# Paracelsus, Heinrich Khunrath and Macbeth: An Alchemical Argument

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Full fadom five thy father lies;
    Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
    Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
    Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
    Burthen: Ding-dong.
Hark! now I hear them,—ding-dong, bell.
(*The Tempest*, I.ii.399-407)[1]

The popularity of this song about the alchemical transformation of Alonso would indicate that Shakespeare's knowledge of alchemy is well-known. However, things are not so simple. A search on earlier writings on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and magic proved to be almost fruitless. One small paragraph in Frances Yates' *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* has this to say on *Macbeth*:

> The world of Macbeth and his wife is a school of night indeed, where witches incite to murder. The deep damnation of this deed is trumpeted against by angels, by 'heaven's cherubins', whose universal harmony is heard only in the form of judgment.[2]

Yates appears disappointed here in not finding in the play the

Spenserian type of fairies, elves, angels or daemons suitable for Romance. Her discussion in the book revolves round *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Love's Labour Lost* and, of course, *The Tempest*. In this book she principally discusses Christian Cabala and white magic in the Renaissance. In this respect *Macbeth* is a tortuous text redolent of black magic.

My purpose in this essay, however, is not to discuss magic but alchemy, a closely related but more intricate subject pursued by scholars in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in England and Europe. Whereas readers will recognise Paracelsus as a major source of alchemical literature in Europe, Heinrich Khunrath of Leipzig (1560-1605) would probably appear unfamiliar in a discussion of Shakespeare's play. From Stuart Gillespie we know about his familiarity with James I's *Daemonologie* and it has been suggested as a probable source of the weird sisters in *Macbeth*. James discusses necromancy and witchcraft in this book, rightfully so, having a first-hand experience in the North Berwick witch trials from 1590. Samuel Harsnett, the Archbishop of York wrote a sceptical and polemical pamphlet *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603; 1605). This book has been identified as the source of the names of demons mentioned by Edgar as Tom O' Bedlam in *King Lear* (1608).

*Macbeth* is probably Shakespeare's only play that uses a laboratory image from alchemy. Lady Macbeth in broaching her plan tells Macbeth how the guards poisoned and intoxicated through her clever design would not be able to apply reason:

> his two chamberlains
> Will I with wine and wassail so convince,
> That memory, the warder of the brain,
> Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
> A limbeck only:[3] (I.vii.64-68)

Kenneth Muir in a note quotes from E. Schanzer an explanation of

these lines: "the receptacle which should collect only the pure drops of reason, the final distillate of the thought-process, will be turned into the retort in which the crude undistilled liquids bubble and fume." He further glosses 'limbeck' as "the corrupt form of 'alembic', a word adopted into most European languages from the Arabic of the Moorish alchemists of Spain."[4]

*Macbeth*, it is believed, was written between 1603 and 1606. For some reason, it appears that not only witchcraft but alchemy was also in Shakespeare's mind in this period. Shakespeare uses the term alchemy with reference to its heavenly power of purifying or enriching something in *Julius Caesar* (first performed in 1599) and Sonnets 33 and 114 (1609).[5] This was, of course, a commonplace use of the word 'alchemy' in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. Alchemy has often been associated by poets with love and religion because of its ennobling power. Stanton J. Linden has argued that from Chaucer to Ben Jonson writers have expressed an attitude towards alchemy, which is of "mirth, amazement, scepticism, outrage, bitterness and contempt."[6]

Regarding the use of alchemy in the European and English tradition Peggy Muñoz Simonds comments:

> Famous Renaissance magicians who practised alchemy as part of their repertoire included Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, Giambattista della Porta of Naples, and the English alchemist Dr. John Dee, who taught chemistry to Sir Philip Sidney and his group . . . alchemy often served as the poetic metaphor for wit, love, death, religious conversion and salvation and political reform—even for the transforming art of poetry itself in the works of such authors as John Skelton, Sir Philip Sidney, Sir John Davies, John Donne, George Herbert, John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan and many others . . .[7]

Simonds comes to conclude that "[t]hus the science of alchemy

was by Shakespeare's time already a recognized metonym for reform and change that would soon be taken up with considerable enthusiasm by Puritans, Quakers, Levellers, and others, but was then employed later in the century with equal fervour against the Cromwellian revolutionaries by Charles II and his royalist supporters as validation for the restoration of the monarchy."[8] According to his argument, it appears that in his mature vision in *The Tempest* (written in 1610/1611) Shakespeare presented Prospero, the magus alchemist performing a highly successful *opus* through all ten stages of *divisio, salsatura, nigredo, solve et coagula,* washing and dying, *cauda pavonis*, the *conjunctio*, squaring the circle, the *albedo* and *lapis* or the philosopher's stone.[9] One may therefore safely argue that Shakespeare used alchemical imagery throughout his writing career. I must now briefly explain the place of alchemy in the contemporary discourse and how it is relevant for our understanding of *Macbeth*.

