

Alchemy, medicine, and religion in Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*: an unproblematic *ménage à trois*

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Abstract

Regardless of time, place, and culture, alchemy has enjoyed a *ménage à trois*. On the one hand it has boasted the ability to find the *panacea*, that is, a universal cure for the body, thus claiming parentage to medicine. On the other hand, by declaring perfect knowledge of nature as its ultimate goal, the alchemical quest has been seen as a mystical way to find a cure for the soul, too. The aim of this essay is to shed light on the relationship of alchemy to medicine and religion through the case study of Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. Published in London in 1652, the *Theatrum* is an early modern bestseller as well as the

largest anthology of alchemical poetry in the English language. I will show that alchemy had both practical as well as spiritual connotations which only apparently could be regarded as incompatible with one another. After a short biographical introduction, this essay will consider, first, the historiography of alchemy; secondly, the practical uses of alchemy according to Ashmole; and, thirdly, the relevance of alchemy to his religious beliefs. Thus, the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* will elucidate some of the reasons for which the relation of alchemy, medicine and religion was an unproblematic *ménage à trois*.

Keywords

Alchemy, Medicine, Religion, England, Familism

Introduction

Regardless of time, place, and culture, alchemy has enjoyed a *ménage à trois*. On the one hand it has boasted the ability to find the *panacea*, that is, a universal cure for the body, thus claiming parentage to medicine. On the other hand, by declaring perfect knowledge of nature its ultimate goal, the alchemical quest has been seen as a mystical way to find a cure for the soul, too. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the relationship

of alchemy to medicine on one hand, and religion on the other hand, through the case study of Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. Published in London in 1652, the *Theatrum* is an early modern bestseller as well as the largest anthology of alchemical poetry in the English language.¹ Ashmole thought that alchemy was the key to achieving true learning, to acquiring the philosophy known and understood by Adam before the Fall, to freeing human bodies and souls from the corruption introduced because of the pride of the First Man. It was not just a means of making gold. I will show that Ashmole regarded alchemy as so important in three sections on, first, the historiography of alchemy and the debate about practical and spiritual alchemy, secondly, the practical uses of alchemy according to Ashmole, that is medicine and natural magic, and, finally, the relevance of alchemy to his religious beliefs.

Elias Ashmole and his world

Elias Ashmole was born in 1617 in Lichfield, Staffordshire, where he attended the local grammar school.² He then went to Brasenose College, Oxford and completed his education with legal practice at the Temple. During the Civil Wars he fought for the King and as a result Commonwealth authorities sequestrated his lands. At the beginning of the 1650s, therefore, Ashmole had a financial problem to solve. He did, in typically early modern fashion, by marrying a widow twenty years his senior, who was renowned for her money more than for her looks. This allowed him to devote his life to what he loved most: the pursuit of learning. He thus became a great collector, especially of English manuscripts relating to natural philosophy and history. Ashmole is best remembered for the eponymous museum which he founded in Oxford in 1683. He is sometimes credited with alchemical knowledge, meaning that he was an accomplished lab practitioner. In fact, this is inaccurate. Ashmole published three alchemical editions – in other words, he edited other people's alchemical writings. Such editorial endeavour is not enough to qualify him as a practising alchemist. His personal papers, which are kept in roughly

1 The *Theatrum* is hereafter referred to as *TCB*.

2 This biographical survey is based on the most recent monograph about Ashmole's life, Vittoria FEOLA, *Elias Ashmole. The Quartercentenary Biography* (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2017).

700 volumes of manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, reveal Ashmole's philological interest in the language and religious metaphors of alchemy, while only a handful substantiate the claim of Ashmole the lab worker, and this is especially connected to his amateur medical practice.

In 1650, as a result of his marriage, Ashmole moved to Swallowfield, Berkshire, where he joined the circle of antiquaries and natural philosophers around his new neighbour, William Backhouse. There, he delved among like-minded, empirically-bent men who participated in the Interregnum debate about educational reforms on the side of the Moderns and against Scholastic learning. Backhouse was an Oxford-educated antiquary and natural philosopher, he was interested in mathematics and in favour of the use of English for the circulation of knowledge. He organised a sort of translation workshop in his house, where Ashmole and their fellows turned Latin and French alchemical texts into English, and then published them in London. I am going to use one such publication as a case study about alchemy, medicine, and religion in seventeenth-century England.

Ashmole published in London, in 1652, a Backhouse-inspired and – promoted undertaking: the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. *Containing severall poetick pieces of our famous English philosophers, who have written the Hermetique mysteries in their owne Ancient language. Faithfully collected into one volume, with annotations thereon*. It contained Ashmole's *Prolegomena*, twenty-nine poems by different authors, a number of fragments and shorter works by anonymous writers, and Ashmole's *Final Annotations*, which is a fifty-page biographical essay about the authors of the poems.³ They were Thomas Norton, George Ripley, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, John Lydgate, John Dastin, Pearce the Black Monk, Abraham Andrewes, Thomas Robinson, Richard Carpenter, Walter Redman, William Backhouse, Edward Kelly, and John Dee. Apart from two of them, they were all Catholic clergymen; most had lived and worked before the Reformation. The significance of their clerical status will be considered shortly. The *Theatrum* has been popular, both in the seventeenth century and later; though, revealingly, with radically different readers. Among Ashmole's contemporaries who owned

3 I have considered the *Theatrum* as an example of metaphysical poetry in Vittoria FEOLA, «Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. The relation of antiquarianism to science in seventeenth-century England», *Renaissance Medievalisms*, ed. Konrad EISENBICHLER, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 321-343.

and annotated the *Theatrum* we find experimental natural philosophers such as Isaac Newton and Constantin Huygens. In the eighteenth century, instead, Horace Walpole used it as a source of inspiration for the new literary genre that he was inventing, the Gothic novel. Among Victorian occultists, like Frances Arthur Waite, the *Theatrum* became a source of inspiration for their so-called spiritual alchemy.

The historiography about the meanings of alchemy

Most of the alchemists whose works were collected by Ashmole were engaged in both practical and spiritual alchemy. In other words, they regarded alchemy as a means to achieve physical ends like the creation of gold or medicinal cures and as a way to supply spiritual needs, for example to achieve salvation. Thus Ashmole's collection allows us to approach the historiographical debate over the nature of alchemy in the early modern period. Indeed, if we are to get to grips with Ashmole's own thoughts we must interpret his collection in the context of alchemy generally. It will be argued, on the basis primarily of Ashmole's collection, that recent discussions of alchemy in the early modern period have been based upon the inaccurate suggestion that alchemy was entirely non-spiritual. This contention, in its turn, is based upon flawed interpretations of the language of alchemy and, in particular, incorrect derivations of the word alchemy and a failure to appreciate its religious and Catholic contexts. In this section, therefore, I will provide a historiographical context in which to consider Ashmole's collections and thinking with reference, first, to the debate over practical and spiritual alchemy, and, secondly, its religious contexts. The first part of this section will include a discussion of the derivation and meaning of the word alchemy; the second will relate this to religious terminology used in alchemical texts.

William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe's article entitled «Alchemy vs. Chemistry: the etymological origins of a historiographic mistake»⁴ can be considered as a manifesto for a practically-oriented historiography on alchemy. The purpose of their paper is to show that the

4 William R. NEWMAN, Lawrence M. PRINCIPE, «Alchemy vs. Chemistry: the etymological origins of a historiographic mistake», *Early Science and Medicine* III (1998): pp. 32-65. Cfr. Vittoria FEOLA, *Elias Ashmole and the Uses of Antiquity* (Paris: Blanchard, 2012), pp. 146-153.

existence of two different words – that is, alchemy and chemistry – has misled historians into thinking of two different phenomena, because they are not aware of the true origins of both words. Hence the mistake is to regard alchemy and chemistry as two chronologically sequential phenomena, the first involving chrysopoeia only – that is, the production of gold - the latter coinciding with modern chemistry.

Newman and Principe, in contrast, maintain that ‘alchemy’ and ‘chymistry’ were used in the seventeenth century as total synonyms. They described the same set of non-spiritual practices and experiments. There were, they acknowledge, different stages in these processes – ranging from *chrysopoeia* and *argyropoeia* (the production of gold and silver) to *iatrochemia* and *chemiatria* (referring to the medical domain of chemistry) – but these in fact confirm that alchemists were interested in practical, non-spiritual experiments and processes.⁵ Attempts to understand alchemy which include differentiating between alchemy and chemistry are, in their opinion, necessarily flawed. To prove that the terms alchemy and chemistry described the same physical processes, Newman and Principe examine a number of sources and finally point to B. J. T. Dobbs’ description of George Starkey, alias Eireneus Philalaethes, as «the last great philosophical alchemist of the seventeenth century». In fact, they maintain, he was a simple chemist pursuing corpuscular transmutation.⁶ Thus the perceived difference between alchemy and chemistry has led his-

5 *Ibi*, pp. 44-63.

