Anarchic alchemists: dissident androgyny in Anglo-American gothic fiction from Godwin to Melville

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CHAPTER 2

THE ALCHEMIST:
FROM MEDIEVAL LEGEND TO MAD SCIENTIST

Theodore Roszak writes that "magic has not always belonged to the province of the carnival or the vulgar occultist" (Roszak, *Counter Culture* 241). However, magic, alchemy and witchcraft, since the coming into dominance of a scientific rationalist ideology, have been often repressed, sometimes illegitimate and at best marginal practices and modes of thought in Western society. As a consequence, the legendary figures associated with these mystical arts – sorcerers, alchemists, witches and druids – in the course of the eighteenth century, found their most welcome home in cultural productions that deal with the fantastic, the unreal, and the culturally abject. The figure of the alchemist, the subject of this chapter, is a cultural figure in which Hermetic philosophy, folkloric magical practices and a pre-scientific naturalist worldview combine. In cultural productions since the renaissance, the figure has been a powerful cultural symbol for the mystical, supernatural and occult, both on the level of fact and affect, of argument and spectacle.[1] It is not so surprising then that during the age of enlightenment the alchemist emerged as a popular stock figure in a genre of fiction that embraced residual cultural elements such as folklore, mysticism, magic and the supernatural: the gothic.

This study is not concerned with the reality of the alchemist and/ or the truth of his philosophy and practice. It is not concerned with tracing the source of its philosophy, how it developed, or whether the experiments conducted actually worked. This chapter will not analyse in detail the plethora of alchemical treatises that have appeared over the centuries. Many of these texts are composites of Hermetic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, Cabalistic theology and practical alchemy. They are often heterodox compositions fusing ancient Arabic, Greek, Roman, and medieval Christian religious beliefs, philosophies and magical lore. Instead, this study focuses on the popular myth of the alchemist, how it came into being through the many legends that were told and retold over the centuries, and how this myth has been sustained especially in popular culture. The most recognizable portrait of the alchemist is the one that pictures him as a wandering individual in possession of occult knowledge that allows him to transform base metals into gold and silver, and to revitalize the human body with a dose of the elixir of life. In some cases, as in the myth of the Rosicrucians, this knowledge is shared with a secret circle of associates, who attempt to

[1] The career of John Dee is a case in point. In the opening chapter of *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), Peter J. French explains that while Dee was "a major intellectual force in Elizabethan England, many of his contemporaries…branded him a conjurer." He was at once a revered and a feared, court astrologer and mysterious magician, Queen Elizabeth's counsel, Queen Mary's foe and a thorn in King James's side (French 4).

transform society through their mystical practices. Mostly, however, the alchemist works alone, or according to some legends, with a Soror Mystica, a female companion.

The schema of alchemy consists of more than magical mysticism, pseudo-science or material greed. Section one of this chapter will show how several scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the public identity of the alchemist has often been that of a social outcast, an object of criticism, ridicule and at worst oppression. Section two presents a short overview of the criticism produced on the figure of the alchemist and the myth of alchemy in both canonical and fantastic literature in English. It shows that many critics consider that the alchemist, in pre-eighteenth-century literature, functions primarily as the butt of satire. In the course of the eighteenth century, however, the alchemist found a home in gothic fiction, a fantastic genre in which the magical powers of the alchemist can be taken seriously. The third and final section discusses the most consistent fictional image of the alchemist as he appears in popular fiction since the beginning of the nineteenth century: the alchemist as mad scientist.

The Alchemist: a Genealogy of a Legendary Cultural Figure

The website of the gothic merchandising firm Alchemy Gothic presents its browser with a fictionalized genealogy of the figure of the alchemist.[2] According to this site, the first alchemist was the son of Lilith. He went against his maker by "renouncing sin" and was "stoned and cast from the fold," only to be given special powers, which he was told to use in order to redeem mankind. On the Alchemy Gothic website, the alchemist undergoes various character changes over the centuries, appearing amongst others as a medieval court jester, hermetic philosopher, dandy highwayman and experimental scientist. While this genealogy is based on representations of the mythical figure in popular culture, it shows that even today, the alchemist is thought of essentially as a marginal figure that embodies an abject social position. By invoking the alchemist as outcast, he can be used effectively to sell merchandise aimed at a contemporary youth subculture that wishes to position itself in a dissident relationship to the hegemonic culture. What follows in this section, is a similar genealogy of the alchemist as a cultural figure that expresses opposition towards the dominant order. This genealogy is not based on his image in contemporary popular culture but on various accounts of the legends surrounding alchemy and alchemists by scholars working in various academic fields. The most important figures in this story are the legendary founder of alchemical philosophy Hermes Trismegistus, the Renaissance alchemical scholars and visionaries Giordano Bruno and Tommaso Campanella, the occultists Henricus Cornelius Agrippa and John Dee, the alchemical medical practitioner Paracelsus and the mythical Rosicrucian Brotherhood. While the lives, thought and practice of these legendary historical and mythical figures have informed the development of the gothic stock-figure of the alchemist as mad scientist, certain elements of the legends that surround them can be used to support the interpretation of the schema of alchemy set out

[2] See <http:/ / www.alchemygohtic.com/ html/ amzer.html > 12 January 2005. Alchemical imagery and an androgynous gender performance are two of the most popular cultural schemata in gothic youth subculture. See < http:/ / www.darkentries.be/ index.php?nav=interviews&zoekID=32 > 12 October 1995 for an article (in Dutch) on the connection between gothic youth subculture and androgyny.

in the introduction: alchemy as a metaphorical vehicle that articulates a vision of radical utopian reform, often including awareness of the need to radically restructure conceptions of male and female gender identities and social roles.

The classical scholar Garth Fowden explains that "alchemists…were at pains to claim Hermes" the Egyptian "patron of magic" and alleged author of the *Corpus Hermeticum* "as one of the founders and propagators of their art."[3] The historian of alchemy and eco-philosopher Peter Marshall also explains that "the alchemical way is the way of Hermes." According to Marshall, Hermes has not only "been hailed the father of alchemy but gave his name to the esoteric wisdom of the great Hermetic tradition." He explains that Hermes was the Greek counterpart of Toth, "the wisdom god of Egypt." In alchemy, Hermes became known as Hermes Trismegistus, the thrice-great, a name also given to Toth (Marshall, *Stone* 181). The *Corpus Hermeticum*, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, expresses a Gnostic religious experience and is "aimed at those spiritual seekers who yearn for union with God and who wish to attain immortality." In the teachings of Hermes it becomes clear that "reason alone is not enough" to reach this union with the gods – or even the monotheistic god of Christian Hermetic Gnosticism. Reason can take the disciple to a certain point, but "the intellect must then embrace intuition if it is to attain faith" (Marshall, *Stone* 183). What makes this philosophy so unique, according to Marshall, is that "science, philosophy and religion…are…mutually supportive in the path towards enlightenment." The illumination is a union not with a patriarchal God figure, but a union with an all pervasive God, "the source of light, mind, life and the good which are all interconnected," a God who is "not only full of the fertility of both sexes but 'ever pregnant' with his own will which is all goodness" (Marshall, *Stone* 184). In Hermetic lore the essence of mankind is "beyond gender as he has been born from a Father beyond gender." [4] These ideas give Hermeticism an androgynous impulse and utopian potential. Somehow, the legend of the alchemist in European and later also American culture was transformed into the story of the misogynist mad scientist who in his attempt to dominate nature erases the feminine principle.