Persians and Arabs adopted the Greek traditions from the Eighth century CE and Sufi Jabir Ibn Hayaan (ca 721-ca 815) promoted the Sulphur-Mercury theory of the Philosophers' Stone and popularized the idea of the production of an elixir that can cure human diseases as well as transform lesser metals into gold. In this period, we find the most famous text on alchemy, *Emerald Tablet* by Hermes Trismegistus in Arabic. The Andalusian scholar and mystic Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) first mentions that the science of alchemy is of three kinds: natural, spiritual and divine. The Arabic texts were translated into Latin in the twelfth century and the West came to know about the laboratory practice of alchemy. However, even at this early age, besides the material gold-making context a larger spiritual and theological context of alchemy began to develop and it is in this larger context that *Macbeth* becomes a text immersed in the process of spiritual/psychological transformation.[10]

The project of alchemy (turning base metal into gold with literal,

metaphorical and spiritual interpretations) was usually referred to in alchemical texts as the Great Work or the *opus magnum* or simply, *opus.* In the Christian Middle Ages the story of Christ was used as an exemplum for the various processes of the Great Work. The preparation of the alchemical elixir is seen as analogous to the conception, nativity, passion and resurrection of Christ. Peter Forshaw mentions one Frater Ulmannus who in his *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit (Book of the Holy Trinity)* "discusses laboratory alchemy in a heady mixture of imperial German politics and Marian theology, including images of Christ as an alchemical eagle and Lucifer (with his mother!) as an alchemical hermaphrodite, symbols respectively of correct and misguided laboratory practice, with some consideration of the moral nature of the practitioner thrown in for good measure."[11] Some of these images will be explained later in this essay. Forshaw helps us to build the English context of supernatural alchemy:

> This notion of supernatural alchemy came to prominence in the early modern works of figures like Heinrich Khunrath (1560-1605), Elias Ashmole (1617-1692), and Robert Boyle (1627-1691) . . . This supernatural dimension appears in a different way in the manuscripts of English astrologer, alchemist and physician Simon Forman (1552-1611), whose plans for laboratory practice included casting astrological charts in order to check for the malign presence for evil spirits or beneficial aid of angels.[12]

Readers of Kenneth Muir's edition of *Macbeth* are aware of Forman's description of witnessing the performance of the play in 1611 at the Globe. Many of Simon's interests like his problem-solving, use of drugs, healing women's diseases find a reflection in *Macbeth*. We wonder if he recognised the strong alchemical context of the play. There is, however, no such indication in his bland summary of the

play. We find the following information about Simon Forman:

> Forman's papers have proven to be a treasure trove of rare, odd, unusual data on one of the most studied periods of cultural history. They include autobiographies, guides to astrology, plague tracts, alchemical commonplace books and notes on biblical and historical subjects. They also contain his disputes with the College of Physicians and his largely unsuccessful magical experiments.[13]

Elias Ashmole, the donor helping to create the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford, collected Forman's papers. Though he comes late for our purpose, yet we will briefly look at him in order to understand the continuation of the alchemical tradition in England better:

> During the 1650s, Ashmole devoted a great deal of energy to the study of alchemy. In 1650, he published *Fasciculus Chemicus* under the anagrammatic pseudonym James Hasolle. This work was an English translation of two Latin alchemical works, one by Arthur Dee, the son of John Dee. In 1652, he published his most important alchemical work, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, an extensively annotated compilation of metaphysical poems in English.[14] . . . His final alchemical publication was *The Way to Bliss* in 1658, but thereafter his interest seems to wane in favour of his other pursuits. Ashmole promoted the use of therapeutic remedies drawing on both Galenic and Paracelsian principles, and his works attempt to merge the two schools. *The Way to Bliss* recommends ways to prevent illness: a balanced diet, moderate exercise and enough sleep. His works were avidly studied by other natural philosophers, such as Isaac Newton.[15]

The alchemical tradition in England that can be traced from John Dee to Isaac Newton could not but form a large and influential part in the intellectual history in Shakespeare's time. The wave of scepticism in the sixteenth century as a result of the development of Baconian science (Bacon himself believed in alchemy) and the Royal Society led to a poor and satirical representation of alchemists as frauds and tricksters in writers such as Ben Jonson.[16] We need to go back to the history of medicine once again to recover the context of alchemy and the importance of Paracelsus in Shakespeare's time.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PARACELSUS

The Swiss Chymist Theophrastus Paracelsus of Hohenheim (1552-1611) scandalised the medical community by suggesting that there were two types of medical alchemy—Chymiatria and Spagyria. He focused both on incurable bodily diseases like leprosy, syphilis, gout and 'spiritual diseases' like mania, epilepsy, lunacy. We find in *Macbeth* the reference to curing difficult physical diseases (in the King's evil episode) as well as mania (washing of hands) and mental obsessions. In *Labyrinthus medicorum errantium* (1537-41), his critique of scholastic medicine, Paracelsus declared that magic was the 'Anatomy of Medicine,' its "mistress, preceptoress and doctoress," suggesting that those who were not familiar with Cabala and magic would find it difficult to practise medicine. Among the medical disputations published in Basel among the contemporaries of Khunrath Forshaw mentions those on subjects of sympathies and antipathies of elements, heartbeat, philosophical and medical actions and one significantly on sleep, walking and comas (1583).[17] Though Shakespeare is unlikely to read the Latin treatise, sleep and dreams being matters of contemporary research, it is possible that he was making the best poetic use of such burning questions on the frontier of knowledge. His interest in madness would have

inclined him towards Paracelsian discussion of such topics for the simple reason that there was no proper Galenic treatment of such diseases as somnambulism or madness and melancholy. The Doctor in Macbeth is clearly out of bounds in treating Lady Macbeth. The frustration at lack of treatment in contemporary medicine finds expression in Macbeth's angry retort: "Throw physic to the dogs" (V.iii.47).[18] Paracelsus encouraged the combination of astrology and magic with alchemy and emphasized practical laboratory alchemy alongside works discussing elemental beings, man's ethereal body and contact with spirits.[19]