6 *Ibi*, pp. 33-37. Cf. Betty J.T. DOBBS, *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy, or The Hunting of the Green Lyon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); William R. NEWMAN, review of *The Janus Faces of Genius* by B.J.T. DOBBS, *Isis* 84 (1993): pp. 578-579; ID., «Prophecy and alchemy: the origin of Eirenaeus Philaethes», *Ambix*, 37 (1990): pp. 97-115; ID., *Gehennical Fire. The Lives of George Starkey, an American Alchemist in the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 92-114, 141-169; Scott H. MANDELBROTE, review of *Gehennical Fire* by W.R. Newman, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 28 (1995): pp. 470-471; William R. NEWMAN, «The Corpuscular Transmutational Theory of Eireneus Philalaethes» in *Alchemy and Chemistry in the 16th and the 17th centuries*, eds. Antonio CLERICUZIO, Piyo RATTANSI (Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 161-182; ID., «The Corpuscular Theory of Joan Baptista van Helmont and its Medieval Sources», *Vivarium* 31 (1993): pp. 161-191; ID., «Boyle's Debt to Corpuscular Alchemy» in *Robert Boyle reconsidered*, ed. Michael HUNTER (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 107-118; ID., «The Alchemical Sources of Robert Boyle's Corpuscular Philosophy», *Annals of Science* 53 (1996): pp. 567-585; Antonio CLERICUZIO, «A Redefinition of Boyle's Chemistry and Corpuscular Philosophy», *Annals of Science* 47 (1990): pp. 561-589.

torians to think of different processes, when in fact the terms were used of the same – practical and non-spiritual – processes.

Furthermore, Newman and Principe suggest the adoption of a different terminology, according to the historical period under consideration. When talking about the Middle Ages, the Latin terms *chemia*, or *chymia*, or *chimia* will serve the purpose. After the Reformation and the spread of Paracelsianism, they advocate the use of the archaically-spelt word *chymistry*, to express what others would refer to as either alchemy or chemistry. The modern word chemistry should be used, instead, to describe the very same phenomenon but not earlier than the eighteenth century.⁷

In fact, in Ashmole's huge collection of alchemical manuscripts, the spellings suggested by these two historians do not occur often or consistently enough to justify their claim, and Ashmole's papers include works by the most important alchemists from the Middle Ages until the seventeenth century. It seems very anachronistic to insist on referring to the practices of alchemists by terms which are different from – and frequently seem to contradict – the terms they used themselves. And, after criticising the identification of chronologically sequential phases in the development of alchemy, Newman and Principe seem just to substitute a different chronological sequence in terminology, and one that bears little relation to a sequential development in the nature of alchemy itself. I would also maintain that Newman and Principe were themselves mistaken in their understanding of the uses and of the derivation of the word 'alchemy'.

First, Newman and Principe's hypothesis does not take into account the possibility that alchemy, or chymistry, might have had a symbolic meaning. Allison Coudert has provided a detailed account of this issue in her paper «Henry More, the Kabbalah, and the Quakers».⁸ She infers that the spiritual or esoteric side of alchemy came from Gnostic and Neoplatonic ideas that had been suppressed in orthodox Christianity. Those who wrote the *Hermetica*, and in particular the *Tabula Smaragdina*, were clearly Greek Gnostic practitioners. They also stated the fundamental

7 NEWMAN, PRINCIPE, «Alchemy vs. Chemistry», cit., p. 41.

8 Allison P. COUDERT, «Henry More, the Kabbalah, and the Quakers», eds. Richard KROLL, Robert SHCRAFT, Perez ZAGORIN, *Philosophy, Science, and Religion in England 1640-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 31-67.

alchemical doctrine that every created thing stems from a single divine substance that takes up numerous forms in the course of a series of never-ending mutations. The alchemical belief that all matter is one, or «ex uno omnia», was visually displayed through the image of the *ouroboros*, or taileating serpent.⁹ Coudert explains how the alchemical target of transmutation was based on the Aristotelian law that everything in nature strives for perfection. The function of the adept was, therefore, to help nature along by performing chemical operations.¹⁰ But these had a very strong spiritual significance and content, built, as they were, upon the belief in a single divine substance.

Secondly, by drawing attention to primary sources different from those quoted by Newman and Principe, Coudert also underlined the idea that many alchemists shared the Gnostic view of man as potentially divine. For example, some alchemists drew a parallel between Christ and the philosopher's stone, as in the case of Robert Fludd.¹¹ This comparison is a recurring theme in many of Ashmole's manuscripts and will be considered below.

Thirdly, Coudert notices that the alchemical concept of transmutation as a regenerative experience for both matter and the alchemist bears remarkable similarities with the cabalistic concept of *tikkun*, or restoration. Likewise, the Hermetic belief in the alchemist's power to transform base matter has a striking analogy with the extraordinary powers attributed to man by the Lurianic kabbalah.¹² This observation is, however, problematic. The evidence she quotes, for example, does not show that seventeenth-century alchemists knew these Gnostic and cabalistic texts. Actually, François Secret, in his book *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* has argued that only very rarely did Renaissance and seventeenth-century alchemists have cabalistic texts whereby to operate a synthesis of alchemy and Jewish cabala.¹³ This does not, however, lessen the importance of her claim that alchemy had a spiritual dimension.

Finally, Coudert finds noteworthy the similarity between the goal of

9 COUDERT, «Henry More, the Kabbalah, and the Quakers», cit., pp. 34-35.

10 *Ibi*, p. 39.

11 *Ibi*, p. 41.

12 *Ibi*, pp. 40, 42-45.

13 François SECRET, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod Éditeur, 1964).

internal transmutation pursued by mystical alchemists and the Quakers' internalised idea of Christ's death and resurrection. Actually, the Quakers' belief in man's capacity to transcend sin, with its emphasis on «Christ within» seems to imply the Hermetic view of man as God's emanation, or microcosm. Similarly, the doctrine taught by Hendrik Niclaes, the founder of the Family of Love, in the 1540s, shared a great deal with later Quaker thought. Indeed, the very concept of the “begodded” man, able to conquer sin by becoming divine, shows Neoplatonic-Hermetic influences.¹⁴ Coudert, however, has not shown the ways in which Familism and Quakerism might have exerted a practical influence on particular alchemists. Yet, the author of the first English translation from the Latin of Hermes Trismegistus' *Pymander* and *Asclepius*, two fundamental Hermetic texts, was in fact a Familist: John Everard (1575?-1650?) a Cambridge divine and good friend of Ashmole's. Everard was a Neoplatonist and a mystic. In his works, Everard quotes from Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, and many early Christian writers.¹⁵ Ashmole added Everard's translation of Jean d'Espagnet's *Arcanum Hermeticae Philosophiae* to his own translation of Arthur Dee's *Fasciculus Hermeticus*. Besides, Everard supplied Ashmole with an annotated copy of an anonymous work, which Ashmole published as *The Way to Bliss* (London, 1658).¹⁶ Thus the contexts of much alchemical thought which Coudert provides are probably correct. The relationship between alchemy and Familism will recur later.

Newman and Principe were also mistaken in their beliefs not just about the uses of the term alchemy but also in their suggestions about its derivation. The word alchemy stems from the Arabic prefix *al* (the definite article), and the Greek noun *chymia*, or «art of alloying metals». The earliest records of alchemical practices date back to Hellenistic Egypt in the first century AD, at a time when Alexandria was the most important cultural centre. The Greek word *chymia* was first applied to pharmaceutical chemistry, which was chiefly concerned with infusions and juices of plants. Nevertheless, it also had the practical goal of transmuting base metals into gold and silver, as well as the spiritual goal to set the matter

14 COUDERT, «Henry More, the Kabbalah and the Quakers», cit., pp. 46-47.

15 For a full biography of John Everard, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

16 Carl H. JOSTEN, ed., *Elias Ashmole. His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, his Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources Relating to his Life and Work*, 5 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), vol. I, p. 122.

free, in order to purify the alchemist's soul.¹⁷ Newman and Principe overlooked the Alexandrian phase in the development of 'alchemy' with the result that they did not appreciate that from the beginning the term had spiritual as well as practical connotations.