The renaissance scholar Charles Nauert writes that in the Middle-Ages, magic was "an unspoken and often unacknowledged element in the mental world of European men."[5] Stewart Easton, however, points out that alchemy was clearly a topic of discussion amongst the learned elite. The medieval scholar Roger Bacon (1214-92) and the contemporary medical philosopher Arnold of Villanova (1235-1311) were among the earliest western students of alchemy.[6] The fact that Bacon "sent four treatises on alchemy to the Pope," shows that alchemy as a scholarly subject was not out of bounds for church men.[7] There was a difference, however, between studying alchemy theoretically and practicing the art. According to Easton, Roger Bacon knew "very well what it is that alchemists do" because

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[3] Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 1-2.

[4] Clement Salaman, Dorine van Oyen & William D. Wharton, trans., *The Way of Hermes: The Corpus Hermeticum* & Jean Pierre Mahé, trans., *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* (London: Duckbacks, 2001) 23.

[5] Charles G. Nauert Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1965) 225.

[6] I will refer continually to Roger Bacon so as to distinguish his person from that of Francis Bacon, whose ideas will be discussed in chapter three.

[7] Stewart C. Easton, *Roger Bacon and His Search for a Universal Science* (New York: Columbia UP, 1952) 107.

"he may have been allowed to witness their experiments," but actually dabbling in the occult art, was distrusted by the authorities (Easton 114). Villanova too wrote about alchemy. Because of his enthusiasm for such unorthodox practices, he was accused of sorcery and had to leave the country for a time. Roger Bacon and Villanova, C.A. Burland explains, "were orthodox churchmen, yet both were eccentric to such a degree that their work led them into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities and landed them in prison more than once."[8] Roger Bacon's interest in alchemy was not his only peculiar mental streak. During his career, he became increasingly critical of orthodox religious doctrine, which eventually led to his imprisonment for fourteen years. He was "released only in the year before his death" (Burland 43). While it is not possible to conclude that it was his interest in alchemy that led to his unorthodox religious views in the case of Roger Bacon, the link between the study of alchemy and the development of a vocal and sometimes activist criticism of the dominant order would become a general theme in the myth of the alchemist. The fate of these two medieval scholars can be seen as paradigmatic of the fate of the alchemist throughout western cultural history. What made Roger Bacon's and Villanova's interests in alchemy dissident is that the philosophy behind it could potentially undermine the authority of patriarchal Christian doctrine because it allowed mankind to become one with God, rather than stressing mankind's dependency on God. Unlike the Christian relationship between mankind and the creator, which supports an androcentric hierarchical gender ideology, alchemical philosophy, with its stress on the re-unification of opposites, including male and female binaries, can express a utopian androgynous ideal.

The story of Nicolas Flamel is one of the most influential alchemical legends. Flamel's career as an alchemist also illustrates how alchemical science can subvert medieval Church authority, even as it remains an expression of the Christian virtue of charity. In 1357, Neil Powell writes, the medieval French scrivener "purchased a very old and very large gilded book."[9] Flamel was in luck, since his social status as scribe protected him from the various "lengthy curses and execrations" he found between its pages "against anyone who might read the book who was neither a priest nor a scribe." It turned out that the volume contained "instructions for the transmutation of metals to gold," with the aim of helping "the dispersed Jews pay their taxes to the Roman Emperors" (Powell 42). In typical alchemical fashion, the book consisted of images and words that formed esoteric riddles. So, in 1378, Flamel left Paris and set out on a journey towards Spain, which Marshall describes as "the land of ancient Hebrew and Arab wisdom" (Marshall, *Stone* 313). The scribe went in search of someone who could decipher the book's mysteries and allow him to complete the alchemical experiment. At Léon, Flamel encountered a certain "Master Chances, who was well-versed in the secrets of the Cabala and other Jewish mysteries" (Powell 42). The two men resolved to return to Paris together. Luckily for Flamel, Chances deciphered the riddles before he died on route. Flamel continued his journey alone, but returned to Paris a powerful man: he possessed the secrets of alchemy.

So far, this account of Flamel's introduction to alchemy suggests that medieval alchemy was a masculine endeavour: the story of men in dominant patriarchal positions

[8] C.A. Burland, *The Arts of the Alchemists* (London: Wiedenfield and Nicolson, 1967) 39.
[9] Neil Powell, *Alchemy, the Ancient Science* (London: Aldus Books, 1976) 42.

seeking out other men in order to gain a greater knowledge that would in turn give them greater power over yet other men. However, according to the legend, Flamel did not work alone. After his return to Paris, Marshall writes, Flamel spent years conducting experiments "with the help of his wife Perennelle." It was not until 1382 that the couple managed to complete a successful alchemical transformation. According to Marshall, "Flamel and his wife are a model of the close collaboration between male and female alchemists, mirrored in the work of the Alexandrian alchemists 1,500 years earlier and with the Curies nearly five centuries later" (Marshall, *Stone* 314). In fact, as Marshall writes, and as John Todd also realised, in ancient Chinese as well as Egyptian alchemy "women played an important role, not only as assistants but in their own right" (Marshall, *Stone* 197).[10] Nancy Jack Todd and John Todd's lifelong partnership dedicated to the New Alchemy Institute, in some ways continues this legend of male and female partnership in alchemy.

The scientist Linda Jean Shepherd points out that in Western culture, "until recently, a woman scientist was an oxymoron."[11] The eco-feminist Carolyn Merchant explains, however, that in contrast to the history of modern science, "many of the earliest alchemical treatises were either written by or attributed to women: Isis, Mary the Jewess, identified with Moses' sister Miriam; Cleopatra; and Theosobia, sister of Zosimus, an alchemist of the fourth century A.D" (Merchant, *Death* 18). Within the myth of alchemy, women actually produced and wrote, and as such became masters of the art in their own right. Maria the Jewess is credited with the invention of many of the most basic alchemical apparatuses: most notably the *bain-marie*, or water bath, "still widely used in kitchens and laboratories throughout the world" (Marshall, *Stone* 201). In a history of women in chemistry, Marlene and Geoffrey Rayner-Canham write that "the first chemists we can identify by name were two women."[12] In ancient Egypt, they argue, women "were involved in applied chemistry." According to the Canham's, women were slowly expunged from active participation once alchemy became part of Greek culture, in which women had "a more subservient role" (Canham 2). Finally, during the Dark Ages, after the fall of the Roman Empire, and the rise of the patriarchal Christian church as the dominant authority, female alchemists disappeared entirely from the scene. Male alchemists found a home in the margins of western culture as residual elements of a bygone era.

In the myth of Flamel and Perennelle, the woman is not only a laboratory assistant. Legend has it that Perennelle was instrumental in deciding to what purpose the couple would put their alchemical gold. Powell writes that it was she who "suggested that their riches should be devoted to charity." Having decided upon such a benevolent practice, the alchemical couple held fast to their resolution. Retaining a humble lifestyle themselves, they apparently used their alchemical gold to establish "'fourteen hospitals, three chapels, and seven churches, in the city of Paris"' and used it also to help out "'widows and orphans"'

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[10] In his book *Freedom: Alchemy for a Voluntary Society* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1994), the Gnostic and Jungian Scholar Stephan A. Hoeller has drawn attention to the radical potential inherent in Chinese alchemical philosophy to offer the individual in Western society a means through which to transform the dominant political, economic, and social ideologies underscored by dualist metaphors expressing essential inequalities; Hoeller in future text references.