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HEINRICH KHUNRATH

The medical sects in Khunrath's day were divided into two groups: the *Chymiatri* and the *Paracelcisti*. The first group believed in the allopathic cure of Galen and Hippocrates and the latter were the followers of the homeopathic cure (based on the principle of 'like cures like') of Paracelsus and practised the magic of their master's *Philosophia sagax*, a book filled with necromancy, vain astrology, signatures, uncertain arts, and the summoning of devils and spirits. According to Libavius, their works are founded on paradoxes, absurdities and madness. Oswald Croll may be mentioned as a prominent alchemist of the Paracelsist group but he practised in Germany.[20] He is full of praise for Heinrich Khunrath, who met John Dee while in Bremen. Libavius mentions the Paracelsians as anti-Aristotle. When Khunrath and Libavius were submitting their theses at Basel, the Professor of Theoretical Medicine was Theodor Zwinger (1533-1588), a follower of the anti-Aristotelian Huguenot Petrus Ramus. It appears that the Chymical Medicine practised by Paracelsus, though privately liked by many physicians in Basel, was yet publicly avoided and those who were not able to conceal their interest often faced difficulties in promotion.[21]

Khunrath's reputation as a spiritual alchemist is principally founded on his baroquely illustrated *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1609), which never presents itself as a work strictly devoted to alchemy, but incorporates 'Physico-Chemistry' into a broader theosophical project. Some of the illustrations from this work have been reproduced even in modern critical literature on alchemy and I will also include a few of them. The first engraving shows the oratory-cum-laboratory of the alchemist. This combination of theoretical wisdom and practical experimentation is the hallmark of a wise alchemist. He is depicted as praying to God (Jehova) on the left. On the right is his cabinet of ingredients and furnace for boiling; in the middle piles of musical instruments suggest the centrality of music in the alchemical work. The perspectivism of the architecture suggests the importance of mathematics and geometry in the alchemist's work. It is clear that the process is dangerous

Photo 1: The Cabalist-Alchemist. From H. Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*

and the alchemist through prayer solicits supernatural help. He also needs music to calm him down. *Macbeth* is a play where the heightened nerves are never soothed and it is absolutely without any role of music excepting the chanting by the witches.[22]

Paracelsian influence on Renaissance thought descended heavily through the works of Khunrath. The names of his theses are mostly directly taken from Paracelsus's works. How closely Khunrath propagated Paracelsus cannot be made obvious without quoting the works of Khunrath and his sources provided by Forshaw. I therefore mention the Paracelsian sources in a note here though I did not check them myself but relied upon Forshaw:

> Khunrath defended twenty-eight theses *On the Signatures of Natural Things*, arguing for the revival of the occult doctrine of signatures for medical purposes. The title of the theses more than likely alludes to the already-mentioned *De natura rerum*, attributed to Paracelsus, the ninth book of which bears the same heading as Khunrath's dissertation.[23] Khunrath's theses represent a "natural philosophical concept of a rational hermeneutic of nature," one that sees connections in all things and which orients itself to phenomena on the assumption that the outward appearances, forms, and visible symmetries of things reveal their inner qualities.[24]

Like Paracelsus, Khunrath argues that knowledge gained by *ratio et experientia* (reason and experiment) should be augmented by and subordinated to knowledge of a higher order. "The true wise man is Θεοδιδακτος [theodidactos], "taught by God", either in hypnotic visions or dream-revelations and union with good ('hyperphysical') spirits".[25] Khunrath uses the Greek word hyperphysical rather than the Latin word supernatural.

## ALCHEMY AND THE JUNGIAN PARADIGM OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Before I can argue the place and role of alchemy in *Macbeth* any further, I must lay down some basic ideas of alchemy, conveniently interpreted for us by Jung. Nathan Schwarz-Salant writes in his introduction to *Jung on Alchemy*:

> Alchemists knew by their accumulated experience of centuries of traditional cultures, that their personalities could be transformed. Through initiation rites they felt different, behaved differently, and grew in new ways. . . . Alchemy developed within this respect for a human concern for the sacred. As a consequence, its very methods were intrinsically bound to the power of illumination and the imagination, and

Photo 2: Mercurius as the sun-moon hermaphrodite (*rebis*) standing on the (round) chaos.
Source: From Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622); reproduced in Jung's *Collected Works*, Vol. 12

