

# ALCHEMY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

POST-JUNGIAN PERSPECTIVES



EDITED BY DALE MATHERS

ROUTLEDGE



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## ALCHEMY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Alchemical symbols are alive in popular culture, as recently popularised in the Harry Potter books and films. Alchemy intrigued Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology. It inspired him as he wrote *The Red Book* – the journal of his voyage of internal discovery. He devoted much of his life to it, using alchemical symbols as metaphors for unconscious processes. *Alchemy and Psychotherapy* explores the issue of alchemy in the consulting room and its application to social and political problems. This book argues against the dominant discourse in contemporary psychotherapy – scientific materialism – and for the discovery of spiritual meaning.

*Alchemy and Psychotherapy* has four main parts:

‘Alchemy and Meaning’ looks at the history of alchemy, particularly the symbol of the coniunctio – sacred marriage – as a metaphor for the therapeutic relationship.

‘The Symbolic Attitude’ explores working with dreams, fairytales, astrology and the body: each of which is, itself, a symbolic language.

‘The Spirit and the Natural World’ discusses ‘burn-out’ of therapists and our ecological resources – the mystical aspects of quantum physics and the philosophical underpinning of symbol formation.

‘Clinical Applications’ shows alchemy’s use with victims of abuse, with those struggling to secure gender identity, in anorexia and in ‘social healing’ – atonement and restorative justice – applying the idea of the coniunctio.

*Alchemy and Psychotherapy* is illustrated throughout with clinical examples, alchemical pictures and poetry to emphasise that alchemy is both a creative art and a science. Bringing together clinicians from different analytical psychology schools in the UK, contributors show that the consulting room is their alchemical laboratory, and that research is their creative engagement.

*Alchemy and Psychotherapy* will be a valuable resource for practitioners, students at all levels of psychotherapy, analytical psychology, psychoanalysis and creative, art-based therapies, and for creative practitioners (in film, literature and performing arts) who draw on Jung’s ideas.

**Dale Mathers** is a member of the Association of Jungian Analysts. He teaches analytical psychology in the UK and Europe and is in private practice in South London.

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# ALCHEMY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Post-Jungian Perspectives

*Edited by*  
*Dale Mathers*

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO OUR FRIENDS  
AND COLLEAGUES AND TO OUR BEST TEACHERS –  
OUR PATIENTS.

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## FOREWORD

*John Beebe*

This book links alchemy, a complex subject with deep historical roots, with a type of depth psychotherapy that is just a century old. In so doing, it follows the lead of C. G. Jung, whose psychological interpretation of alchemical texts has already become canonical and, not least for that reason, controversial. It was Jung who first made the case for regarding alchemy as the true precursor, not just of chemistry, but of analytical psychotherapy. In an epilogue to his final book on that subject, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* [The Mystery of the Conjunction], he wrote:

Alchemy, with its wealth of symbols, gives us an insight into an endeavour of the human mind which could be compared to a religious rite, an *opus divinum*. . . . The conventional devaluation of alchemy on the one hand and of the psyche on the other had first to be cleared away . . . [before we could] see how effectively alchemy prepared the ground for the psychology of the unconscious, first by leaving behind, in its treasury of symbols, illustrative material of the utmost value for modern interpretations in this field, and secondly by indicating symbolical procedures for synthesis which we can rediscover in the dreams of our patients. We can see today that the entire alchemical procedure for uniting the opposites, which I have described in the foregoing, could just as well represent the individuation of a single individual, though with the not unimportant difference that no single individual ever attains to the richness and scope of the alchemical symbolism.