[11] Linda Jean Shepherd, *Lifting the Veil: The Feminine Face of Science* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993) 19.

[12] Marlene and Geoffrey Rayner-Canham, *Women in Chemistry: their Changing Roles from Alchemical Times to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: American Chemical Society and Chemical Heritage Foundation, 1988) 1.

(Powell 46). Importantly, this medieval legend, whether fact or fiction (probably a bit of both), is not just an example of an alchemical legend in which a woman is practically and socially involved with the experiments. It also complements the Gnostic spiritual journey towards a heavenly state with a benevolent material practice that seeks to alleviate social inequities and focuses on social reform. This fragment of utopian alchemical folklore is an empowering story of how magic can be put to practice in bringing about social reform with a culture in which there was no room for women to participate in scientific projects and public offices. As such the myth of Flamel undermines the now privileged reading of alchemy as a purely symbolic, spiritual art, practiced by solipsistic, misogynist, hermetic philosophers who attempt to create artificial wealth and seek to eliminate the feminine principle from the human reproductive process.

Nauert argues that during the Renaissance magic was not a mere residual element of a bygone Pagan past, but "stepped forth into the light of day as a central element" (Nauert 225). Henricus Cornelius Agrippa is the most famous sixteenth-century historical figure connected to alchemy and the occult. His life and writings have fed the myth of magic and alchemy for centuries. Frances Yates describes how "in his mysterious travels he was in contact with alchemists in many different places;" that "sometimes he is heard of performing alchemical operations in a laboratory;" that "he certainly sought out alchemical books and was deeply interested in the subject."[13] Remembered for his books on the occult – still in print today – Agrippa did not stick merely to hermetic philosophy, cabalistic mysticism and lonely alchemical experiment. Like Bruno, Campanella, and the mythical Rosicrucian Brotherhood, he actually articulated an agenda of radical reform. Astonishing in his time, but understandable from his position as a student of the occult, Agrippa did not limit his reform impulse to religious matters alone, although these were dominant during his lifetime. He actually wrote and published a tract that set out to undermine essentialist gender identities and their corresponding socio-political and legal statuses. In this tract, Albert Rabil explains, Agrippa argues that "women were the equals of men in all things that really counted, including public spheres of activity."[14] According to Agrippa's text, women's exclusion from the public sphere is "based not on sex but on social conditioning" (Rabil 3). According to Nauert, Agrippa recognised that magic suffered a bad reputation and "sought to purify magic and to restore its good repute" (Nauert 129). In his preface to *Occult Philosophy*, Agrippa writes, "a magician does not among learned man signifie a sorcerer, or one that is superstitious or divellish [devilish]; but a wise man, a priest, a prophet."[15] Nauert sums up Agrippa's thesis when he writes that through magic "man might liberate himself from subjection to the usual order of nature," which suggest an inherent drive for reform within magical systems (Nauert 233). While there is no direct evidence that shows Agrippa's proto-feminist ideas on the construction of gender identity to be the result of his interests in alchemy, it is important to note that, as in the myth of

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[13] Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 1979) 83.
[14] Albert Rabil, Jr., trans. and ed., *Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminance of the Female Sex* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996) 3.
[15] See the e-text of Cornelius Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy*, trans. J.F. (London, 1651) <http:/ / www.esotericarchives. com/ agrippa/ agrippa1.htm# intro> 28 September 2005.

Hermes, and the legend of Flamel and Perennelle, in alchemy, reform and philosophical gender dissidence are all constituent parts of Agrippa's thought.

Nauert explains that for the Renaissance magus in general, "the world was a living, moving, growing thing," so fixed biological identities as well as social positions were hard to accept (Nauert 237). In this fluid natural body endowed with spirit there existed only reciprocally active male and female generative principles that allowed it to evolve, but no fixed individual gender roles that assigned social statuses to these gendered principles. Agrippa may well have believed that rigid concepts of accepted masculine and feminine identities and behaviour were artificial social constructs. From his viewpoint as magician and alchemist, there were no such fixed polarized categories within the macrocosm and therefore neither in the microcosm. Man as microcosm was a little world, and thus also fused within himself the many qualities that western ideology had polarized into dual categories: heaven/ earth, God/ man, spirit/ body, reason/ sensation, masculine and feminine. Agrippa's vision of socially constructed gender roles led Renaissance scholar Linda Woodbridge to go so far as to describe Agrippa as "a realist in the study of sexual politics" because he "questioned the existence of a 'natural' order, viewing women's condition as a product of forces less natural than cultural."[16]

The Renaissance naturalist Giordano Bruno equally fused hermetic philosophy, alchemy and social reform. Like his predecessors, Bruno articulated an alternative religious doctrine, which got him in trouble with the authorities. Merchant shows that the philosophy of Bruno belongs to the type of alchemical naturalism valued by the ecologist John Todd, whose utopian idealism was discussed in the introduction. In this philosophy the earth is a living organism, and mankind is simply a microcosmic part of it, living within and not off nature as part of an organic whole: "the distinctive feature of the naturalist philosophy was the dialectical process as the key to both the organic unity of nature and its immanent self motion." For Bruno, Merchant explains, "nature was a constantly growing, changing, and evolving organism" (Merchant, *Death* 115). The concept of essential identities within nature is an impossible concept from such a naturalist viewpoint. It is this negation of essentialism that makes alchemical symbolism such a fruitful trope for expressing ideas about reform on both the level of society, the level of the individual and especially with regards to the reform of individual gender identity and social gender roles, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Bruno's alchemical ideas, like Campanella's, were not mere philosophical speculations, but philosophies that informed social ideals. Even more than their medieval predecessors, these two Italian Renaissance magi desired "to bring about a religious, moral and social revolution based on Hermetic philosophy" (Marshall, *Stone* 329). Campanella especially, influenced by Bruno, turned his ideas towards a more activist agenda: he led a revolt against Spanish rule of Southern Italy in 1599, for which he was imprisoned. Like Roger Bacon and Villanova, Bruno and his contemporary Campanella were persecuted by the Church for their ideas and actions. Whatever the truth, Marshall writes that Bruno and Campanella were suspected of being members of an "underground movement" which

[16] Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984) 43.

attempted "to restore the Egyptian religion and the sacred science which fired it" to what they believed to be its proper position (Marshall, *Stone* 327). Eventually, "in 1600, Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome by the Inquisition for his challenges to the medieval earth-centred cosmology and for his assertion that other sun-planet systems existed" (Merchant, *Death* 117). Bruno's more activist contemporary, Marshall writes, was "tortured and imprisoned for more than twenty-seven years…for trying to bring about a general revolution based on Hermetic principles," as expressed in his book *City of the Sun*, a copy of which can be found in the library of Poe's Roderick Usher (Marshall, *Stone* 329). Whatever the reality of Bruno's and Campanella's actual career and fate, their legend, as recounted by scholars such as Merchant and Marshall are stories of how their fusion of alchemical philosophy and radical reform principles led to institutional oppression and, at worst, reactionary violence. The story of the alchemist as a subversive philosophical presence in western culture, despite historical inaccuracies, would come to play an important part in the construction of the anarchic alchemist of gothic fiction.