> it especially applied the ideas of death and rebirth, so central to initiation rites and mystical experience, to material and psychological change.[26]

In alchemy, one has to be open to an Other dimension of existence. This Other is often referred to as God and is mediated by the shaman or the priest. Alchemists were "killed and reborn" through their experience of the *numinosum*.[27] Jung by applying the principles of alchemy to his practice of psychotherapy proposed the following parallels:

1. The idea of a unitary process—the self—which operates by creating equilibrium through manifesting compensatory images.
2. The idea of a conflict of opposites held together by this unitary and compensatory process.
3. The idea of the archetypes, which provide an underlying structure for the components of the psyche.
4. The belief that through projection and the imagination psyches can connect to and affect one another.[28]

## PRIMA MATERIA AND HIEROS GAMOS

The alchemists proposed that the world is made out of *prima materia* or chaos. This *prima materia* may also be assumed to be the primal mother, and in Jungian psychoanalysis, the unconscious. Through the myths of Cybelle and Attis[29] or the dismemberment of Osiris, or the Christian concept of original sin the theme of impossible passion is held up. Like the Oedipus story alchemists believe in a sacred marriage between mother and son which they term as *hieros gamos*. Now we understand the image mentioned above by Forshaw in Frater Ulmannus of Lucifer and his mother—it is an image of the sacred marriage or the laboratory practice gone wrong. Jung writes in *Psychology and Alchemy*: "The mother, who was anterior to the

world of the father, accommodates herself to the masculine principle and, with the aid of the human spirit (alchemy or 'the philosophy'), produces a son—not the antithesis of Christ but rather his chthonic counterpart, not a divine but a fabulous being conforming to the nature of the primordial mother. And just as the redemption of man the microcosm is the task of the 'upper' son, so the 'lower' son has the function of a *salvator macrocosmi*."[30]

## MYSTERIUM CONJUNCTIONIS

This sacred marriage, therefore, in psychotherapy is a reaching out to the pre-Oedipal consciousness. Jungian psychotherapy attempts to understand and access the unreachable unconscious through the alchemical myth of *mysterium conjunctionis*. This conjunction or marriage is not without its danger. It is an experience of the *numinosum* and may lead to an experience of God or the Devil.


Photo 3: The Conjunction
Source: From the *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550); reproduced in Jung's *Collected Works*, Vol. 16

Alchemists theorize a state of *nigredo* that follows the conjunction. In *Rosarium Philosophorum* there is a woodcut of a hermaphrodite figure, resurrected from a previous dead state, and supported by a crescent moon.[31] This signifies not only a union of opposites, the male-female polarities of the hermaphrodite, but also an overcoming of psychic death related to the dread and terror of despair and abandonment.[32]

## LAPIS OR THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The goal of the Great Work is to arrive at the stone by joining two materials by means of a third material. The dark coloured lead must be liquefied and its blackness reduced by joining it with a third material of medium colour. According to alchemical theory, by experiencing the *conjunctio* and the resulting *nigredo* over and over again, a new state could be reached, the 'whitening' of the *albedo*. The goal is the attainment of the *lapis* (the stone) which for the psychotherapist means 'the self'. This structure can be attained through an embodied self. This stage in which the passions are engaged, follows the 'whiteness' of the albedo and is known as the rubedo. Some sacrificial blood, some redness is needed for the full integration of the self. Jung explains the self-castration of Attis in the Cybelle-Attis myth as the sacrifice of the instinctual feelings for the Great Mother. It is the castration of the libido, both as the incestuous love of the son for the mother and of her incestuous love for him.[33] In psychotherapy the process of successful individuation is completed after such castration of the self. Between the analysand and his unconscious, the psychoanalyst is the third matter. It is essentially a process of psychic transference. The subject may lose himself by developing psychosis if he is unable to deal with the conjunction with the mother (unconscious). The psychotherapist must also be of stable self so that he is not psychically disturbed by the subject's revealed unconscious.

From such a preliminary understanding of alchemy and its Jungian interpretation we may look at Macbeth as a complex process of failed individuation leading to a break down in the hero's psyche. I would propose that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are not only complementary but also compensatory psyches.[34] Lady Macbeth repeatedly questions Macbeth's manhood and that is a suggestion of his incomplete individuation and mother-fixation. The great number of baby images in the play reinforces this idea of lacking manhood. Macbeth is told to look like the innocent flower (I.v.65);[35] he imagines pity, a soft emotion, "like a naked new-born babe" (I.vii.21).[36] When Macbeth says "I dare do all that may become a man" (I.vii.46)[37] he means he cannot do anything inhuman but logically a baby is not a man. Here he feels castrated, powerless, and afraid like a baby.