Also, the sources employed by early alchemists provided a very clear spiritual content and agenda for later alchemists. Early alchemists used Egyptian mythology, Aristotelian, Stoic and Gnostic thought, and Babylonian astrology. I will examine each of these influences in turn. From Egyptian mythology, alchemy took the concept of creation as a holy event. Also, the Egyptian Isis-Osiris myth formed the basis of the fundamental alchemical doctrine of the philosopher's stone's cycle of life. Alexandrian alchemists applied to metals the birth, life, death and rebirth theme; indeed, through the death of the matter, the alchemist could obtain his soul's regeneration.¹⁸

The spiritual dimension of alchemy is reinforced by a consideration of Aristotle's matter theory. This provided the distinction between matter and form, along with the existence of the four elements, fire, water, air, and earth. Aristotle's theory underpinned the alchemists' conviction that it would be possible to change the state of matter by altering the proportions of the elements of which it was made. Similarly, as in Stoic matter theory, form was given to matter by *pneuma* (God's vital breath), so the alchemist distinguished between the body and soul of matter.¹⁹

Greek Gnosticism provided the hermetic component of early modern alchemy. Alchemy was also called *ars hermetica*, the hermetic art. It was thus termed after Hermes Trismegistos, the mythical founder of the art, a wise man, who was thought to have lived in Moses' time, and considered the author of magical and alchemical texts. In fact, these were composed by Greek Gnostic thinkers. Yet, the *Corpus Hermeticum* was far more concerned with spiritual alchemy than with alloying practices.²⁰

Babylonian astrology, by way of Greece and Rome, influenced Alexandrian - and spiritual - alchemy insofar as the latter adopted the planet correspondence system. Each planet ruled over the properties of the

17 Carl PRIESNER, Carin FIGALA, hrg. von, *Alchemie. Lexikon einer hermetischen Wissenschaft* (München: C. H. Beck, 1998).

18 *Ibi*, pp. 22-23.

19 *Ibi*, p. 24.

20 *Ibi*, p. 25.

seven metals, which thus came to be recognised by the correspondent astrological symbol. Thus, astrology became an essential auxiliary art for alchemists. The necessary premise was that there were precise correspondences between the visible and the invisible worlds, the worlds of matter and spirit. Everything contained a «seed» of divinity, which could be developed through the application of certain principles. The material world was a reflection of the spiritual one and should work according to the same principles.²¹ In a long section of his final annotations to the *Theatrum*, Ashmole spoke of the importance of calculating astrologically the most propitious time to start the alchemical work. Ashmole distinguished between a «Calculatory part» of the art, which was astronomy, and a «Judiciary part», which was astrology.²²

Some Alexandrians ascribed transmuting practices and hermetic beliefs to classical authors who had in fact never meant *chymia* in that particular way. An entire corpus of spurious works was formed, for example those of the Pseudo-Aristotle. From the Alexandrians the art and name were adopted by the Arabs, who altered the original meaning and transmitted the new word *al-kimiya* to Europe by way of Spain. The Muslims came in contact with Greek culture at Alexandria and in Syrian and Mesopotamian towns through Aramaic and Syrian texts. The Magian converts to Islam, in addition, brought Indian and Persian influences.²³ These influences, particularly in the writings of Jabir ibn Hayyan (Geber) and Muhammed ibn Zakariyya al-Razi (Rhazes), cannot be considered in detail here, but confirm that in all of its main influences, alchemy had both spiritual and practical dimensions. They influenced particularly the medieval *Pseudo-Lullian Corpus* and Renaissance Paracelsian alchemy.²⁴

Hence, from what we have seen so far, it seems legitimate to follow E.J.

21 CLERICUZIO, RATTANSI, *Alchemy and Chemistry*, cit., pp. 2-4; Allen G. DEBUS, ed., *Science, Medicine and Society in the Renaissance: Essays to honor Walter Pagel*, 2 vols. (New York: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 167-182.

22 TCB, *Annotations*, p. 450.

23 Francis S. TAYLOR, *The Alchemists. Founders of modern chemistry* (New York: Heidemann, 1958), pp. 76-94, 109-144; Charles BURNETT, «The astrologers' assay of the alchemists: early references to alchemy in Arabic texts», *Ambix* 39 (1992): pp. 103-109. Also, S.M. IMAMUDDIN, *Muslim Spain 711-1492. A sociological study* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), pp. 7-8.

24 PRIESNER, FIGALA, *Alchemie*, cit., pp. 224-227.

Holmyard's distinction between an outward or exoteric and a hidden or esoteric alchemy. The former aimed at producing a substance, called the philosopher's stone, or simply the stone, an elixir, tincture, or medicine, capable of transmuting the base metals (tin, copper, iron, lead, and mercury) into silver and gold. The latter was characterised by the belief that the elixir could be obtained only by divine grace.²⁵

Holmyard's distinction may be slightly misleading, in that it seems to suggest that alchemy could be either entirely concerned with the practical goal of transmutation, or entirely devoted to achieving salvation. Daniel Merkur has gone so far as to ask:

First, if the reader had already to have been initiated orally into the secret of gold-making, if she or he were to be able to make sense of the texts – then, why write at all? Secondly, one Hellenistic gold-making recipe was rephrased in thousands upon thousands of texts, when a single tract would have sufficed the needs of gold-makers. Why write so many texts in so many different ways? Alchemical literature is a type of cypher. The secret chemistry of the Great Work was its pre-supposition. Whatever in an alchemical text refers to gold-making, is *not* the secret message of the text, but only its place of concealment.²⁶

Merkur's view may be correct in that alchemical language, I will argue, was frequently a cypher, but he misses the point that religious language could also be used to describe physical processes. He did not, in fact, take into account the Catholic roots of European alchemy. When the art reached the West, in the Middle Ages, the people who began to practice it were, for the most part, clerics.²⁷ Hence, the adoption of a religious terminology to discuss both alchemy's spiritual processes and its practical applications. This can be seen clearly in the examples provided by the authors who can be found in Ashmole's collection.

25 Eric J. HOLMYARD, *Alchemy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 15-16.

26 Daniel MERKUR, «The study of spiritual alchemy: mysticism, gold-making, and esoteric hermeneutics», *Ambix* 37 (1990): p. 43.

27 PRIESNER, FIGALA, *Alchemie*, cit., pp. 26-29.

There are a number of manuscript copies of works by Roger Bacon in Ashmole's collection.²⁸ Bacon, himself a Franciscan friar, wrote of two sorts of alchemy: *alkimia operativa*, which teaches the making of the noble metals, and *alkimia speculativa*, which touched the secrets of God. Indeed, alchemy was from the origin a secret as well as a sacred art. Since the alchemist's job was to reproduce God's act of creation, the *opus* was given a religious meaning; hence the necessity for an obscure language, which would prevent direct revelation. The alchemical secrets could not be passed on but from one master to a single, chosen adept, wider revelation being regarded as a sin.²⁹

Writers on alchemy used a metaphorical language to describe chemical processes as well as something else. One can draw the distinction very neatly: among the many alchemical manuscripts Ashmole collected, some are operative texts, that is the reader immediately understands that he or she is looking at a practical recipe for the production of gold and silver. In this case, the author is employing a metaphorical language, in which chemical elements are referred to with symbols (sulphur as «the red king», for example). One is left with the impression, therefore, that the author was in fact working in a laboratory; and, if one wanted, the same experiment could be reproduced by following the recipe. The fact that the modern names for the chemicals they were working with had not been standardised explains why the medieval monks adopted a different religious terminology in order to describe their operations. Being clerics, however, they naturally interpreted what they were doing, according to their theological beliefs. The Christian influence on European alchemy, therefore, was vital and explains the language alchemists continued to use even after the Reformation.

The authors of the poems contained in Ashmole's *Theatrum* show the Catholic roots of alchemy and its language. The «neglected philosophers» were Thomas Norton, George Ripley, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Dastin, Pearce the Black Monk, Abraham Andrewes, Thomas Charnock,

28 For a complete list of Roger Bacon's works in Ashmole's collection, William D. MACRAY, *Index to the catalogue of the manuscripts of Elias Ashmole, formerly preserved in the Ashmolean Museum, and now deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1866).

29 Gareth ROBERTS, *The Mirror of Alchemy. Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 65-67.

William Bloomefield, Sir Edward Kelley, Dr. John Dee, Thomas Robinson, Richard Carpenter William Backhouse, John Gower, John Lydgate, Walter Redman. Among these, Andrewes and Redman remain unidentified; all the others, with the exception of Kelly, Dee, and Backhouse, were Catholic and most were members of religious orders. Actually, Dee and Kelley behaved as if they were Catholic during their sojourn in Prague, in 1583-84. Norton, Ripley, Dastin, Pearce, Charnock, Carpenter, Gower, and Lydgate were clerics. Charnock and Carpenter, the only ones who lived through the break with Rome, remained Catholic after the Reformation. A striking characteristic shared by most of the authors Ahmole singled out, therefore, was their Catholic faith.³⁰

This is clearly reflected in the terminology employed by the majority of the authors in the *Theatrum*. Norton, for example, calls the transmutation «transubstantiation».³¹ The pure king, in the work of John Dastin, works miracles on earth, clearing eyesight and making the lame walk, and later prays to his father to take away «the Challice of hys passion», as Christ does in the agony in Gethsemane.³² Ripley, in the Prologue to his *Compound of Alchymy* speaks of the philosopher's stone in terms of the mystery of Godhead.³³ Bloomefield's *Blossoms* portrays Trinitarian aspects of the alchemical elements, salt, sulphur, and mercury: the alchemist in his dream-vision is enlightened by God, who gives him the stone, which is «three in Substance, and one in Essence».³⁴ Ripley paralleled sulphur with the Holy Ghost, for it was «quick» and raised the body from death to life,³⁵ thereby making an allusion to the Holy Spirit's description in the creed as *vivificantem*. Similarly, the metaphor usually

30 Ashmole was clearly aware of this Catholic feature of his book, which he does not address directly, though. Instead, when he refers to a poem called *Hermes Bird*, he describes the manuscript in which he had found it, by saying: «In it is conteyn'd the Grand *Misteries* of the *Philosophers Stone*, and not more *Popish* or *Superstitious* than' *Flamell s Hieroglyphicks* portraid upon an *Arch* in *St. Innocents Church-yard* in *Paris*; Notwithstanding it has pleased some, to wash the *Originall* over ... As also... to break in *Pieces* the *Glasse Window*...wherein was fairely *Painted* (but unhappily mistaken for a *Popish Story*) the whole *Processe* of the *Worke*». *TCB, Annotations*, p. 466.