(CW 14, paras 790, 792)

Because the clinical accounts supplied in this book have been offered by contributors who have drawn upon Jung's insights to inform their own observations, it is necessary to unpack what Jung claims for alchemy before we can understand how it applies to psychotherapy as practised by analytical psychologists today. The authors of these chapters are hard-working mental health professionals used to being paid for their work, and they would not conceive what they do as a cult practice. Yet they too have observed how for their clients what

transpires in an analytical setting can be a religious experience of the kind that would not have been unfamiliar to people living in the ancient world who chose to participate in one of the Mysteries then available. The factor in common with those rites would be transition from a state of being that sees itself as at the mercy of fate, having been born with a particular delimiting character into a set of circumstances that have even further restricted that character's options. Luther Martin's *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* has shown that, as one reviewer of that remarkably clarifying text has put it, 'the common, universal theme in mystery religions is encountering and, in some sense, "transcending" determinism, Fate, or Necessity' (Hoffman, 2002). This is not so different from the attitude toward self of the contemporary analytic patient who is all too aware of the repetition compulsion driving repeated enactment of a set of deep-seated complexes.

Not a great many educated people in the West today accept the astrological world view that was universal in the ancient world of late antiquity – informing, for instance, the Magi that hurried to Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Christ. The Chaldean astronomers had long since demonstrated that five planets and two lights (sun and moon) held visible, measurable positions in space, and everyone, by the time of Christ, believed that the pattern of these heavenly bodies, visible from earth, controlled, not just the character of the individual, from the horoscopic time of birth forward, but even the life experiences that would be, in this incarnation, significant for that individual. Destiny therefore meant not just the basic quality of the person's life but also the time and circumstance of the person's death. Alchemy appeared as an experimental, magical, and philosophical tradition in the West at a time when astrology had held for at least six centuries its hegemony over the Ancients' psychological vision. In introducing for psychological discussion what is sometimes described as the oldest Western alchemical text, the visions of Zosimos of Panopolis, Egypt, Jung describes Zosimos as 'an important alchemist and Gnostic of the third century AD' (CW 13, para. 85). But by then, when the technique was already thriving, it would have been impossible to understand the practice of alchemy, and why it was needed, without grasping that it was a method for gaining liberation from one's otherwise foreclosed astrological destiny.

Alchemy was not in this respect essentially different from other mystery religions, including Christianity, for all of them sought release from the 'dependence of character and destiny on certain moments of time' (CW 12, para. 40) such as the time of birth that (as the horoscopes revealed) bound the nature of one's personal spirit to the matter of the cosmos. The brilliance embedded in alchemy was that it took this correspondence seriously and began to work on the spirit at the material level, starting with metallurgy, the mining and mixing of metals. Elemental minerals such as mercury, copper, iron, tin, lead, were regarded, according to the theory of correspondences then prevalent, as the representatives of the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. It was understood that if their earthly forms could be manipulated successfully, then the law of correspondences

expressed by the alchemical maxim, 'As above, so below' could work in human favour if reversed, for 'As below, so above' had, according to the same law, to be equally true. In other words, if the astrological, heavenly pattern could be transformed through laboratory operations performed by the alchemist working on base, earthly metals, the very character of the person on whose behalf this experiment had been practised might be changed sufficiently to create for him or for her an entirely new fate.

Depth psychotherapy often has held a similar ambition when it comes to work on psychological complexes. Even today, despite decades of experiment with the symbolic attitude recommended by Jung, the level at which a psychotherapy commonly starts is literal and material, psyche projected on the matters at hand. The correspondences that a psychotherapist must deal with involve the ways lives are governed by the circumstances of one's money, sexuality, parents, relationship status, and political position in society. Such issues, which are archetypal in the sense that they are inevitably going to be faced by all humans, are at the heart of the complexes that are brought by a patient to a psychotherapist, and work on them in therapy can free up unexpected energy. What has up to now simply governed the person's life seems to evoke agency, rather than anxious reaction. The process of the therapies in which this happy outcome emerges is usually as messy, individual, and filled with esoteric instruments of change as any that might have occurred in a successful alchemical laboratory. We cannot claim for psychotherapy the regularity of a science, any more than alchemy ever achieved the status of true science, even in its richest period, the Renaissance, just before the Scientific Revolution pre-empted its momentum.