Lady Macbeth takes upon or imagines herself in the role of the mother, sometimes of Macbeth when she chides him for childish fear of the painted devil:

> The sleeping, and the dead,
> Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
> That fears a painted devil (II.ii.53-55);[38]

At other times she imagines or remembers her motherhood, a mother who kills her child:

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
> As you have done to this. (I.vii.54-58).[39]

This reminds us of the image of Medea. Incidentally, Medea has often

been represented as an alchemist's guide.[40] This primal mother figure, who kills her son after union, is an alchemical image. This death may lead to destruction or to rebirth and renewal. Lady Macbeth, being actually a part of Macbeth (in the image of the hermaphrodite) can only hint at this primal mother. The true *prima materia* with which Macbeth has union (his unconscious) are the witches. They represent the pre-Oedipal chaos with which Macbeth must come to terms. He obviously fails in the task. He cannot even match Lady Macbeth and comments that she should bear male children only, thus identifying her as the contrasexual *anima* that must join with him (husband/son) in a mysterious conjunction. Just like the alchemist Jason died because he could not properly handle his *anima* in Medea, similarly Macbeth fails to handle his *anima* in Lady Macbeth.

In the case of Lady Macbeth, it is a pre-Oedipal father-fixation. She could not kill Duncan as he resembled her father: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't." (II.ii.12–13).[41] This confrontation with her unresolved pre-Oedipal consciousness may lead to her psychic disintegration. Instead of self-castration, necessary for transcendence of her nigredo, Duncan's blood, in the spilling of which she has a major role pushes her into Hell and she fails to attain the refined state of *rubedo*. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are failed alchemists and pay the price of experimentation gone wrong.

Now, Macbeth's desire gone awry or out of control in this case is, significantly that for the gold crown. Let us imagine that kingship here is the metaphorical substitution of the alchemical king. In the alchemical tradition the symbol of king and queen were also used to indicate the conjunction that would lead to the production of gold.[42] For Macbeth, the Alchemical King never rises out of his salt bath or *nigredo*.[43] Macbeth fails to reach the state of rebirth after alchemical death. The gold crown or kingship never leads to the resolution of his unresolved Oedipal crisis and he gets destroyed in the pursuit of his desire.

## THE GOAL OF THEIR OPUS

Let us imagine that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are set on their alchemical project of finding gold: the crown, kingship or integrated psyche. All their desires are desperately channelled towards this goal, which should be the noble *opus* of any alchemist—purifying himself/herself through death and rebirth. From the beginning, something is amiss. The witches take hold of their imagination (The Macbeths can be clubbed together most of the times as one character split into two as Freud believed.)[44] The complete disorder in values, morals and ethics is rendered palpable by the 'fair and foul' ambivalent speech of the witches. Themes of equivocation, moral duplicity and political treachery reinforce the evil character of the Macbeth world. Instead of praying to God, as any alchemist should, they pray to and invoke evil spirits. The witches are aware of the melancholic journey on which Macbeth and his wife are to set out. They are part of *prima materia*, the original chaos in Macbeth's world and they set up an

Photo 4: The conjunction in gruesome form
Source: From *Turba Philosophorum* (1550);
reproduced in Jung's *Collected Works*, Vol. 12

appointment with him on the heath. Why this promptness, why this initiative on the part of the witches? This is because Macbeth fails to take control of his opus. In his case the incestuous wedding is with the witches or the dark forces of the *nigredo*; the *mysterium conjunctionis* is not with Lady Macbeth but with the most horrible unconscious. Lady Macbeth of course acts as a pseudo-mother by treating Macbeth like a child. But she and Macbeth are the same. Both of them will be engulfed by the horror of their unconscious psyche. There is an illustration in *Turba Philosophorum* (1550) of the conjunction in a gruesome form in which the alchemist has coitus with a great serpent. This picture is more appropriate for Macbeth.[45] We will examine how many alchemical stages of the ten mentioned by Simonds can be found in Macbeth.

## The *divisio* or state of separation

Macbeth distinguishes himself from the rest as the elements divide themselves at creation. He carves out a passage for himself in the battlefield as expressed in the captain's report. The image of storm and thunder, fire and water are all present in this report. Macbeth "Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage" (I.ii.19),[46] symbolically standing for birth or creation and division of the four elements at the beginning of the alchemical process. Again, "As whence the sun 'gins his reflection, shipwracking storms and direful thunders break, . . . Discomfort swells." (I.ii.25-28)[47]

## *Salsatura* or marination

After separation and division of elements the alchemist hero must undertake a bath for marination. In Macbeth's case it is a bloodbath: "Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha," (I.ii.40-41)[48] Blood being saline, it is perfect substitution for brine water for the *salsatura* or marination stage.

However, there is deep irony in the evocation of Golgotha, shedding of Christ's blood as opposed to the unholy bloodbath here reinforcing the contrast between good and evil. Simonds interprets Prospero's statement "my charms crack not" as use of "crack", a keyword in alchemy "which often happened to alembics placed over too high a heat."[49] The captain reports "If I say sooth, I must report they were / As canons overcharg'd with double cracks;" (I.ii.36-37)[50] Clearly, the Captain means the cracking noise of the canons but where ambiguity and displacement are chief devices in language it won't be too wrong to read the echo of alchemical "crack" here. Besides, are we not expecting a double crack in the failure of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth? They are not as adept magicians as Prospero as Macbeth says, "we are yet but young in deed." (III.iv.143)[51]

## *Nigredo* or distraction (madness)

Is there a tempest in *Macbeth?* According to John S. Mebane the very title of *The Tempest* stands for the alchemical term for the "boiling