31 *TCB*, p. 86.

32 *Ibi*, pp. 263-4.

33 *Ibi*, p. 82.

34 *Ibi*, p. 306.

35 *Ibi*, p. 383.

deployed in order to describe the processes of growth, improvement and ennoblement was that of the germination of wheat. This was drawn from John 12:24-5, as well as I Corinthians 15:36-8. We can see this in Dastin's *Dream*: «The graine of Wheate which on the ground doth fall, But it be dead it may not fructifie».³⁶

The alchemists whose works were collected by Ashmole demonstrate then that religious language was used firstly, because it provided obvious parallels to physical processes and in the absence of a physical language was a good way to describe these processes, but also because alchemy had both a number of practical applications and an important religious and spiritual dimension. This will be seen in the next two sections in which I will consider first, alchemy's relevance to medicine, and, secondly, angelology and the importance of alchemy in Ashmole's religious thinking.

Ashmole's cure for the body

Ashmole believed that the «angelical stone» could cure the body. He also held that true learning could have other practical benefits as well as helping medicine. The reason why man's health could be improved by a supernatural remedy lay in the religious origin of the decay of man's body: Adam's sin of pride and the Fall. According to Ashmole, people died of two kinds of diseases: the ones they had inherited from their ancestors, and the «transplanted» ones. The latter were caused by Adam's Fall. Ashmole provided the following explication:

Divine malediction lodged in created things, is removed from them into our *Bodies*, and there grow up and multiply till (having heightened the *Sal*, *Sulphur* and *Mercury*, into an irreconcilable *Contestation*, through the impurities wherewith they are loaded and burthened) they introduce a miserable *decay*, which consequently become a *Death*.³⁷

The «red stone» (another way to call the «angelical stone») was the remedy, that could prolong man's life. Even some of «the *Autients* before

36 *Ibi*, p. 259. For a broader discussion of the religious tone in most alchemical works, with special reference to particular one in the *Theatrum*, see ROBERTS, *The Mirror of Alchemy*, cit., pp. 78-86.

37 *TCB, Annotations*, p. 448.

the *Flood*» took it, in order to live for more than a thousand years.³⁸ The point about Adam's Fall suggests a way in which the spiritual and practical non-spiritual aspects of alchemy were closely related. Ashmole thought that Adamitic knowledge would allow him to achieve salvation; in this chapter I will hold that the same Adamitic knowledge would result in the cures for the body which would improve medicine and allow Ashmole to practise natural magic. Thus the quest for Adam's knowledge was a quest for uncorrupted truth and philosophy which would bring about better earthly medicine and allow us to approach God. I will reveal the background to Ashmole's ideas about medicine, before looking at his own beliefs about first, medicine and, secondly, natural magic.³⁹

The way in which Ashmole described Adam's Fall shows that he embraced a Paracelsian view of the alchemical elements. By mentioning «salt, sulphur, and mercury», Ashmole employed a terminology, which had first been used by the German alchemist Johann Bombast von Hohenheim, alias Paracelsus (1493-1541). For him, alchemy was the art, which brought to completion what nature had left in an immature state. Every useful device created by man had been conceived because he had been able to imitate nature and make use of its constituents. Furthermore, for Paracelsus, medicine alone had not been able to perfect itself and was therefore awaiting its alchemical reform. In order to achieve such reform, that is for natural substances to be turned into medicines, they must undergo a process of putrefaction, lose their first life and attain rebirth. Since nothing is generated from seed without its first decomposing and dissolving into the earth, natural substances, too, must rot and perish before their intrinsic therapeutic properties can be deployed. The process of decay and rebirth was central to both spiritual and non-spiritual alchemy.

This theme of alchemical death and regeneration implied the separation theory: by separating the pure from the impure, the useful from the useless, the good from the bad, alchemy might purify bodies from the poison they contained and transform them into efficacious medicines. Hence, Paracelsus aimed at separating what was already present in matter rather than at the creation of something that did not exist in nature. His pharmacological procedures were the very opposites of those

38 *Ibi*, p. 449.

39 *Ibidem*.

employed by Galenic doctors.⁴⁰ They also parallel the process of purifying knowledge and natural philosophy which Ashmole would identify in spiritual alchemy.

Paracelsus employed an additional element, salt, as well as the sulfur and mercury of the traditional alchemists, and he applied his theory to all natural substances, including the human body. Thus, he did not follow the classical theory of the elements (air, fire, earth, and water), nor did he agree with the Pseudo-Aristotelian «dyad theory», which had been introduced into Western alchemy by Jabir Ibn-Hayyan, and further developed by the Latin pseudo-Geber in his *Summa perfectionis*. Basically, according to Geber, all metals were composed of the same two substances, that is mercury and sulphur. This provided the basis for the belief in the transmutation of metals, because metals were thought to be distinguished only by accidents. The alchemist could, therefore, achieve transmutation by bringing sulfur and mercury to the proper state of proportion.⁴¹ On the other hand, Paracelsus stated that he had no skill in the preparation of the philosopher's stone, and that he named his compounds after the alchemists' elixir, only because these had the same effect on the human body as that which the alchemists claimed their stone had on the bodies of metals.⁴²

Ashmole provided an explanation of human diseases which was, then, in line with that of Paracelsus, but, unlike the German reformer, he insisted on the existence of the philosopher's stone.

Yet this *Medicine* is the remedy for the particular *corruption of Man*. [...] *The Brevity of Life* came in with the *Fall of Adam*, and though some of the *Autients* before the *Flood* lived almost a thousand yeares, yet certainly their lives were *prorogued* by the use of this *Medicine*.⁴³

It was the Fall of Adam that resulted in the corruption of man. In itself, this was not an unorthodox claim. But, as will be seen, Ashmole set himself the task of achieving the pre-Fall Adamitic knowledge, as the alchemists whose he collected had, he said, also done.

40 CLERICUZIO, RATTANSI, *Alchemy and Chemistry*, cit., pp. 17-31, 51-73.

41 LAWRENCE M. PRINCIPE, *The Aspiring Adept. Robert Boyle and his alchemical quest. Including Boyle's "Lost" Dialogue on the Transmutation of Metals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 36-42.

42 CLERICUZIO, RATTANSI, *Alchemy and Chemistry*, cit., p. 24.

43 TCB, *Annotations*, p. 449.

Not only did Ashmole believe in the medical properties of the red stone, but he also empirically verified them. This has to do with his practical endeavours as an amateur physician. «I my selfe have prepared, made and Experimentally verified.»⁴⁴ Indeed his medical practice began on 21 December 1649, when he first dissected a body, and in his diary he recorded on a number of occasions the chemical remedies he made for curing various diseases.⁴⁵ He collected many anatomical treatises by diverse authors, and at different times.⁴⁶ Moreover, most of the previous owners of the alchemical manuscripts he assembled were physicians as well as clerics. These were Nicholas Bowden, William Flood, Nicholas Fiske, Thomas Napier, Simon Forman.⁴⁷ Ashmole was given some alchemical manuscripts by his friends and astrologers, William Lilly and Christopher Wharton. We do not know whether Lilly and Wharton⁴⁸ owned alchemical papers because they were actively attempting to achieve the philosopher's stone or because they were studying alchemy for its links with astrology. Yet, it has to be pointed out that astrology was also related to medicine, for it established certain correspondences between the body's humours and the stars.⁴⁹

Ashmole's beliefs in the properties of the red stone as a cure for the body were reflected in his comments on the College of Physicians. «The *Progresse* [of] this Science...but to contract the Rayes of my Prospective to our own *homes*, the *Phisitians Colledge of London* doth at this day nourish most noble and able Sons of *Art*».⁵⁰ Ashmole saw in the red stone the means by which to reconcile Galenic and Paracelsian medicine. Paracelsus had reacted sharply against the traditional learning practised

44 *Ibi*, p. 462.

45 *Josten*, II, p. 499.

46 Ashm.MSS. 391, f. 8v; 399, arts. 2, 5, 9, 10; 789, f. 365; 1393, f. 60; 1398, p. 172; 1435, pp. 29-59, 67-103; 1462, ff. 5, 8, 10; 1468, p. 7; 1476; 1481, ff. 25v, 35v; 1499, f. 215; 1500, p. 351; 1827, art. I.