Psychotherapy today, like alchemy in the early seventeenth century, has the advantage of being still on the cusp of becoming a science. It can be practised and conceptualized in many ways, each rich in its potential to enhance transformation. By comparing itself to alchemy, Jungian analysis has distinguished itself from other schools mainly in recognizing the symbolic thrust of its enterprise, and in producing practitioners willing to be candid about what they have experienced rather than rushing to codify their craft into a science. I admire the courage of the contributors to this book in sharing just how they mix the materials brought to them by present-day clients who are en route to discovering how their complexes may be unsnarled sufficiently to enable the flexible tension that propels transformation. Though the goal of the individuated patient may turn out to be as elusive as the liberation of the human spirit via the Philosopher's Stone, the discoveries patients in analytical psychotherapy have made about their own alchemical energies retain the potential to generate new transformative practices in all of us. The reader of this book, whether psychotherapist, patient, or amateur *aficionado* of the soul, will benefit from what it tells us is being done on this Jungian ground. I hope, particularly, that sophisticated readers already accustomed to perusing the psychotherapy literature can rise above the complacency that attends being introduced to new developments within an established discipline and pursue what is to be freshly discovered here with a

sensibility naïve enough to consider, as if for the first time, what real change within the self may require.

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## FOREWORD

*Susan Rowland*

Alchemy is not true. It is not possible to transform lead into gold through a series of chemical additions, subtractions, distillations and cooking operations in a rudimentary laboratory as was practised in medieval and Renaissance Europe. No wonder that 'alchemist' became a byword for 'con-man' as demonstrated in Ben Jonson's 1611 play of that name. Jonson's work, *The Alchemist*, concerns a pretend practitioner of the alchemical or hermetic arts who extorts large sums of money from gullible clients until he himself loses everything. This play marks a cultural turning point. From this era alchemy begins to give way to its successor, chemistry, in which mystical approaches to matter are firmly banished in favour of scientific experimentation that will inexorably culminate in the discovery of the periodic table of the elements.

And yet in the early twentieth century, psychoanalyst C. G. Jung became fascinated with Renaissance books of alchemy. At least three volumes of his *Collected Works* are wholly devoted to alchemy and its symbolism in relation to psychotherapy. In the twenty-first century, a National Theatre production of Jonson's *The Alchemist* portrayed the titular anti-hero as a fake guru with a Californian twang. Is it a mistake for a psychotherapist to promise golden success from the leaden problems of today's complex world? Do analysts risk the danger of falling into the historic trap of alchemy: offering a ready way for the unscrupulous to coin money from those after a quick fix?

No, I am not suggesting that Jung or Jungians are false gurus. Nor am I suggesting that alchemy was simply a way to obtain money by duping a credulous public. Rather, Jung's symptomatically counter-cultural valuing of alchemy speaks to his courage and insight into digging up what had been lost when the modern scientific paradigm reinvented alchemy as chemistry. For the false alchemists paradoxically succeeded. They really did 'obtain' gold from the (worthless) dross or lead that they offered; they made money! While alchemy proper had cultural currency, false alchemists coined it. In that ability to manipulate desires and fears, they point to something significant that their con-artistry fails to enact: real transformation. What can be done with desire that drives people beyond their common sense or the precepts inhabiting their conscious minds?

So what was it about alchemy that permitted such economic success in its exploitation? Clearly the basic premise of turning a cheap and plentiful metal, lead, into a rare and precious one, gold, had commercial viability – but surely its chemical improbability would have quenched it as a practice long before it actually ceased to operate? As Jung quickly realized, alchemy persisted in the face of its apparent ineffectiveness for two reasons: it originated in a world view very different from the modern notion of human physical and psychic separation from the world and, second, it was a process of *working on the alchemist him or herself*.

For alchemists, spirit and matter were not separate realms; spirit and matter were of one order, interconnected. Matter contained spirit and spirit had a material dimension. Hence, divine spirit could indeed transform or be extracted from lowly, base, leaden matter. Moreover, if spirit and matter are together then they both inhere in the human body. The alchemist does not only manipulate substances in glass test tubes; he uses what they called the *imaginatio*, like the modern sense of imagination but significantly different. Where spirit and matter exist together, the *imaginatio* is a spiritual force with material penetration, to be part of the transforming process. Therefore, what was known as ‘the Great Work’ of alchemy was a spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, scientific and even artistic multi-media operation.