Photo 5: Salt Bath and Renewal of the Alchemical King.
Source: Reproduced from Simonds, "My charms crack not": The Alchemical Structure of "The Tempest". See Notes. Originally from Salomon Trismosin's *Splendor Solis* in Paracelsus, *Aureum vellus* (1598).

process which removes impurities from base metal and facilitates its transmutation into gold."[52] There is no occasion for such a storm in *Macbeth* but there is the possibility of a magical storm. The First Witch to prove her magical power asserts:

> I will drain him dry as hay:
> Sleep shall neither night nor day
> Hang upon his penthouse lid;
> He shall live a man forbid.
> Weary sev'n nights nine times nine,
> Shall he dwindle, peak and pine:
> Though his bark cannot be lost,
> Yet it shall be tempest-tost. (I.iii.18-25)[53]

From the outset Shakespeare gives us clues regarding the alchemical nature of the play. With this notion of boiling he weaves the idea of sleeplessness that will be a major element of the *nigredo* or suffering part of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The "tempest-tost", sleepless sailor is an early projection of Macbeth's *nigredo*. The alchemical image of boiling is further reasserted in the cauldron scene. The witches parody the boiling act of the alchemist in his furnace in the most repulsive way: "Double, double, toil and trouble:/ Fire, burn; and cauldron, bubble." (IV.i.10-11)[54] Do they refer to the double figure of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth here who must boil together in the state of *distractio* or madness during the *nigredo*?

In consoling Lady Macduff Ross uses the image of a stormy sea:

> when we hold rumour
> From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
> But float upon a wild and violent sea
> Each way, and move (IV.ii.19-22)[55]

The conjuration of evil spirits by Lady Macbeth and of the witches

by Macbeth is a parallel to prayer by the alchemist to God before launching his project:

> Lady Macbeth: Come, you Spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
> Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
> stop th'access and passage to remorse; (I.v.40-44)[56]

This is an appeal for a successful *solve et coagula*. Later, before proceeding on the murder of Macduff's family and declaring war Macbeth seeks answer to his questions from the witches desperately. Does he sense that the experiment is going horribly wrong?

> Macb. I conjure you, by that which you profess,
> However you come to know it, answer me:
> (Iv.i.50-51)[57]

Macbeth's madness and melancholy in his state of *nigredo* or distraction has been displayed in the banquet scene and that of Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene.

> O! Full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!
> Thou know'st that Banquo, and his Fleance, lives.
> (III.ii.36-37)[58]

An anticipation of the terrible suffering clouds his mind:

> It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood:
> Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak;
> Augures, and understood relations, have
> By maggot-pies and choughs, and rooks, brought forth
> The secret'st man of blood. (III.iv.121-125)[59]

Macbeth's suffering is in the head, it is madness and melancholy:

> I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
> Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
> Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd.
> (III.v.135-139)[60]

Lady Macbeth in her *nigredo* is absorbed in the thought of blood. Her early boldness is gone. She is a wreck and finds herself in her conjured hell:

> Out, damned spot! out I say!—One; two: why, then 'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky—Fie, my Lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard?—What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?—Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? (V.i.33-38)[61]

## Dissolution and Condensation through Cooling *(solve et coagula)*

Boiling must be followed by cooling for the purpose of dissolution and thickening in alchemy. The witches do it with something gruesome:

> 2 Witch: Cool it with a baboon's blood:
> Then the charm is firm and good. (IV.i.37-38)[62]

Macbeth is boiling in his evil intent and does not want to cool:

> No boasting like a fool;
> This deed I'll do, before this purpose cool: (IV.ii.153-54)[63]

However, this stage and the next stages never arrive for our protagonists

in *Macbeth* because these are stages of purification and rebirth. In *The Tempest* during their period of madness and grief the members of the court party are repeatedly dissolved and condensed into dew. This miraculous dew changes Old Adam into the New Adam.[64] However, in *Macbeth* the protagonists never experience this process of regeneration and they are destroyed in *nigredo*. Therefore the later stages of alchemical transmutation never take place in the play.

## MACBETH: A FAILED ALCHEMICAL EXPERIMENT AND THE HORROR OF THE SELF

One may read *Macbeth* as a play delving with uncontrolled passion of two characters for something (gold crown) that leads to psychosis for one and somnambulism and insanity for the other. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are not two but one character—the hermaphrodite in alchemical imagery, Lucifer and his mother in unnatural and unholy coitus.[65] In this drama of self-abuse and loss of self, one witnesses the violent dismemberment of Osiris or Attis. Macbeth loses his holistic integrity—suffers from fragmentation (hand and eye dichotomy) and says "my way of life/ Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;" (V.iii.22-23).[66] His 'self' shrinks and dries up and an insurmountable gap is created between the two of them who were of one heart and motion in their desire. As Macbeth stands in the pool of blood, he sacrifices himself in vain. Even the death of his wife becomes meaningless: "She should have died hereafter:/ There would have been a time for such a word" (V.V.17-18).[67] All this blood ironically cannot help him achieve the *rubedo*. Unlike the god Dionysus who is accepted by the Bacchantes, the forces of the unconscious, he is merely torn apart by them. Simon must have immensely enjoyed this alchemical drama but whispered nothing about its secret to eternity.