Bruno and Campanella were hermetic scholars who worked within a pre-democratic Christian European society. They wished to reform a European social structure dominated by the Spanish Catholic empire in order to allow for a more balanced society in which the individual, unfettered by religious doctrine, social status could develop his or her talents. The holistic utopias of radicals such as Campanella were never ideal democratic states, however, in the contemporary sense of the term. Merchant argues, however, that in Campanella's vision of the future, "women were more liberated than in the real sixteenth-century society" (Merchant, *Death* 90). The holistic vision, with its emphasis on the each individual's relationship to nature, and to God in nature, undermined the dominant ideology based on rigidly binary gender identities for men and women. What is significant is that this vision has retained its close connection to issues of gender inequality ever since.

In his biography of John Dee, Peter J. French argues that the English Renaissance magus "must be classed with such unorthodox religious thinkers as…Agrippa and Giordano Bruno" (French 119). Like Agrippa, Dee travelled extensively throughout Europe during his lifetime, introducing monarchs and noblemen to what Yates calls his Christian Cabalistic philosophy. According to Yates, he was heavily influenced by Agrippa's thought and actually practiced alchemy (Yates, *Occult* 83). Dee was part of a group of revolutionary philosophers who sought to change the structure of mankind's relationship to the earth and to God. French explains that in general within the hermetic philosophical worldview, "it was not longer man *under* God, but God *and* man" (French 76). The hierarchal structure of Christian doctrine was replaced by a more egalitarian natural philosophy that perceived mankind as part of nature, and nature as part of God, who represents "eternity, the world, time, the future…the source of all things" (French 74). French explains that "natural magic did not violate the laws of nature; rather, it was the discipline by which the magus learned to develop natural powers" (French 91). Like his Italian contemporaries, Dee was imprisoned for his ideas in 1555, when England was ruled by the Catholic Queen Mary. It is probably his lifelong refusal to side with either the Catholic or Protestant cause that allowed him to shift allegiances and so regain and retain his freedom. During his continental travels with the occultist Edward Kelley, Pope Sixtus V

asked Rudolf II to arrest the two English magicians because of their radical ideas and professed angel-conjuring practices (French 121). Like that of Bruno and Campanella, Dee's reformism was religiously based. French writes, "he desperately hoped that theological magic could be used to return some semblance of normalcy to a world that to him seemed mad" (French 125). Dee's mode of thought has been echoed more recently by such counterculture philosophers as Herbert Marcuse, and Theodore Roszak who polemically asked the question whether scientific rationalism, underscored by the Freudian theory of repression, was not in fact the ultimate form of human madness (see Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization; Roszak, The Making of a Counterculture*).

The colourful legend of Paracelsus, or the "enigma," as Ole Peter Grell calls it, has been an influential historical source for fictional alchemists.[17] John Henry explains that during the seventeenth century, "a number of Paracelsian ideas became absorbed into mainstream medicine, chemical remedies appeared in the official pharmacopoeias, but Paracelsus himself and his followers were frequently vilified."[18] Grell explains that "lacking social connections, not to mention proper academic credentials, Paracelsus developed a deeply anti-authoritarian and iconoclastic outlook which served to make him a highly volatile character" (Grell 2). Marshall adds: "if some pronounced him mad, he was a brilliant madman, shining like phosphorous in the stagnant water of his times." Grell's, Henry's and Marshall's comments open up for debate the appropriateness of calling such figures as Paracelsus mad. His practice has seemed mad only in the eyes of his opponents – in this case those who adhered to the hegemonic ideologies of the Christian Church and the dominant medical theories. But Paracelsus was not merely a crazy alchemist whose experiments by accident influenced the development of modern medicine. Marshall explains that Paracelsus actually "spawned a cultural and social movement" (Marshall, *Stone* 347). Paracelsian alchemy shared the Hermetic naturalist's views of the earth as a living organism. Consequently, Merchant argues, it "came to be associated with atheistical and radical libertarian ideas" (Merchant, *Death* 121). Paracelsus argued that the earth is a living self-regulating microcosm of the cosmos, and that mankind is a microcosm of the earth. This undermined the hegemony of the institution of monarchy and the Church, which propagated a fixed socio-political hierarchy. Like his alchemical predecessors, Marshall explains, Paracelsus "went out of his way to overthrow the old order in science and society…the Bastille of cultural privilege." Not satisfied with theory alone, "wanting to heal as well as to learn," he joined the army as a surgeon in both Scandinavia and Venice. At Basle he "upset the university authorities by lecturing in German instead of Latin…publicly burning the books of Avicenna and Galen." In true alchemical spirit, foreshadowing contemporary ecological rhetoric, Paracelsus "insisted that his students throw away their old books and study the 'Book of Nature'." He was eventually "imprisoned in Salzburg in 1526 for his open support of the peasant's revolt," and "was dismissed" from his position as city physician and professor of medicine in 1528; like a true gothic alchemist, so the

[17] Ole Peter Grell, Introduction: The Enigma of Paracelsus, *Paracelsus: The Man and his Reputation, His Ideas and Their Transformation*, ed. Ole Peter Grell (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 1.
[18] John Henry, *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 59.

legend goes, Paracelsus was reduced to wandering in rags through Switzerland, Germany and Austria performing his miracles wherever he laid his hat (Marshall *Stone*, 347-349).

Grell explains that the term Paracelsian, in his own day, "was being generously used by those who wanted to stigmatise their opponents as religiously, politically and philosophically unsound" (Grell 4). Henry writes that he was considered "the Luther of medicine," linking his name with one of the greatest religious radical reformers of all time (Henry 59). He goes on to explain that enthusiasm for Paracelsian medicine was prevalent in societies that held an enthusiasm for the Protestant cause, such as the French Hugenots and British Parliamentarians (Henry 60). Broadly speaking, the myth of Paracelsus is linked to the act of rebellion against established authorities, whether the Catholic Church or the British monarchy. This shows that alchemy did not merely impact on scientific ideology, but affected wider ideological issues as well. Consequently, Paracelsus' stigma attached itself to his followers. Gerard Dorn, who developed Paracelsus' ideas in a spiritual direction, was put under house arrest. Marshall writes that "the Inquisition nearly prosecuted him for heresy" (Marshall *Stone*, 355). Herbert Berger adds that the Belgian Paracelsian "Jan Baptist van Helmont was imprisoned for some time, and his manuscripts were confiscated."[19] Like Campanella, Paracelsus was not merely a visionary, but an activist, attempting to bring about socio-political reform, whose disciples were also persecuted. Whatever the reality about this historical figure, his legend, like that of the mythical Hermes, as well as the historical figures of Agrippa, Dee and others, are crucial to the later development of the alchemist as mad scientist.

In his history of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, Christopher McIntosh explains that "starting in Germany in the early part of the 17th century, this 'new sect of philosophers' shunned worldly satisfactions in favor of spiritual ones and was said to have conquered death through the elixir of life"[20] According to McIntosh, "the members of this order travelled around healing the sick and acquiring and spreading knowledge, but always working incognito" (McIntosh, *Rosicrucians* xix). Apparently, they had the ability to travel swiftly and invisibly; they always dressed in the native habit of the country they frequented and were always able to speak the native tongue. By such means, the Rosicrucians were able to carry out their reforms safe from persecution.[21] The written documents of the brotherhood, McIntosh explains, held out, "the promise of a reformed world and the overthrow of papal tyranny," even though "some Catholics…were sympathetic to ward the broad aims of the movement" (McIntosh, *Rosicrucians* xix; 31). While the original Brotherhood "was only partly concerned with alchemy," McIntosh explains that the eighteenth century saw a "general resurgence of alchemy" and "later revivals of the

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[19] Herbert Berger, "The Paracelsians – Nature and Character," in Ole Peter Grell, ed., *Paracelsus*, 103.

