

The Hermetic Hamlet

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The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book. By Raphael Patai. Princeton University Press: 1994. Pp. 617. \$35, £29.95.

CLASSICAL knowledge was preserved in the expanding Arab world during the dark ages in western Europe following the resorption of the Roman empire. Much of this knowledge was rediscovered and reacquired by the West in the centuries thereafter. This passage is memorialized linguistically by the number of words still used that are prefixed with the Arabic definite article, *al*: alcohol, alembic, algebra, alchemy, algorithm, almanac, alizarin, alkali. None conjures up the mystical origins of Western thought so well as the word alchemy. The word derives from the Greek word for Egypt, the presumed home of the suppositious Hermes Trismegistus. He was the factitious author of the body of writings from which hermetic philosophy derived, and which in turn fuelled the neo-Platonic revival led by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola in the fifteenth century. Hermeticism was closely allied to alchemy, with its mystical beliefs in the alkahest, or universal solvent, the panacea, or universal cure, and the philosopher's stone, which converted all it touched to gold.

These recondite beliefs reflect the moral basis of alchemy. It is built on the theory that all forms of matter are variants of the one basic essential substance. As Shakespeare phrases it in one of his many Hermetic touches: "A king may go on a progress through the guts of a beggar" (*Hamlet*, Act IV). Hence base metals can be transmuted to precious metals (or vice versa), and a malfunctioning body could be healed by an 'essence' of a plant. This is the Platonic idea, still so important in Western thought, that all manifest forms are but imperfect aspects of a pure, idealized form — hence the word 'idea', which has been debased over the centuries to something very different from what Plato intended. In alchemy, the distinction between the animate and inanimate was blurred (anima, of course, being the soul, or spirit). If man consisted of liquid, solids and spirit, so did copper, only in different proportions.

Alchemy as a moral system explains the otherwise puzzling problem of how a belief in the philosopher's stone could survive centuries of failed demonstrations, and how rulers and the power élite could continue to employ alchemists: the success of an alchemist depended not so



W. D. MATTHEW (left), curator in the American Museum of Natural History's Department of Vertebrate Paleontology, circa 1916. Taken from *The American Museum of Natural History's Book of Dinosaurs and Other Ancient Creatures* by Joseph Wallace (Simon and Schuster/Prion, \$25, £14.99), a popular well-illustrated account of some of the museum's most important fossil vertebrate specimens and their historical background. The book is published to accompany the major renovation of the museum's fossil vertebrate galleries, due to be completed in 1996.

much on his last experiment as on his moral status. Indeed, alchemical doctrine equated the philosopher's stone with Christ himself and Hermes Trismegistus ("the three-times greatest") with the Christian trinity. Belief in the one inherently involved belief in the other.

The Hellenic and Christian roots of alchemy are obvious. Raphael Patai, in this volume dense with exegesis and translation of original documents from Hebrew and Arabic, argues also for its Jewish roots. There was a mediaeval belief that Moses was an alchemist, and one of the important early alchemists, although perhaps as apocryphal as Hermes Trismegistus, was Maria the Jewess. She is hailed as the founder of both alchemy and the Hermetic art. Maria is supposed to have invented the water bath for heating substances that is still known as the *bain marie* in France and the *Marienbad* in German. The writings ascribed to her also contain the oldest description of a still. Like Hermes Trismegistus, both Moses and Maria came from Egypt, the *Khemia* of

the Greeks and the *al-kimia* of the Arabs. Indeed, there was even a belief that Moses and Hermes Trismegistus were one and the same person. Patai moves slowly forward from the times of mists and legends to the nineteenth century. Shadowy figures, who, if they ever existed, we know about only through the writings of others, make their vague appearances and vanish. Obscure but earnest documents are translated that discuss at length the unsubstantiated beliefs of a pseudoscience largely ignored by the modern world. The biographies of Jewish practitioners of alchemy are scrutinized through the centuries. We learn that the great physician Avicenna, who showed that diabetic urine was sweet, was supposedly trained by Jacob the Jew. Occasionally a brightly lit figure steps from the shadow. Raymond de Tarrega is one. He was murdered in his prison cell in Spain for heresy in 1371. The plants used by de Tarrega are still familiar to any ethnopharmacologist: opium, camphor, hemlock, ebony, mullein. De Tarrega seems to have been a fourteenth-