Bringing all these activities together was the symbol. Encoded in the alchemist’s writing, visually represented in drawing and woodcuts, the symbol was an image that also was occurring in the alchemist’s body and psyche. An image in the modern psychological sense of the earliest stage of cognition, the alchemical symbol was very definitely what Jung called a symbol in distinction from a sign. To Jung both symbols and signs are types of image. Whereas a sign points to something known and wholly conscious, the symbol points to the unknown, not yet known or partly unknowable. Put another way, the symbol joins embodied immanent experience to the unconscious populated with the capacity for archetypal transcendence.

In Jung’s modern world, characterized by divisions and specializations, the notion of knowable images, including words, is part of the architecture of who we believe we are. In the world of medieval and Renaissance alchemy in which divine spirit infused matter and nature, images were more *natively* symbols. They did more than just point to the unknowable collective unconscious. Alchemy symbols, as Jung himself stated, were themselves both imagination and reality, ‘real and unreal’ (CW 12 para. 400).

With such a sense of alchemy, Jung realized that its practice manifested a different type of consciousness; one more connected to matter, unconscious, body and spirit. For after all, alchemy was the manifestation of a holistic universe; for alchemists human consciousness was co-created in relation to divine spirit imbued in all of nature. Of course, as Jung also noted, his Renaissance alchemists had become partly Christianized in a way that was about to propel them into the scientific revolution and their radical turn into chemistry. He discovered that Renaissance alchemy texts were predicated on a narrative of *rescuing* the divine

imprisoned in matter. God wanted his transcendence to become as mainstream Christianity portrayed him: the immaterial divine being who created matter, body and nature as separate from himself. Renaissance alchemists were hurrying to join the dominant religious ethos; one which was just about to institute its transcendent God in science by focussing on matter as without soul: for alchemy to chemistry!

C. G. Jung had an acute sense of paradigm shifts and recognized that by excluding soul from matter, post-Renaissance chemists were also excluding psyche. The alchemy he found in Renaissance books was to have a major influence upon his psychotherapy both conceptually and culturally. Conceptually, Jung said that alchemy worked because it was a work of psyche. Without realizing it, alchemists projected their psyches into the matter in their laboratories. The lead was their heavy depressed souls. The quest for gold was a desire to experience the divine or in Jung's terms, to be connected to the major archetype of wholeness, the self. Alchemy was fascinating and satisfying because it was a means to individuation in the sense of becoming a more 'whole' person feeling connections to matter, spirit and the cosmos. Culturally therefore, alchemy was Jungian psychotherapy before Jung. It provided a historical and epistemological validation of Jung's ideas.

The very strangeness of the world of alchemists and their symbols made it a psychically activated language. This is what we see in this fine book, edited by Dale Mathers. In these chapters by practising psychotherapists, alchemy mobilizes, provokes and enables transformation and healing. It is an embodied, aesthetic mode of being that fuses and de-fuses, unites and fragments, dissolves and coagulates psychic states both within one person and between therapist and patient. The unfamiliar terms allow a suspension of everyday entanglements in conventional ideas. More importantly, alchemy is a language of im/possibilities where fantasy can be expressed, even embodied, yet remain symbolic and metaphoric. By considering the therapeutic session as a *temenos*, a vessel for transformation and rebirth, therapy can bathe the troubled soul in the wisdom of an-other age.

Jung did not quite stick to his 'modern' translation of alchemy as psychic projection onto matter. In later work he developed his notion of synchronicity in which something happening in the psychic real is effected by, or itself affects, something material with no rational cause. Such 'meaningful coincidences' infer that psyche and matter is not as wholly divided as alchemy as projection implies. Put another way, the transferences and counter-transferences of alchemical conjunction in the consulting room may not be where alchemy ends. Adding synchronicity to the mix would make alchemy as therapy into something else as well; not just training to live in the world in a new way, but training to make the world new.

I commend this fine book for opening the door into the riches and imaginative inspiration of alchemy in psychotherapy.

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