 34-35.
19. Obrist, *Débuts*, 71. Albertus Magnus uses similar analogies between human sexual reproduction and alchemical transformation in his *Mineralia IV*, cited by Obrist.
20. Barbara Obrist, "Visualization in Medieval Alchemy," *Hyle-International Journal for the Philosophy of Chemistry* 9.2 (2003): 131-170. Accessed on line, <http://www.hyle.org/journal/issues/9-2/obrist.htm>.
21. Marielene Putscher, "Das Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit und seiner bilder in Handschriften des 15 Jahrhunderts," in *Die Alchemie in der europäischen Kultur- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, Christoph Meinel, ed., (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 151-178. Putscher compares copies of these manuscripts in Berlin (Kupferstichkabinett MS 78 A 11); Nürnberg (Germ. Nat. Mus. 80061) and München (Bayr. Staatsbibl. Cgm 598). with other versions. See also Lennep, 70-78.
22. Ingrid Flor, "Die 'Kröning Mariae' und der 'Christus-Adler' zur Herrschaftssymbolik Spätmittelalterlicher Endzeitprophetie," *Umění* 40 (1992): 392-412.
23. Andrea De Pascalis, *Alchemy the Golden Art* (Rome Gremese, 1995), 57-72.
24. Manchester, John Rylands Library, German MS 1, fol. 7v.
25. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, MS 78 A 11. See fols. 121v and 122v.
26. London, Wellcome Institute, MS 164 fol. 99v.
27. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, MS 78 A 11, fol. 31v.
28. Putscher, 155.
29. Zentralbibliothek Zürich MS Rh. 172, see Obrist, *Débuts*, 183-245,

and Lennep, 54-70.

30. Marie-Louis von Franz, *Aurora consurgens*, trans. R.F.C. Hull and A.B.S. Glover (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980).

31. Lennep illustrates many of these folios, see figs. 25, 26, 28, 32, 40.

32. Martin Slatohlávek, "Iconographic Motifs from the Biblical Song of Songs," *The Bride in the Enclosed Garden*, exh. cat. (Prague: Convent of St. Agnes of Bohemia, 1995), 34-74.

33. (Frankfurt: Cyriaci Iacobi, 1550). See Lennep, figs. 19-38.

34. Florence, Bibliotheca Medicea Laurentiana, MS Ashburnham 1166, fol. 15r. See Giovanni Carbonelli, *Sulle fonti storiche della chimica e dell'alchimia in Italia* (Rome: Istituto Nazionale Medico Farmacologico, 1925), 46-70. Lennep dates this manuscript late fifteenth century. This folio is reproduced in Carbonelli, fig. 70.

35. London, British Library, Harley MS. 3469, fol. 10r. See Lennep, 100-129, fig. 168.

36. Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS F29, fol. 95v.

37. *Spruch der philosophien*, Ferguson MS. 6, fol. 164v.

38. Lennep illustrates many of these images, see Zürich, Rh. 172: fig. 40, Nürnberg, Germ. Nat. MS 80061: Fig. 51; Paris, BN 7171, fig. 146. A variant of the image of a woman on the two fountains was later reprinted in Reusner's *Pandora*. See Lennep, fig. 54.

39. Barbara Obrist, lecture entitled, "'Nuda Natura' and the Alchemist in Jean Perréal's Early 16th-Century Miniature," International Conference on the History of Alchemy and Chymistry, Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, July 21, 2006. See Lennep, fig. 108.

40. H. M. E. de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta fugiens: Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems*, (York Beach, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, 1969), 266-268.

41. See Lennep, fig. 143.

42. See Lennep, fig. 161.

43. Most of these engravings are illustrated in Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game* (New York: George Braziller, 1988).

44. M. E. Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems," *Glasgow Emblem Studies*, 3 (1998): 26-47.

45. De Jong, 107-112.

46. This advice is contained in a treatise in which Isis shares the mysteries of alchemy with her son Horus. Marcellin Berthelot translated the shorter version found in Paris, BN MS 2327, in his *Collection Des Anciens Alchimistes Grecs* (translation section), 31-36.

47. Ute Gause, "Zum Frauenbild im Frühwerk des Paracelsus," *Parerga Paracelsica: Paracelsus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, foreword by

Joachim Telle (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1991), 45-56.

48. Walter Pagel, "Paracelsus and the Neoplatonic and Gnostic Tradition," *Ambix* 8 (October 1960): 153-155.

49. De Jong, 251-255.