## NOTES

1 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* ed. Frank Kermode (London: Methuen, 1985), 35.
2 Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 2001), 182.
3 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Bloomsbury, 1984), 43.
4 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 43.
5 In Sonnet 33 he writes:

> "Full many a glorious morning have I seen / Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye, / Kissing with golden face the meadows green, / Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;"

In Sonnet 114 he writes in a similar sense:

> "Or whether doth my mind, being crown'd with you, / Drink up the monarch's plague, this flattery? / Or whether shall I say, mine eye saith true, / And that your love taught it this alchemy, / To make of monsters and things indigest / Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble, / Creating every bad a perfect best, / As fast as objects to his beams assemble?"

In *Julius Caesar* we find a similar use:

> "O, he sits high in all the people's hearts:/ And that which would appear offence in us,/ His countenance, like richest alchemy,/ Will change to virtue and to worthiness" (I.iii.157-60).

In *King John* also Shakespeare uses alchemical imagery:

> "the glorious sun / Stays in his course and plays the alchemist, / Turning with splendor his special eye / The meager cloddy earth to glittering gold," (III.i.77-80).

6 Stanton J. Linden, 'Francis Bacon and Alchemy: The Reformation of Vulcan', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1974): 547-60, 547. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709085 Accessed: 28 March, 2020.
7 Peggy Muñoz Simonds, ' "My charms crack not": The Alchemical Structure of "The Tempest" ', *Comparative Drama*, 31, no. 4 (Winter 1997-98): 538-70, 538. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41153887 Accessed: 28 March, 2020.
8 Simonds, ' "My charms crack not" ', 540.
9 The Latin terms of the stages of the *opus* may be translated in this way: separation, marination, putrefaction and distraction, dissolution and condensation, the women washing sheets and dyeing, the peacock's tail, the chemical wedding, squaring the circle, dawning and perfection. Simonds, '"My charms crack not"', 542.
10 Peter J. Forshaw, 'Isn't alchemy a spiritual tradition?', *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism* eds. Wouter Hanegraaff, Peter Forshaw and Marco Pasi, Amsterdam University Press, 2019, 105-12, 107.

https://www.academia.edu/39836074/Isnt_alchemy_a_spiritual_tradition Accessed: 28 July 2020.

11 Forshaw, 'Isn't alchemy a spiritual tradition?', *Hermes Explains*, 107.

12 Forshaw, 'Isn't alchemy a spiritual tradition?', *Hermes Explains,* 107.

13 *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1885-1900), Vol.19 "Simon Forman" by Sidney Lee. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Forman,_Simon_(DNB00) Accessed: 27 July, 2020.

14 Ashmole was also a Freemason. The following is quoted from *Wikipedia*:

> "He referred to himself as the son of William Backhouse, who adopted him in 1651 as his spiritual son—for the connection he gave him to the long spiritual chain of hermetic wisdom that Backhouse was part of. According to Ashmole, Backhouse 'intytle[d] me to some small parte Of grand sire Hermes wealth [sic]'".

15 *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 2 "Elias Ashmole" by Richard Garnett. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ashmole,_Elias_(DNB00) Accessed: 27 July, 2020.

16 Linden, 'Francis Bacon and Alchemy', 547-560.

17 Andreas Christianus, *Disputationes duae: prior, de somno et vigilia: posterior: de comate seu cataphora* (Basel, 1583).

18 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 148.

19 Forshaw, 'Isn't alchemy a spiritual tradition?', *Hermes Explains*, 108.

20 Oswald Croll (c. 1563-1609) was an alchemist and professor of medicine at the University of Marburg in Hesse, Germany. A strong proponent of alchemy and using chemistry in medicine, he was heavily involved in writing books and influencing thinkers of his day towards viewing chemistry and alchemy as two separate fields. Croll received his doctorate in medicine in 1582 at Marburg, then continued studies at Heidelberg, Strasburg, and Geneva. In 1608, Croll's opus magnum "Basilica Chymica" ("Chemical Basilica") was first published. It is a hefty summary of his researches, methods of preparation, and studies into chemical medicine or iatrochemistry. In 1609 his treatise "De signatura rerum" ("Treatise of signatures") was published. Some of his work pushed for the understanding and recognition of chemical compounds and medicinal value of herbs and other processes first put forth by Paracelsus.

21 Peter J. Forshaw, '"Paradoxes, Absurdities, and Madness": Conflict over Alchemy, Magic and Medicine in the Works of Andreas Libavius and Heinrich Khunrath', *Early Science and Medicine*, 13, no.1 (2008): 53-81, 63. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20617709 Accessed: 28 March, 2020.