47 Napier's papers are contained in Ashm.MSS.204, 356, 972, 1407, 1421, 1441, 1488, 1490, 1494.

48 Lilly supplied Ashmole with MS.242. This is a collection of astrological data by John Dee, which previously belonged to the mathematician Sir Christopher Heydon. Lilly presented Ashmole with it in 1666. Wharton gave him MS.1420.

49 Patrick CURRY, *Prophecy and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 35-40.

50 *TCB, Annotations*, p. 460.

in the universities, and advocated reforms aimed at teaching chemistry.⁵¹ He considered that to be the essential basis for a new medicine as well as a new philosophy, which should be based on the scriptures and nature rather than on Greek philosophy⁵². In England, during the Civil War and the Interregnum, chemistry continued to be regarded as strictly associated with medicine. The university curriculum was still based on the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). The influence of Paracelsian-Helmontian medicine increased in the 1650s, when this approach was promoted by some of the members of the Hartlib circle.⁵³ One reason why Paracelsian reforms were not put into practice was that they had been urged by Puritan radicals. While most members of the College of Physicians were in favour of traditional Galenic medicine, the Society of Apothecaries advocated a new type of pharmacopoeia, based on Paracelsianism.⁵⁴ In Ashmole's understanding such an approach was an attempt to purify knowledge and medicine, as well as human bodies, and to get back to Adam's true philosophy.

In the terms of the polemic between the College of Physicians and the Society of Apothecaries, Ashmole's position was a conciliatory one. «And albeit I magnifie *Chemical Phisique*, yet I do not lessen the due commendations that belong to *Galenicall*: nor dare I, when so great an *Hermetick Philosopher* as *Arnoldus de villa Nova* has taken so much paines to Joine them.»⁵⁵ We can see a reflection of Ashmole's Paracelsianism in his late request to the University of Oxford to set up a laboratory for the performance of chemical experiments. Another element that emerges from the previous passage is Ashmole's respect for the 'authority' of Arnoldus de Villanova. Ashmole's respect for tradition and authority finds here another testimony.

51 Charles WEBSTER, *The Great Instauration* (London: Duckworth, 1967), pp. 267-270.

52 On Greek thought and its influences on the Western medical tradition, see George E. R. LLOYD, *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Paul VEYNE, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* transl. by Paul WISSING (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988); Heinrich VON STADEN, «Affinities and Ellisions: Helen and Hellenocentrism», *Isis* (1992), 578-595.

53 WEBSTER, *The Great Instauration*, cit., pp. 283, 276.

54 P. RATTANSI, «The Helmontian-Galenist controversy in Restoration England», *Ambix* XII, no. 1 (1964): 11-14.

55 *TCB, Annotations*, p. 461.

The validity of the medical properties of the cure for the body, however, ultimately depended on the Scriptures; again, the parallel and links between medicine and practical learning or alchemy, and religion are very important. Ashmole equated medicine with theology by pointing out that the ten fathers before the flood, together with Solomon and Moses, were «the great *Physitians* in former *Ages*». ⁵⁶ Abraham brought this natural knowledge into Chaldea, whence it passed into Egypt and Greece, and, «Augmented, by the stupendious paines of *Arabians*» ⁵⁷ eventually reached Europe. The Flood, like the Fall, though of less significance, was nevertheless an important moment in history when God intervened.

With regard to this definition of the physicians, Ashmole's indiscriminate use of the expression «sons of art» for both alchemists and doctors is significant. He stressed the religious role of the physician, by referring to Eccles:3.8, and underlined common people's duty to honour the physician, as «*God* has appointed us». ⁵⁸ Ashmole relied on the authority of the Bible, therefore, to support his views, according to which the alchemist is enlightened by God, and thus becomes God's medium to cure man - exactly like the Persian magi.

The practical knowledge which alchemy would give Ashmole was not just restricted to medicine, however. The influence of Paracelsus and of Persian ideas can be seen in his use of natural magic, which was, presumably, another aspect of Adam's knowledge that had been lost. Indeed, «*Natural Magick* [is] the *Doore* that leads to this *Blessed Stone*». ⁵⁹ The relationship between natural magic, alchemy and religious knowledge will be shown below. Now I will talk about the practical uses of natural magic which complement Ashmole's beliefs about medicine and which reflect the influence of Paracelsus and Persian learning.

Ashmole's beliefs in natural magic underpinned all his practical activities, like casting talismans and making magical mirrors, as well as his attempts to purify medical learning. In his *Ephemerides* of March 1651, Samuel Hartlib noted that Ashmole «contrived an Astrological or Magical Remedy from the last great conjunction with Saturne & whereby hee hath driven away all fleas out of his house &. Which Dr. Child promised

⁵⁶ *Ibi*, p. 459.

⁵⁷ *Ibi*, p. 460.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibi*, p. 443.

to learn m(ore). fully from him». ⁶⁰ The information about the astrological or magical remedy against fleas throws light on Ashmole's main activities while he was preparing the *Theatrum*. Indeed, he was basically concerned with the casting of horoscopes and magic sigils, as his diary's numerous references to these two activities demonstrate. He also diligently recorded all the times he attended the Astrologers' feast in London. ⁶¹ This means that Ashmole's main interests were astrology and natural magic. On the other hand, he only rarely recorded the acquisitions of new manuscripts, which he was collecting for his editorial practices. This shows that Ashmole's most important experimental practices were related to natural magic, whereas Ashmole's speculations were devoted to alchemy. Practically speaking, then, Ashmole carried out experiments in natural magic and thought about the other aspects of alchemy.

Another practical application of this natural magic and, presumably Adamitic knowledge, was the belief in specula. This also shows the influence of Paracelsus. Ashmole often recorded his dreams in his diary and cast horoscopes in order to understand them. He also believed he would have eventually made a magical speculum, which would have enabled him to see the images of people who lived in the past, as well as foretelling future events. ⁶² He owned – and, most probably, used – a work by Paracelsus, which described the best ways to build magical specula. ⁶³ The help of judicial astrology was necessary, in order to set off the operation at the right time. ⁶⁴ An astrological election and the invocation of certain angels were also essential in the preparation of sigils. Ashmole

60 Quoted in *Josten*, II, p. 565.

61 Ashmole did not record in his diary when he joined the Astrologers' Club. The earliest entry in his diary about the Astrologers' annual Feast in London is dated 1 August 1649. *Josten*, II, p. 492.

62 *Ibi*, II, p. 537.

63 Ashmole had a copy of Paracelsus' *Theophrastus Bombast, ab Hohenheim, dicti Paracelsi, Operum Medico-Chimicorum sive Paradoxorum, Tomus Genuinus Undecimus, Et Philosophici vero Quartus, continens Astronomiam Magnam cum Artibus incertis, transmutationibus Metallorum, Magic adversus morbo figuris, et planetarum sigillis* (Frankfurt, 1650), Ashm.MS.1609. The specula-making procedures are on pp. 143-149.

64 Astrology is divided into natural and judicial practices. Natural astrology concerned astral influences on natural phenomena, such as epidemics, as well as human events, like wars. Judicial astrology embraced predictions about specific individuals. For a broad discussion about astrology in Ashmole's time, CURRY, *Prophecy and Power*, cit.

thoroughly annotated his copy of Jean Gaffarel's *Unheard-of Curiosities Concerning the Talismanicall Sculptures of the Persians, the Horoscopes of the Patriarkes, And the Reading of the Stars* (London, 1650).⁶⁵ Natural magic was thus related to Persian learning.⁶⁶

This book may be taken for the earliest testimony of Ashmole's interest in Persian culture – an interest that he might have developed later to the extent of learning the language. He did not actually record in his diary when he did so, as in the case of his first lesson of Hebrew, with Rabbi Solomon Franck, on 26 February 1652⁶⁷ (after the publication of the *Theatrum*, therefore). However, among his manuscripts, some of them, which Ashmole personally transcribed, contained some marginalia in Persian. Ashmole's long-lasting friendship with Thomas Hyde, who was Bodley's librarian from 1665 until 1701, may also be seen as a collateral consequence of his fascination with Middle Eastern cultures. Having become interested in Persian angelology, he also went on to research Persian and Arabic sources for his *History of the Order of the Garter* as well as for his ideas about natural magic and alchemy.

Ashmole was aware of the Persian etymology of the word *magus*, with its magical and spiritual connotations, which he gathered from Marsilio Ficino's «*Contemplator of Heavenly and Divine Sciences, a studious Observer, an expounder of Divine things, a name...gratious in the Gospell*».⁶⁸ Indeed, the Median magi were a magico-priestly caste, whose main powers were healing and prophecy making through the interpretation of dreams. The Persian magus par excellence was Zoroaster, a medicine-man who derived most of his knowledge from various angelic conferences. These were eminently practical occasions, on which the magus, who had the power to summon angelic creatures, was told medical truths, in order to promote the prosperity of the people. The theme of a universal knowledge was also inherent to the angelical wisdom of the Persian magi; this encompassed the study of the four elements and paid

65 Ashm.MS.327. Ashmole refers to both Paracelsus' and Gaffarel's works in the *Annotations* to the *Theatrum*, in the paragraph he devoted to the medical properties of sigils and talismans, whose art was developed by Persians and Arabics. See *TCB*, p. 463.