[20] Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, revised edition (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1997) xvii.

[21] For versions of this legend other than that of McIntosh, see; Marshall, *The Philosopher's Stone*, chapter 41 and Frances Yates's *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, chapter 8. In the introduction to *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment Revisited* (Hudson: Lindisfarne Books, 1999), Ralph White acknowledges that "scholars may rightly dispute some of [Yates'] conclusions" in *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. He claims, however, that "what cannot be disputed is that she brought to life a forgotten period of immense interest" (xiv). While Yates' book may be now be deemed historically inaccurate, it has played a significant role in keeping the Rosicrucian myth alive and within the academic eye, as Christopher McIntosh's work shows.

Rosicrucian idea were to lay great stress on their claims to possess the secrets of transmutation and the knowledge of the Elixir of Life" (McIntosh, *Rosicrucians* 51; 55; 51).

McIntosh explains that during the seventeenth century in Europe "Rosicrucian brethren were widely defended and attacked, praised and reviled" (McIntosh, *Rosicrucians* 48). While it is not possible to argue that the Rosicrucian Brotherhood was considered a subversive organisation everywhere, their radical reputation did cause friction with those in influential positions. McIntosh writes how

> in 1625, the Court of Justice in the Dutch province of Holland sent a number of Rosicrucian books to the theological professors at Leyden, asking their opinions. The Leyden faculty replied attacking the Rosicrucian tenets in the strongest terms. The recommended that members of the order should be treated as being on the verge of insanity, unless they threatened the inviolability of the Church and the peace of the State, in which case they should be punished more severely" (McIntosh, *Rosicrucians* 49).

Again, a link exists between, alchemical philosophy, radical reform impulse and repressive measures by the authorities. The distrust of Rosicrucians was not confined to one Dutch province. McIntosh also writes of French anti-Rosicrucian hostilities and Francis Yates writes that the French Jesuit François Garasse believed that all Rosicrucian Brothers "deserve to be broken on the wheel or hanged on the gallows" (Yates, *Rosicrucian* 141).

J. Gordon Melton explains that "from its beginning as an occult myth in the seventeenth century, Rosicrucianism has spread around the world arriving in the American colonies in the 1690s."[22] Although Melton writes that "the original Rosicrucian Brotherhood established in Philadelphia died after one generation, the myth survived the eighteenth century, and became reintegrated into American society when the Philadelphian political activist and sensational novelist George Lippard set up a Rosicrucian-style labour organisation, The Brotherhood of the Union, and started publishing gothic fictions riddled with secret alchemical brotherhoods.

In her study of British Rosicrucian gothic fiction, Marie Roberts draws attention to the link of Rosicrucian reform and the alchemical androgynous ideal. She argues that

> the Rosicrucian Invisible College had been outlawed, presumably because of its refusal to locate science, magic and nature, male and female within the incommensurable paradigms. The central symbolism, the rose and the cross, is a representation of the unity of the male and the female compounding the name of the legendary founder, Christian Rosenkreutz (M. Roberts 104).

The negative publicity and eventual collapse of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood did not mean the end for alchemists, alchemy and radical reform and androgynous idealism in Europe. As Christopher McIntosh writes, "whether they existed or not, the fact was that a powerful

[22] J. Gordon Melton, ed., *Rosicrucianism in America* (New York: Garland, 1990) i.

legend had taken root, a legend that has remained alive ever since and has spawned a great variety of movements claiming the title Rosicrucian, not to mention a vast and growing body of writing on the subject."[23] It is certainly true that from the mid-seventeenth-century onwards "with the collapse of the microcosm theory" also "went the destruction of the whole intellectual basis of astrology, chiromancy, alchemy, physiognomy, astral magic and their associates" (McIntosh, *Rose Cross* 30). The Rosicrucians, along with other alchemical figures, quickly entered the foggy but fertile spaces of cultural memory, folklore and fiction. Today, however, their legend still supplies metaphors for anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist and ecological ideas for people like the New Alchemists, who recognize and practice the androgynous idealism Roberts identified as central to the myth.

The legends concerning medieval alchemists, Renaissance hermetic philosophers, and Rosicrucian Brotherhoods did not merely challenge Christian orthodoxy and the patriarchal ideology that underscored it. The magical powers that the alchemists and Rosicrucians were deemed to possess – the ability to turn lead into gold and the possibility to heal the sick and gain immortality by means of the elixir of life – were potentially subversive of the prevailing political and economic structures of early modern Europe. In *The Queens Conjuror* (2001), a biography of Doctor Dee, Benjamin Woolley writes that in sixteenth-century Europe, "most monarchs and many nobles financed alchemical experiments."[24] McIntosh finds the Rosicrucian alchemist Michael Maier "in 1612 addressing King James" – the magic fearing monarch – "in terms that suggest the existence of a Rosicrucian-type movement in Britain, of which James was apparently seen as protector" (McIntosh, Rosicrucians 33). The alchemist, therefore, was not always a mysterious solitary outsider. Woolley mentions how Agrippa "would pay merchants with gold coins that shone remarkably bright, but which invariably turned into slate or stone within twenty-four hours" (Woolley 251). This story, if true, would turn Agrippa into a cunning con-man, undermining a growing international market founded on monetary exchange. Similarly, Woolley writes, when word got round that Edward Kelley had developed the power to transmute base metal into gold, at the court of Rudolf II, the English Lord Treasurer William Cecil did "everything in his power to lure Kelley back to England" (Woolley 254). Woolley unfortunately does not explain why the Lord Treasurer wanted Kelley to come back home. What is certain is that alchemists were taken seriously by those in power as individuals whose "magic" could work good or ill in society.

In explaining how the realm of Renaissance natural magic played an important role in the development of an empirical and pragmatic scientific method in the course of the seventeenth century, Henry writes that, although "magic had always been condemned by the Church because of its demonological associations, and it was always distrusted by the common people who were all to aware of the fraudulent use of magic," it was not rejected within all intellectual circles. "Many thinkers at this time still saw magic as a noble and worthwhile pursuit and their concern was with corruptions or debasements of it" (Henry 56). Within the context of Renaissance culture, Henry argues, "the pragmatism of magic is

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[23] Christopher McIntosh, *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992) 27.

[24] Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjurer: The Science and Magic of Dr. John Dee, Advisor to Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001) 251.

obvious. The aim of the magus is always to bring about some desired outcome, either for his own benefit or that of his patron" (Henry 55). The acquisition of the knowledge of how to turn base matter into gold and to distil the elixir of life could be useful to a monarch. Therefore, it is understandable that, despite the fact that "magic had always had a bad public image, deriving chiefly from the prevalence of fraud among self-proclaimed magicians and from the unceasing attacks of the Church" (Henry 59), by the eighteenth century, "many of the nobility practiced or patronized alchemy" (McIntosh, *Rosicrucians* 55).