22 See Illustration 1 AMPHITHEATRUM.

23 Paracelsus, *Astronomia magna: oder die gantze philosophia sagax der grossen und kleinen Welt,* ed. Michael Toxites (Frankfurt, 1571), Lib. 1, sigs. $60^{v}$-$63^{v}$ "Probatio Particularis in Scientiam Signatam"; sigs. $63^{v}$-$66^{r}$ "Probatio in Scientias

Artium Incertarum." On the 'Conjectural arts or sciences,' see Maclean, *Logic*, 315-326. On Signatures, see Massimo Luigi Bianchi, Signatura *Rerum: Segni, Magia e conoscenza da Paracelso a Leibniz* (Rome, 1987); Wilhelm Kühlmann, "Oswald Crollius und seine Signaturen lehre: Zum Profil hermetischer Naturphilosophie in der Ära Rudolphs II," in *Die okkulten Wissenschaften in der Renaissance, Wolfenbütteler Abhandlungen zur Renaisssanceforschun*g, ed. A. Buck (Wiesbaden, 1992), 103-23.

24 Forshaw, '"Paradoxes, Absurdities, and Madness"', 67.

25 Forshaw, '"Paradoxes, Absurdities, and Madness"', 68.

26 Jung, *Jung on Alchemy*, 5.

27 Jung, *Jung on Alchemy*, 6.

28 Jung, *Jung on Alchemy*, 13.

29 "In Ovid's tale, Attis, at the outset, has attracted Cybelle to him by his vow of 'chaste passion' in service to the goddess. But upon falling in love with a nymph named Sagaris, Attis breaks his vow, and Cybelle takes vengeance, killing the nymph. This causes Attis to go mad. He flees to the top of Mount Dindymus, raving in hallucinatory terrors. He then turns upon himself in the most terrible way: 'He mangled, too, his body with a sharp stone.' And in the midst of his self-mutilation, he cries out as one whose guilt is overbearing: 'I have deserved it! With my blood I pay the penalty that is my due' (Ovid, Fasti, iv.237-39)". *Jung on Alchemy*, 30.

30 Jung, *Jung on Alchemy*, 25-26.

31 See Illustration 2 HERMAPHRODITE.

32 Jung, *Jung on Alchemy*, 35.

33 Jung, *Jung on Alchemy*, 37-38.

34 Freud also believed Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to be a single entity split into two. "Shakespeare often splits a character up into two personages, which, taken separately, are not completely understandable and do not become so until they are brought together once more into a unity. This might be so with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth." From Sigmund Freud, *Some Character-types Met With In Psycho-analytical Work* (1916).
http://mrmullen.pbworks.com/w/page/11313751/Freud%20on%20Macbeth
Accessed: 28 July, 2020.

35 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 32.

36 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 39.

37 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 41.

38 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 55.

39 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 42. A Freudian reading also finds the Oedipal Lady Macbeth in the role of mother: see Stephen Leo Carr and Peggy Knapp, "Seeing Macbeth," *PMLA* 96 (1981): 837-47.

40 "Insofar as we can know, Medea has always been multiple, existing in many

different versions simultaneously. She is never simply a literary construction, a stratified intertextual ensemble made up of all the other literary Medeas that came before her, but a product of the values and fears of each culture that imagines her, recreates her, and uses her to represent meaning. The Middle Ages were no different: Medea could figure as an alchemist's guide, as in the *Pretiosa Margarita Novella* (the *New Pearl of Great Price*); as an allegory of God fighting the Antichrist in the *Ovide Moralisé*; as wronged wife in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women;* or as a nightmare figure that appears like Grendel in *Beowulf* to destroy Jason's wedding feast." See Raoul Lefèvre's *History of Jason. Ramus* 41, no. 1-2 (2012): 190-205.
https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ramus/article/epilogue-the-multiple-medeas-of-the-middle-ages/550B8FB71909A9C095BC26FB04466D6A Accessed: 28 July, 2020.

41 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 52.
42 Illustration 3 MYSTERIUM CONJUNCTIONIS.
43 Illustration 4 SALT BATH AND RENEWAL OF THE ALCHEMICAL KING.
44 See note 33 above.
45 Illustration 5, Jung p.35.
46 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 7.
47 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 7.
48 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 8.
49 Simonds, *'"My charms crack not"'*, 555–56.
50 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 8.
51 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 98.
52 John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 181. Cited in Simonds, '"My charms crack not"', 542.
53 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 13-14.
54 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 106.
55 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 118-19.
56 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 29-30.
57 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 109.
58 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 83.
59 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 96-97.
60 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 98.
61 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 139.
62 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 108.
63 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 116.
64 Simonds, '"My charms crack not"', 550.
65 This idea of the complementarity of the two characters has been expressed before in a different language: "Macbeth manifests a fatal con-fusion between

"feminine" otherness and "masculine" ambition. One controls and expresses the other, but which is which? Like the embrace of two spent swimmers, the intimate bond of (female) other and (male) desire becomes one of unstable support and struggle. It threatens to degenerate into a process of de-differentiation. Like the witches unsexed Lady Macbeth, or unmanly Macbeth, both agencies (other and desire) are of neither gender, or of both. Complementarity here threatens to collapse into critical mass." David Willbern, 'Phantasmagoric "Macbeth"', *English Literary Renaissance* 16, no. 3, New Perspectives on Shakespeare (AUTUMN 1986): 541

66 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 145-46.

67 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 152-53.