66 Vittoria FEOLA, «Talismans as automata. Jacques Gaffarel's Curiositez and the mechanisation of nature in seventeenth-century France», *Society and Politics* 13, no. 2(26) (2019): 61-86.

67 *Josten*, II, p. 607.

68 *TCB*, *Annotations*, p. 444.

particular attention to mineralogy and gold-making.⁶⁹ As will be seen in the next section, angelology was a vital part of Ashmole's beliefs. It was, as the example of Zoroaster and the Persian influences which moved Ashmole shows, also connected to practical learning like medicine and natural magic. Together with these, it would help to achieve the true natural philosophy which had been lost with the Fall.

Ashmole found the final confirmation of this belief in the stars. The conjunction of two planets, which began in 1603, had been God's sign of the beginning of a new era of progress in physics, when the «philosophers by fire» would receive the angelical wisdom.⁷⁰ This was related to Ashmole's belief in prophecy, which he expressed, by way of Biblical quotations, in the following terms. «Ther is a Gift of Prophesie hid in the Red Stone, having a Fore-knowledge of the Resurrection, Incarnation of Christ, day of Judgement».⁷¹ Ashmole's definition of the red stone sounds more like a religious metaphor, than what one would expect from a medical expert.

*This is the Stone which some builders up of life have refused, when in truth it was the chiefe Stone in the Corner; It being produced from that undefiled vertue which is yet left with the Creature (as a small reminder of the First Blessing) and able to make a perfect union between the Body, Soule and Spirit, whilst our lively Fire, (that Medium between Body and Spirit), by receiving this Aetheriall Medicine consisting of heavenly vertues (that consume the Impurities and Superfluities of the Body).*⁷²

As well as again using a Biblical language and imagery – and thus again linking practical and spiritual alchemy and natural magic with religion – Ashmole was convinced of the medical properties of the red stone, which may be thus described as a cure for the body. He also ascribed

69 Eliza M. BUTLER, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948; Cambridge: Canto ed. 1993), pp. 15-28; John WILSON, *The Parsi Religion: as Contained in the Zand-Avasta, and Propounded and Defended by the Zoroastrians of India and Persia, Unfolded, Refuted, and Contrasted with Christianity* (Bombay: Bombay American Mission Press, 1843), pp. 447-450.

70 TCB, *Annotations*, pp. 460-461.

71 TCB, *Prolegomena*, Sig.B2r.

72 TCB, *Annotations*, p. 448.

to «the medicine» the power to converse with angels and subjugate demons, however. This may be regarded as the other power of the «blessed stone» he was seeking after: the cure for the soul, an extraordinary means whereby to summon and talk with angels. Thus, alchemy provided the means of purifying learning and philosophy and curing bodies and souls. In short, it allowed people to get back to Adam's pure knowledge and escape from the corruptions of the intervening ages; that it also allowed Ashmole to get rid of all the fleas in his house was an added advantage.

Ashmole's cure for the soul. The spiritual aspects of Ashmole's alchemy

That alchemy had important spiritual connotations as well as practical non-spiritual relevance is evident in Ashmole's comments upon the manuscripts he collected. He regarded alchemy as being a key to religious knowledge and even to achieving salvation. In fact, it will be argued that, not only did his alchemical interests include the belief that alchemy was a spiritual process, but also that his particular interests in angelology and John Dee make it likely that his own peculiar religious beliefs were somewhat unorthodox.⁷³ We will see that although it impossible to describe Ashmole's religious beliefs with any certainty, there are indications that he may even have been interested in ideas associated with Familism. The importance of his religious understanding of alchemy may be seen in a discussion of, first, the significance of the knowledge which he believed alchemy conveyed, secondly, his own understanding of angelology and, thirdly, his interest in John Dee and his understanding of angelology and ideas related to Familism.

Ashmole equated the true alchemist, who was able to achieve angelical knowledge, with the Apostles: «So, that what our Saviour said to his *Disciples*, may... be spoken to the *Elected Sons of Art; Unto you it is given to know the Mysteries of the Kingdome of God; but to others in Parables, that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.*»⁷⁴ This is a reference to Mark's Gospel, chapter 4, 10-12. Indeed, when Ashmole gave three reasons for choosing poetry as the language of the *The-*

73 Vittoria FEOLA, «Elias Ashmole's collections and views about John Dee», *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 43 (2012): 530-538.

74 TCB, *Prolegomena*,

atrum, the third was that it was most suitable for the important type of knowledge he wished to convey. He was actually referring to his belief in the angelical wisdom, which he regarded as the same as the deep meaning of alchemy. He maintained that the metaphorical nature of the language, which was inherent to the genre, made it the best way to conceal what only those enlightened by God will be able to understand.⁷⁵ In other words, in the same way that the original hearers of Christ might hear but not understand, so too, those who read the alchemical texts might read but not understand unless God chose to illuminate their minds.

Indeed, it would appear that the wisdom contained in the alchemical texts was suitable for only a few to understand. Alchemists had to work out a means of preserving their ideas without allowing them to become common knowledge. In Ashmole's words: «[English alchemists'] *Wisdom* and *Policy* was, First to finde out a way to *Teach*, and then an *Art* (which was *This*) to *Conceale*.»⁷⁶ Secrecy was needed, because «*Angelicall wisdom* is to be obteyned by it.»⁷⁷ This is related to the way in which alchemy teaches, that is, to scatter information throughout the text, so that the poem would become a virtual map. This concept is crucial in Norton's *Ordinall of Alchimy*, which Ashmole took as the perfect example of the way to «teach and conceale» alchemy.⁷⁸ In the fifth chapter of his poem, Norton's argument was that the reader should regard his poem as a reference book: by mentioning various philosophers, he was actually telling the skilful reader where to look for the missing information.⁷⁹ This was the main difference between an alchemical recipe, whose meaning was straightforward, and which could be practically employed for the «great work», and a text on spiritual alchemy. It could be inferred, therefore, that this was the way Ashmole regarded his *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. It was a guide to alchemical wisdom, but it could not set it out in a straightforward manner, because the knowledge that it contained was not to be understood by everyone. Rather, it would be

75 TCB, *Prolegomena*, Sig. B3v. «Nor did the *Ancients* wrap up their *Chiefest Mysteries*, any where else, then in the *Parobolical & Allusive* part of *Poetry*, as the most *Sacred*, and *Venerable* in their *Esteeme*, and the *securest* from *Prophane* and *Vulgar Wits*».

76 *Ibi*, B3v.

77 TCB, *Annotations*, p. 447.

78 *Ibi*, pp. 437-40.

79 TCB, pp. 52-90, in particular pp. 53-57.

understood by those illuminated by God. We might almost say that it would be understood by those selected by God, or even 'the elect' or 'the elected sons of art' – the knowledge described was, as will be seen, about how people could achieve the philosophers stone or, in a way, be saved.

Ashmole advocates the authority of the Bible to support the oath of secrecy, by referring to Judgement:13:18, where an angel told Manoah not to ask further questions about the miraculous conception of Samson. What is interesting about Ashmole's decision to quote this passage is that the Bible does not mention, on purpose, the name of the divine messenger. Ashmole, instead, knew it: «*His name was Peli, to wit, admirable and secret.*»⁸⁰ This is significant, because, as I will demonstrate later, it shows Ashmole's study of angelology, well before he began to study Hebrew, as well as before he could have seen Dee's angelical manuscripts.

The knowledge which Ashmole thought alchemy could convey was partly to do with salvation, as will be seen, but also to do with Adamitic knowledge. It may be that the two can be equated, since Adam before the Fall lived in a state of total but innocent knowledge, and in paradise. Ashmole was aware that the suggestion that he was aspiring towards Adamitic knowledge was a great claim. He defended the aim by saying that «*Adam, who before his Fall was so absolute a Philosopher, that he fully understood the true and pure knowledge of Nature (which is no other then what we call Naturall Magick) in the highest degree of Perfection.*»⁸¹ There can be no offence or sin in the alchemists' endeavours «(were it possible) to arrive at his *Perfection*», for «*Adams transgression (for which he fell) was of a higher Nature, [even that proud inquiry into the knowlede of good and evill, with no lesse intent then to make a totall defection from God, and depend wholly upon himselfe and his free will.]*»⁸² Thus Ashmole rejected the sin of pride embodied in the Fall. It has to be borne in mind that the idea of man seeking after the perfect Adamitic knowledge was a recurrent theme in Renaissance thought. Ashmole was familiar with philosophers like Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa who were all hermeticists and thought that such knowledge could be achieved.⁸³ It is difficult to evince from Ash-

80 *TCB, Annotations*, p. 437.

81 *Ibi*, p. 445.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 446.