Despite the decreasing popularity and increasing notoriety of alchemists, an early eighteenth-century alchemical engraving, *Mutus Liber* (1702) shows a man and woman conducting an alchemical experiment together in a laboratory. This image shows the continuity of the idea of partnership in industry in the schema of alchemy, which by then had disappeared from lived experience in western society. In the course of the eighteenth century, the myth of alchemy could potentially undermine the bourgeois capitalist ideology that was slowly emerging into dominance. This ideology, many gender theorists argue, was grounded in a vision of polarized gender identities in which the masculine pole was privileged over the feminine. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that in the eighteenth century, with its growing market economy, women fixed within the socially constructed domestic feminine role functioned as a form of currency between men – a constituent part of the public sphere of commodity exchange – rather than as partakers in the act of exchange. Such a social position, Sedgwick writes, debased women's role to that of an "exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men."[25] Before Sedgwick applied this idea to the study of literature, Gayle Rubin had emphasised that in fact the oppression of women did not primarily result from the emergence of free market economics, but that this ideology helped to perpetuate a centuries-old culture of androcentric domination. According to Rubin, "capitalism is heir to a long tradition in which women do not inherit, in which women do not lead, and in which women do not talk to God."[26] Essentialist gender ideology, therefore, is a "historical and moral element," the illusory naturalism upon which an androcentric capitalist ideology relies for its hegemonic status within western society (Rubin 164). By the eighteenth century, the schema of alchemy, residually present within fantastic fiction and folkloric culture, still offered a counter-ethic to the hegemony of androcentrism. The success of the alchemical project, in the light of the traffic in women, has the potential to free women from their status as commodity. If alchemical transmutation could be achieved, it would mean not only the end to such a system of exchange, but also, as its esoteric philosophy advocated through its androgynous idealism, the end of bipolar gender roles as ideological markers of social status for women and men. By the end of the eighteenth century, the alchemist's subversive potential, even more than in pre-capitalist times, comes from his complete economic and psychological self-sufficiency, which disrupts the process of supply and demand and undermines the monetary system that fuels an economy based on the

[25] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 25-26.
[26] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) 164.

principle of commodity exchange and essential male and female identities in which the man exacts the transaction and in which the woman is the transacted commodity.

The psychologist Carl Gustav Jung has illustrated how the cultural schema of alchemy can work to dispel the cultural myth of essentialist gender identity for men and women. In his *Alchemical Studies*, Jung quotes the following saying as the leitmotiv of alchemy: "'nature rejoices in nature, nature conquers nature, nature rules over nature.'"[27] What is significant in this saying is that there is no subject position for mankind, but nature is given as an all-encompassing active force of which mankind is only a small constituent. Merchant highlights Bruno's similar outlook when she explains that for him "change was the unification and opposition of contraries"; his "dialectic stressed the unity rather than the struggle of opposites, anticipating idealist rather than materialist dialectics" (Merchant, *Death* 114). Bruno celebrated in his work the cyclical alchemical spiral movement of nature towards the ever-reunifying and dissolving of natural opposites. For Merchant, such a worldview, within the context of the Renaissance social structure, "reflected the break up of the hierarchical social order" (Merchant, *Death* 115). Jung had also seen anti-authoritarianism in the nature worship inherent in the schema of alchemy, and in its stress on the fusion and transformation of opposites. According to him alchemy opposed the rigid dualism that underscored dominant Christian doctrine which had dominated Western thought for centuries. He writes, "the Church might exorcise demons and banish them, but that only alienated man from his own nature, which, unconscious of its belief, had clothed itself in these spectral forms." Jung recognizes that "not separation of the natures but union of the natures was the goal of alchemy," and finds this to be analogous to his own ideas about the individual psyche's struggle towards individuation (Jung 161).

While Jung's psychology of individuation, balancing out the male and female principles of the human mind, has been criticized by feminists for erasing any possibility of an independent female identity, his alchemical studies reveal the ideological nature of gender identities, allowing their essentialism to be challenged. The history of alchemy, as a worldview with an androgynous gender ideology, clearly offers a counter-narrative to the dominant androcentric, patriarchal ideology outlined by Rubin and Sedgwick. This counter narrative had become all but obsolete as a viable alternative through the philosophical, economic and political developments leading up to and including the eighteenth century. It remained alive, however, as Jung's work shows, in cultural myths. Writers of fiction have utilized the cultural schema of alchemy in various ways, some of which are outlined below, the most important being that of the gothic mad scientist, discussed in detail.

The Critical Reception of the Alchemist in English-Language Literature

The representation and function of the schema of alchemy and the figure of the alchemist within literature has differed significantly over the ages. In the Renaissance the figure of the alchemist still reflected a person who could be found in real life. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, when alchemists had disappeared from lived experience, he had become a magical figure inhabiting the fantastical world of the gothic novel. The

[27] Carl Gustav Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967) 161.

following sections investigate whether this slide into fantasy of the figure of the alchemist presupposes a slide into the margins of Anglo-American culture. Once he inhabits a fantastic landscape should the alchemist also be dismissed as a product of the imagination, or does his presence continue to resonate with the oppositional and reformist myths that the lives and writings of his real-life counterparts had created?

John Read, one of the first critics to investigate the presence of alchemy in literature, points out that there are "as many kinds of alchemists as of colours in the rainbow which figured so often in their imagery."[28] He identifies the charlatan, who merely fakes knowledge to impress or beguile his peers; the puffer, who engages in alchemical experiments purely for personal material gain; the scientific alchemist, important as a forerunner of modern chemistry; and the philosopher, for whom alchemy is a spiritual enterprise, an attempt at reaching a higher state of consciousness so as to be able to be closer to God (Read chapter 1). Importantly, like many commentators on the myth of alchemy, Read does not discuss the legend of the alchemist as outlined above: the benevolent reformer whose naturalist philosophy and alchemical powers inform a religious, social-political reform project that is expressed in part through androgyny. Instead, Read finds mostly "minor references…to the alchemist, particularly to the type who is less an alchemist than a magician, necromancer, astrologer, chiromancer, or charlatan" (Read 27). According to Read, "the true alchemist has figured little in literature, although *slight works of minor interest* may occasionally be found in which an alchemist is the chief character" (Read 28; my emphasis). In the context of this study, Read's phrases "the true alchemist" and "slight works of minor interest" are significant. Read's book is characterised by its focus on canonical authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Ben Jonson. It is understandable that Read distinguishes in his research between minor works of slight interest and what he believes to be significant literature. Read conducted his research during the 1940s, when the politics of canon formation were still very much ongoing. While the pervasive presence of the alchemist in gothic fiction cannot be denied, it is likely that Read would have defined *St Leon*, *Frankenstein*, *Zanoni* or *Auriol* as "slight works of minor interest." These books do have alchemists as protagonists, but Read probably believed them not worth analysing because of their inferior status as popular gothic fictions, grotesque creations of wild imaginations, rather than the learned products of intellectual minds. Charles Nicholl, writing much later, echoes Read's initial thesis that the alchemist figures mostly as a satirical butt and almost never as a serious protagonist in English literature. He argues that "by Shakespearean times, the alchemist was part of a whole back-alley fraternity – a 'magical underworld' of conjurors, charmers, blessers, figure-casters, almanac-men, mountebanks, quacksalvers, necromancers and cunning men."[29]

The one type of alchemy that for Read and Nicholl remains positively visible within the canon is a fully Christianised and purely masculine spiritual type of alchemy represented through profoundly symbolic works of high art such as William Shakespeare's *King Lear* or John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. For Read and Nicholl, this is worthy alchemy, or to put differently, this is the alchemy acceptable within the parameters of the hegemonic western

[28] John Read, *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1947) 23.
[29] Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1980) 8.

ideology. As a consequence, the practicing radical wanderer is sidelined into the cultural margins, along with the type of fiction in which he has found a home: the gothic. The fact that both Read and Nicholl find mostly negative representations of the alchemist in the canonical fiction they discuss suggests a congruity between the critical politics that play a role in the analysis of the cultural schema of alchemy and the critical politics that play a role in the creation a literary canon. In a time, dominated by scientific rationalism, in which the alchemist and his magical power has been thoroughly marginalized within western culture, the kind of literature that seems for Read to represent the transcendent values of western society represents the active alchemist exactly as a figure of ridicule. The minor fiction, in which the figure of the alchemist takes centre stage, may well have been minor, according to Read and Nichol, simply because it is written around the image of a fantastical, folkloric figure and therefore does not reflect the dominant viewpoint.

Herbert Leventhal shows that alchemy has played an important part in eighteenth-century American culture. He even argues that "alchemy entered the eighteenth century with full academic approval.[30] By the nineteenth century, however, Randall A. Clack argues, the presence of alchemical philosophy in canonical American fiction became "a chemical fantasy."[31] Taylor Stoehr has taken a moral stance in his reading of Hawthorne's alchemists and interprets them as "evil scientists who experiment with vice" (Stoehr 27). A character like Aylmer in "The Birth-Mark," Stoehr writes, "is doomed to destroy the very persons whom he intends his work to benefit," which exemplifies "the ultimate alienation of the 'mad scientist'" (Stoehr 74). Clack follows Read's and Nicholl's line of argument, however, in reading alchemy as a mode of masculine Christian spirituality. He connects the "millennial outlook" of alchemical philosophy, with its project to "move toward (forward to) a new, golden age," to Puritan "cultural myths of America as a New World, a golden land where baser elements of human nature might indeed be transformed" (Clack 5-6). As such alchemy becomes a metaphorical vehicle that has as its tenor the androcentric Puritan ideology that dominated the lives of many early Americans. Unsurprisingly, such an interpretation links alchemy with the dominant patriarchal gender ideology that underscores the greater American myth. According to Clack, for instance, "Hawthorne uses the female figure as a vessel for the essence of love and its transmuting and salvic qualities" (Clack 102). In Clack's reading of Hawthorne, which McCormick and Waller would call the privileged reading, alchemy is entirely in keeping with the Puritan patriarchal enterprise. The feminine remains the passive receptacle for male creativity that can lead to the creation of a New Eden. His utopia is a patriarchal Christian paradise and therefore stifles the androgynous ideal latent in the presence of alchemy.

This study, however, reads certain classic American texts as part of a larger Anglo-American tradition of magico-political gothic, in which the figure of the alchemist, if he is not the protagonist of the story, at least plays a significant role. While authors such as Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Bulwer Lytton, William Harrison Ainsworth and George Lippard are still considered popular novelists, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and

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[30] Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: NYUP, 1976) 126.

[31] Randall A. Clack, *The Marriage of Heaven and Earth: Alchemical Regeneration in the Works of Taylor, Poe, Hawthorne, and Fuller* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) 3.

Herman Melville enjoy canonical status. Read ignores the central presence of the alchemist in a work such as *The Scarlet Letter*, which even in 1947 was deemed a major American novel and features a practicing alchemist as a key figure. There is a critical tension between, on the one hand, the privileged interpretation of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville as canonical authors dealing with alchemy satirically, as an outmoded system that can be used to satirise forms of radicalism in science and social science, like their British predecessors, and, on the other hand, the position of these American authors within the transatlantic genre of alchemical gothic, in which the cultural schema of alchemy, with its history of ideological dissidence and androgynous idealism, is foregrounded as a fantastic trope that can reveal the faultlines in the hegemonic socio-economic as well as gender ideologies.

The Gothic Alchemist as Mad Scientist

Marie Roberts has shown that the figure of the alchemist is prevalent in much popular British gothic fiction of the period in question. According to her, "the most infamous blasphemer is Faust, who through the diabolic ministrations of Mephistopheles relinquishes his eternal soul for the immortality of the flesh," while similarly, "the alchemical secret of the elixir vitae (elixir of life) could be passed on like a deadly virus infecting future generations with the pestilence of never-ending life" (M. Roberts 1). The rhetoric used by Roberts to describe such figures highlights the privileged reading of the alchemist's negative role as villain, rather than hero. While Read, Nicholl and Clack echo the privileged reading of the alchemist as an isolated spiritual seeker, Roberts follows the interpretation of the alchemist as a dissident culture hero when she writes, "apart from this role-call of miscreants, there was a species of immortal who evoked the redemptive powers of myth by using the gift of eternal life for the purposes of benevolence." The alchemist becomes a radical reformer. For Roberts, "this was the brotherhood of the Rosy Cross," whose legends had been such a thorn in the side of the establishment during the seventeenth century, "for whom immortality was a blessing and not a curse" (M. Roberts 1). This study will also take into account the pre-Rosicrucian figure of the medieval alchemist working in his laboratory to complete his material and philosophical experiments. This figure has similar benevolent intentions and can be read as a repository for dissident androgyny, which is incorporated in his wider oppositional stance.

The privileged reading of the mad scientist in gothic fiction can be summed up in the words of J.E. Svilpis. He defines the figure as an individual suffering from a "clinical egotistical detachment" from mainstream society, with a "taciturn, secretive" mode of operating and a "masculine, masturbatory, and spiritual prideful" nature in which is embodied "both sexual fear and a will to power."[32] It is striking how often this unorthodox figure has been treated as an immoral, unethical individual whose intellectual hubris causes the destruction of the immediate society around him. In 1960 Kingsley Amis saw Victor Frankenstein as "easily the most outstanding representative of the generic mad scientist."[33]

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[32] J.E. Svilpis, "The Mad Scientist and Domestic Affection in Gothic Fiction," in *Gothic Fictions: Prohibitions/Transgressions*, ed. Kenneth W. Graham (New York: AMS Press, 1989) 72.
[33] See Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell* (London: New English Library ,1969) 26.

In 2004, Byron and Punter echo Amis' words when they call Victor Frankenstein "the prototypical gothic mad scientist." Significantly, Byron and Punter describe Victor as "one of those overreachers who refuse to accept limitations and are subsequently punished" who is "seeking to usurp the role of god" as well as "the role of women" (Byron and Punter 199). What is implicit in their accounts is their critical approach to the figure of the mad scientist as a fully rounded human being within a social world dominated by hegemonic ideologies such as scientific rationalism and institutions such as a Christian patriarchal social framework, rather than an approach that stresses the fictional nature of the figure who serves a structural function in a fantastic plot.