83 In his *Annotations*, Ashmole quotes from these thinkers; see in particular pp. 444-451.

mole's words, however, how far that perfect pre-Fall knowledge is important in the process of justification.

How far the knowledge which alchemical texts could convey was about salvation is difficult to establish, but he did have a highly religious attitude towards his *prima materia*. Ashmole's ideas about the knowledge to be conveyed by the alchemical texts can be seen particularly in his life-long interest in John Dee, with special reference to his angelology. Indeed, Ashmole's insistence on equating alchemical knowledge with angelical wisdom, without making alchemical experiments, gives the impression that alchemy had for him deeply theological connotations.

Ashmole believed in the property of the stone to put the alchemist in contact with God; and we can see that he considered the achievement of such special relationship the ultimate and true goal of alchemy. Ashmole pointed this out, when he stated:

For they being lovers of *Wisdome* more than *Wordly Wealth*, drove at higher and more *Excellent Operations*: And certainly He to whom the whole *Course of Nature* lyes open [that is, the successful alchemist] rejoyceth not so much that he can make *Gold* and *Silver*, or the *Divells* to become *Subject* to him, as that he sees the *Heavens* open, the *Angells* of *God* Ascending and Descending, and that his own Name is fairely written in the *Book of life*.⁸⁴

Indeed, Ashmole's view of the alchemist as a natural philosopher who gets in contact with God by way of manipulating nature and is rewarded with the perfect knowledge of both worlds, below and above, finds here its best formulation. Alchemy was, it would seem, a way to win salvation and, since this passage is found in the same text which claims that alchemy aspires towards Adamitic knowledge, it would seem that Adamitic knowledge, or complete knowledge of true natural philosophy is a way to achieve salvation.

If this is the ultimate goal of alchemy for Ashmole it is possible to argue that his religious beliefs about grace can be illustrated by reference to his ideas about alchemy. Indeed, the statement about what alchemists can achieve lends itself to a deeper analysis, for it implies a consideration of God's intervention in the alchemical process, and by extension a definition of what grace and salvation meant for Ashmole. Did alche-

84 TCB, *Prolegomena*, Sig. A4v.

mists achieve the stone by themselves or was God's help needed? The point that the texts would only be understood by the illuminated suggests that God's help was needed. Finally, when Ashmole refers to «angels ascending and descending», he was actually hinting at a cabalistic concept, that is Jacob's ladder, according to which man can reach God and ascend and descend from earth to heaven because he has been able to become like God.

Furthermore, Ashmole speaks of the degrees of importance he attached to the powers acquired by the alchemist: first, the chemical transmutation; then, the subjugation of demons; and then, the power of conversing with angels. As a non-practising alchemist, Ashmole seems here to believe in the possibility that practical alchemists attained an immense power through the performance of chemical experiments, which was made possible by the intervention of God's grace. Indeed, we can interpret Ashmole's words either metaphorically or literally. In the first case, the metaphor works really well, according to classical Christian thought. The alchemical transmutation, that is the success of chemical operations performed according to given cosmological beliefs, is successful as a result of the behaviour of the pious adept. He has defeated the demons, that is to say he has been able to conquer earthly desires, and can now talk with angels: this is the Lord's reward for becoming good enough to attain the *opus*. If we are to take Ashmole literally, his belief in the powers of the stone may still be seen within the domain of Christian orthodoxy. A man can subjugate demons with God's help, as is the case with exorcisms, and there is a sound scriptural basis for the possibility of contacts with angels. But as will be mentioned it might also give rise to some doubt.

In the introduction to his first alchemical publication, the *Fasciculus Chemicus*, Ashmole had already made clear that «The *Philosophers* tell us, *One Glass, One Furnace, one Fire*, (and that an *immaterial* one, not to be found in the *Furnace* of the *Chymists*) is sufficient to perfect the work.»⁸⁵ B.J.T. Dobbs has argued that the seventeenth-century epithet «philosopher by fire» was actually used to distinguish the serious alchemical philosopher from the charlatans or the amateur «chymists».⁸⁶ Indeed, Ashmole adopted the definition of «philosopher by fire» in opposition to the chymists, whose natural philosophy was far inferior to the

85 ELIAS ASHMOLÉ, *Fasciculus Chemicus* (London, 1650), n.p., but first page.

86 DOBBS, *The Janus faces of genius*, cit., p. 1

great mysteries of that natural magic – to which alchemical knowledge pertained – was able to uncover.

*The Magick here intended, and which I strive to Vindicate, is Divine, True, of the Wisdom of Nature, & indeed comprehendeth the whole Philosophy of Nature, being a Perfect Knowledge of the Works of God and their Effects. It is that, which reduces all natural philosophy from variety of Speculations to the magnitude of workes, and whose Misteries are far greater then the naturall Philosophy now in use and reputation will reach unto.*⁸⁷

Ashmole explains that this perfect knowledge may be achieved by the true «philosophers by fire» thanks to the propitious moment he was able to find out astrologically:

*The Circuit of that great and Sabbathicall conjunction of the two Superiour Planets which began An. 1603. Is in the Fiery Triplicity, will Illustrate, Enlarge, and Refine Arts like the tryed Gold, It shall produce more pregnant and famous Philosophers by Fire, (I meane such as is Etheriall).*⁸⁸

The alchemist can, then, work out how to contact angels and find true knowledge. This seems to place more emphasis on the ability of alchemists to «save themselves» than we might expect.

The «Etheriall Stone» was the one, which gave the alchemist the power to summon angels and subjugate demons. Ashmole insists on this concept, which he had touched upon in the *Prolegomena* to the *Theatrum*, by saying in the annotations that the philosophers by fire will be made «ingenious *Inquisitors*...fit *Mettall* for *Angells* to Project on.»⁸⁹ Indeed, more specifically, the «Angelical stone» is

*so subtile...that it can neither be seen, felt or weighed; but Tasted only...It hath a Divine Power, Celestiall and Invisible above the rest; and endowes the possessor with Divine Gifts. It affords the Apparition of Angells, and gives a power of conversing with them, by Dreams and Revelations.*⁹⁰

87 *TCB, Annotations*, p. 444.

88 *Ibi*, p. 460.

89 *Ibi*, p. 461

90 *TCB, Prolegomena*, Sig. B1v.

This proves the point that Ashmole was a non-practising alchemist, for his interest in the philosopher's stone was due to its angelical properties, that is, its capacity to turn the alchemist into a superior being, able to talk with angels. This relates to two important aspects of Ashmole's thought. First, since the alchemist is concerned with the furnace, the glass and the fire «immaterial», and the stone «etheriall», it follows that the ultimate goal of the alchemist, who is the «philosopher by fire», is to get in contact with God in a spiritual sense. Secondly, in a number of different passages in the *Theatrum*, which will be discussed later, Ashmole pointed out that the stone was in fact a thing, whose main usefulness has to do with medicine. It might be argued that Ashmole was not consistent, in that he seems to have subscribed to different interpretations of the meanings of alchemy. If one looks at it more closely, however, one will see Ashmole's religious beliefs underpinning these contradictory aspects. Without God's illumination, the alchemist will not find the stone. Without God's help in setting out a propitious time, which can be astrologically determined, the great work may not be accomplished. Without God's intervention, therefore, alchemy would be worthless and impossible to practice. In that short sentence in his first alchemical edition, Ashmole had already made clear that he was searching for knowledge in a mystical way. It seems that the way to get the perfect knowledge is the same as the way to get salvation: humans can do a great deal themselves, they have to work out when to carry out experiments to summon the angels, but God also is vital, because he gives them the means whereby to work out when to carry out the experiments.

Angels were clearly very important in Ashmole's beliefs about achieving salvation and about alchemy; they also relate to his lifelong interest in John Dee, which will now be considered. Among his collection of alchemical papers, Ashmole gathered, over the years, nineteen volumes, containing original manuscripts and transcriptions of texts by or belonging to John Dee.⁹¹ He even told Anthony Wood that he wanted to publish a biography of Dee.⁹² The only manuscripts to which Ashmole added some marginalia, are those referring to Dee's conversations with angels, along

91 Ashm.MSS.174, ff. 439-45; 179, pp. 1-66; 204, f. 145; 242, ff. 139-53b; 337, ff. 65b-71b; 356, ff. 1-34; 422, ff. 1-80; 423, f. 294ab; 424, ff. 3-355; 487, 580, 972, artt. 31-3; 1420, ff. 271-327; 1423, ff. 23-7b; 1442, ff. 31-2; 1451, ff. 1-66; 1486, pp. 2, 61; 1788, 1790.