Ben Bova has constructed a structural theory for the science fiction hero that can function as a theoretical paradigm from which a dissident reading of the role of the mad scientist can be constructed, one that challenges the privileged reading of this figure as evil genius intent on usurping the role of God in the universe and women within society. Bova argues that the genre in which he writes harbours an active reform impulse. Not only is this apparent through science fiction's historical links with western utopianism, but also in the structural function of the literary figures that populate it.[34] In science fiction stories, Bova explains, "the hero actively tries to change the society in which he finds himself."[35] In science fiction, then, it is not only circumstances that create a character, but a character actively attempts to alter the circumstances in which he or she is placed. This quality that Bova finds inherent in science fiction emphasises active reform, while, significantly, it highlight how fictional characters can have a structural function in the plot. Because of his oppositional stance towards the dominant order of the fictional world in which he finds himself, the science fiction hero (a category that can include the gothic mad scientist), Bova writes, is perceived as "aggressively anti-social in the eyes of those around him." Bova uses the term anti-social not with its current derogatory connotation in mind. Instead, he uses it to emphasise the science fiction hero's oppositional stance towards a dominant order that presides over the fictional world he inhabits. According to Bova, this oppositional stance is brought about because "the science fiction hero tries to do things that would not happen naturally." The term naturally here refers to the realm of nature as well as to the realm of man-made society. What is defined as natural is what lies within the parameters of natural or human possibility, the limits of which are defined by the dominant order within the fictional world the hero inhabits. Ultimately, according to Bova, the hero of science fiction is anti-social, in an active oppositional sense, because he "labors to make things different, to engender change" (Bova 12). This type of hero, then, is not the three-dimensional human character undergoing personal development that builds his psychological integrity as a human being; he is a figure in a plot, with a specific purpose, a structural element in the fiction, embodying various interpretative possibilities. The gothic alchemist fits Bova's structural mould for the science fiction hero very well.

What is striking about Bova's interpretation of the science fiction hero is that it is closely analogous to the mad heroes of Godwin's politico-gothic. In some ways this is

[34] For an analysis of the links between SF and Utopia, see Edward James, "Utopias and Anti-Utopias" in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 219-229.

[35] Ben Bova, Introduction: the Hero as Sociopath, *Maxwell's Demons* (New York: Ace Books, 1978) 12.

understandable. The gothic is an important generic precursor to science fiction. In fact, some studies of science fiction see it as a later development of the gothic (especially, and most obviously, the mad scientist is the offspring of the gothic alchemist).[36] Godwin's gothic protagonists show similarities to Bova's science fiction hero. Caleb Williams's attempt to bring his master to justice leads to his own imprisonment; Reginald de St Leon's attempt to use his alchemical powers altruistically lead to continuous persecution by the dominant order; Charles Mandeville's fruitless struggle to uncover the tyranny of the aristocratic social order into which he is born lead him only toward madness and eventual incarceration by those in power. All Godwin's novels, like much science fiction, are structured on a dialectical relationship between repression and resistance, the hero struggling against a representative of the dominant ideology who, in turn, attempts to repress the hero's voice. Godwin's heroes as such are also never fully rounded human beings but vehicles for expressing abstract ideas. The alchemist is an important gothic figure in this tradition of representing ideas in the forms of figures.

What is overlooked in the privileged reading of the figure of the mad scientist, as Bova's theory of the science fiction hero illustrates, is that his psychopathic behaviour or madness is attributed to the hero "by those around him." The *hero* of science fiction becomes the *mad scientist* of the critics because he is interpreted from a position that takes for granted the dominant ideology of scientific rationalism to which the mad scientist stands in opposition in labouring to bring about change. His humanness is valued above his structural function in the plot as a vessel for an oppositional voice. He is deemed mad, because he does not, like the proper human scientist, comply with the legal, moral and ethical restraints that contemporary western ideology has constructed to ensure that the scientist and his work remain under the control of the dominant order. As such, he does not develop according to the general rules, and is thus evil.

From a point of view within the dominant order, the hero's detachment from society is read as wilful, anti-social alienation; his secrecy hides a dissident practice towards the dominant order; and his science usurps the feminine biological reproductive function, which is ultimately an attempt to usurp the role of God. However, as referred to earlier, Marcuse asks the question, is not the dominant order's definition of normative civilized reality in fact the true madness? Marcuse has been the most outspoken voice of the "Great Refusal" of the 1960s. Thus, his rhetorical strategy was to take an overt oppositional point of view. Bova took a countercultural point of view when he emphasised that the science-fiction hero is structurally significant because he functions as the viewed object of a dominant order in the tale, rather than the viewing subject. When the object's point of view is taken – by looking through the spectacles of the figure of the mad scientist himself – his alienation can be defined as the result of his outcast social status. From this perspective, his secret, taciturn behaviour is a function of his fear of persecution by the dominant order.

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[36] For a critical account of the gothic origins of science fiction see Paul K. Alkon, *Science Fiction Before 1900: Imagination Discovers Technology* (London: Routledge, 2002); Brian Stapleford, "Science Fiction Before the Genre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 15-31; Mark R. Hillegas, "The Literary Background to Science Fiction," in *Science Fiction: a Critical Guide*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Longman, 1979) 2-17; Robert M. Philmus, *Into the Unknown: The Evolution of Science Fiction from Francis Godwin to H.G. Wells* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1970).

Similarly, from the perspective of the mad scientist, and especially that of the gothic alchemist (as this study will express), he is not trying to make the existence of women redundant, or to play God. Only in a society in which the primary function attributed to women is procreation is it heretical for a man to be suspected of doing the same. Within western culture, the attempt to play God is judged heretical only by those individuals or social groups who adopt a patriarchal Christian (or other religious) framework, which denies mankind the powers that are attributed to that particular God. Significantly, these two strands of thought are intertwined, as it is exactly within the traditional patriarchal Christian framework that the primary function of women has been procreation – preferably the giving birth to new men. From this ideological perspective, the alchemist is indeed a heretic whose philosophy stands in opposition to orthodox patriarchal Christianity, but the paradox remains: if you do not recognize God as the supreme patriarch, but celebrate God in nature and in every being, how can you usurp his position?

The mad scientist in science fiction, or his parent the alchemist in gothic fiction therefore is never intrinsically an anti-social madman, a doomed eccentric, or, for that matter, an oppositional figure actively working to alter the social make up of the world he inhabits. The mad scientist takes on different cultural meanings depending on the literary critical, theoretical, or ideological perspective adopted by the reader and the function attributed to the character within the plot of the story. The privileged reading is that of the mad scientist as a human character in a realistic social context, from a perspective that takes for granted the dominant status of scientific rationalism. Bova, however, attributes to the science fiction hero a specific function in the text, and views him from the hero's perspective. From this viewpoint, he finds a utopian impulse in the hero's oppositional stance and his scientific fantastic enterprise. In rejecting the privileged reading of figures such as Victor Frankenstein, this study offers a dissident reading of the figure of the alchemist in both British and American gothic fiction.

The analysis of the function of the figure of the alchemist and the presence of other elements of the cultural schema of alchemy in Anglo-American gothic fiction undertaken in section two of this study is informed by the eco-philosophical perspective on the myth of alchemy. The stock gothic figure of the alchemist will be approached as a figure who has not wilfully alienated himself from the fictional society created by the author, but who has been pushed into the shadows due to the rise of an androcentric scientific rationalism, the development of free-market economic system, and the continual dominance of patriarchal Christian social ideology buttressed by rigid binary and unequal gender identities for men and women. The recognition of the presence of this kind of alchemist and alchemical practice and philosophy within certain American gothic fictions makes it possible to show that these texts harbour dissident androgyny. Since androgyny and the androgynous ideal in alchemy have been contested terms in gender theory, it is useful to explain in the next chapter how both can still be used to express a gender utopia that opposes male-female gender polarization.