92 Ashm.MS.1790, ff. 74-75.

with Dee's cabalistic speculations on the meanings of the angels' names, and many «Enochian tables» containing numbers and letters, which were probably to be interpreted cabalistically. Furthermore, Ashmole also appears to have studied Dee's transcripts in the angelical language, that is, pages and pages written in an incomprehensible idiom, without a hint of their actual meaning.⁹³ It is to these particular manuscripts, and only to these, that somebody added various marginalia in Persian. At the stage when Ashmole acquired most of Dee's manuscripts, it would appear that Ashmole copied everything by himself; it seems likely, therefore, that he was also the author of the notes. The manuscripts belonged to Sir John Cotton's library. Besides, it should be borne in mind that the job of transcribing such lengthy texts, and, above all, copying so many cabalistic tables, must have required a long time and a substantial effort. Furthermore, in the 1670s, once he had secured his financial position and his *History of the Order of the Garter* had earned him fame of learned antiquary, Ashmole could have hired a number of people to help him with the transcriptions of manuscripts. Ashmole's decision to carry out the task of transcribing the tables by himself may be taken, therefore, as the measure of the significance he attached to those angelical manuscripts.

Ashmole finished the transcription of the *Liber Mysteriorum, Sextus et Sanctus*⁹⁴ on 20 August 1673. It has been catalogued as Edward Kelly's transcript of a book presented to him by an angel in 1583⁹⁵, but Ashmole has annotated that that was in fact Dee's transcript.⁹⁶ The manuscript contained «Enochian tables». These were tables made up of letters and numbers, preceded by pages written in the «Enochian language», that is, Adam's language before the Fall. Dee claimed to have received those tables from various angels, who also taught him to understand «Enochian». Under an Enochian table Ashmole has annotated «A medio aquarum, et flumine, misteriarum naturarum, exaudi nos deo omnipo-

93 Ashm.MSS. 422, 580, 1788, 1790.

94 Ashm.MS.422

95 William H. BLACK, *A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue of the Manuscripts Bequeathed unto the University of Oxford by Elias Ashmole, Esq., MD, FRS, Windsor Herald, also of Some Additional MSS. Contributed by Kinglsey, Lhuyd, Borlase, and Others* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1845)

96 Ashm.MS.422, f. 15r.

tens, propter laude nomini tui, multa sunt enim peccata nostra.»⁹⁷ Under another table, one reads «Soli deo, laus, et honor sempiternus».⁹⁸ Next to other tables there are short sentences in Persian.⁹⁹

It can be inferred that Ashmole was particularly interested in Dee's cabalistic skills in relation to the way he used the angelical knowledge in order to find out angels' names. Indeed, Ashmole somehow managed to offer an interpretation for the Enochian tables. He wrote down a solution, and, on 16 August 1673 (which suggests that he was reflecting on this topic using all the angelical writings by Dee) included it into another manuscript.

I found out the Composition of the Angells from the Tables to be thus. BALIGON is thus composed: being the Name of the first Angell. The Midle of these 7 Tables containes the first Letters of the Names of all the Angells (signified by the Number (i) at the head of each Square) & the other numbers direct to each B in order. The 2nd Letter of BALIGON (which is A) is taken out of the 2 Table, where you finde A with the figurer (i) before it; noting that it is to be applied to the first Angells name. The 3rd Letter (which is L) is taken out of the 3rd Table where you find L & the Number (i) before it this Number still noting this letter L belongs to the first Angells Name. The forth Letter (I), is found in the 4th Table with the Number (i) before it. The fift Letter (G) is found in the 5 Table, with the Letter (i) before it. The sixt Letter (O) is found in the 6 Table, with (i) before it. Lastly the letter (N) is in the 7 Table, with (i) set before it. And so are the other Angells names composed.¹⁰⁰

This is the longest annotation Ashmole included in his alchemical papers. He thought he had understood the angelical language which was also the language of Adam before the Fall.

Ashmole also copied the prayers John Dee used before setting off for his alchemical and cabalistic undertakings. Their tone is mystical, and revealed Dee's beliefs in the power of prayer, as a means by which to summon the right angel, who would give him knowledge:

97 «Through water and thunder, mysteries of nature, grant our wishes, God almighty, in praise of your name, many are our sins», f.48v.

98 «Praise and honour to God forever and ever», f.42v.

99 Cf. ff. 37r, 48r, 49v, 54r.

100 Ashm.MS.1790, f. 48r.

Prair is the key that opens all things. Enlighten the darkness of my imperfections with the light of the good Spirit. O Sone Lighten my imperfections, & glorify my minde to the sight of innumerable most holy & unspeakable Misteries. Things are not revealed without praier.¹⁰¹

This emphasises the point that the unilluminated might look but not see and hear but not understand. Only those chosen by God might understand the mysteries of alchemy and, we may presume, salvation through that knowledge.

On 22 September 1687 Ashmole was still reflecting on the meanings of angels' names:

5:H.PM. Inquere for the famous and rich discoveries (at: Sir John Cottons) written by Dr Dee, & obserue whether Annael, which is praepositus orbis veneris (that is, the «guardian angel of planet Venus»), be not there written with a double n.¹⁰²

This is a further testimony of Ashmole's life-long interest in Dee, which also means interest in alchemy, as a part of the angelical knowledge after which he was seeking. On the same page, Ashmole added a few more notes. «Ed: Talbot [ie. Edward Kelly] came to Dr: Dee at Mortlake (10 May 11:H A.M.) with the intention to introp him.» And immediately afterwards: «Uriell spake plainely (to the hearing of E. T.). Michaille is the Interpreter of the Book of Soyga.»¹⁰³ The explanation of these three short sentences could provide a key to understanding Ashmole's beliefs. It may also correct the most recent historiographical interpretation of Dee's angelology. The second sentence implies Ashmole's distrust of Kelly, who acted as a sryer for Dee during his and Dee's sojourn in Eastern Europe, in 1583-1586.¹⁰⁴ Dee employed four sryers in the course of his life-long conversations with angels, but none seem to have had Dee's comprehensive knowledge of alchemy and cabala. Nevertheless, the angelical writings are characterised by a homogeneous tone and repetition of the same

101 *Ibi*, f. 38r.

102 Ashm.MS.1790, f. 54b.

103 *Ibidem*.

104 Ashmole pointed out in the Annotations that Kelly had broken the oath of alchemical secrecy, hence his bad luck, given the religious meaning of the art. *TCB, Annotations*, p. 465.

ideas. It may be inferred, therefore, that those writings reflect Dee's ideas. This is significant because Ashmole was always very interested in Dee. It is, perhaps, important that, as Deborah Harkness says, Dee faced each discrepancy between angelic and traditional alchemy with a firm belief that he was receiving Adam's «true alchemy.»¹⁰⁵ Ashmole, like Dee, thought that he was aspiring to Adamic knowledge. Exactly what the nature of Dee's conversations with angels was is not known: did his scribes simply trick him? Did he just write about his own beliefs in dialogue form, and if so, why did he write so many pages in the incomprehensible 'angelical language'? These are questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily. Dee also provides a final point about Ashmole's beliefs which shows that they might not have been totally orthodox.

It has been suggested that Dee could have been an adept of the Family of Love, whose agenda was to reunify Christianity on the basis of a few, fundamental dogmas, but who also emphasised direct contact with God through illumination, and adopted Nicodemite behaviour in order to gain followers.¹⁰⁶ This means that Familists were encouraged to behave according to the religion of the place in which they lived, provided they secretly worshipped God in the manner which had been taught by the original founder of the sect, the Dutch merchant from Emden, Hendrik Niclaes. Familists were harshly persecuted in Protestant countries, whereas, despite their condemnation, they did not cause much concern to Catholic inquisitors. This seems to have been due to the Familist denial of predestination, which was the main Protestant argument for the process of salvation.¹⁰⁷ The point about individual illumination may be related to Ashmole's claims about the impossibility of understanding alchemical texts without God's help. Only those whom God chose to illuminate might understand the mysteries of alchemy, and avoid looking but not seeing and hearing but not understanding. It is possible that Ashmole

105 Deborah E. HARKNESS, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels. Cabala, Alchemy and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 201.

106 Elie BARNAVI, Miriam ELIAV-FELDON, *Le périple de Francesco Pucci. Utopie, hérésie et vérité religieuse dans la Renaissance tardive* (Paris: Hachette, 1988), p. 142.

107 Alistair HAMILTON, *The Family of Love* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1981); Charles W. MARSH, *The Family of Love in English Society, 1550-1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). The link between the Order of the Garter and Familism in Elizabethan England has been explored by Jan VAN DORSTEN, *Garter Knights and Familists*, reprinted from *Journal of European Studies*, 1974 (Leiden: Brill, 1982).

regarded the 'elected sons of art' as those illuminated by God. This would be similar to a Familist position.

Frances Yates has contentiously defined John Dee's religious outlook as «religious Hermetism».¹⁰⁸ As has been pointed out, Ashmole had a lifelong interest in Dee. Ashmole might be described in the same way as Dee, according to Yates' criteria. At the risk of an oversimplification, these were: the belief in Hermes Trismegistus' doctrine, and the pursuit of knowledge through alchemy, astrology, and natural magic. Deborah Harkness has criticised Yates' view,¹⁰⁹ but without really supplying a suitable alternative definition for that kind of religious beliefs. Both historians misunderstand hermeticism, in that neither of them saw the basic concept, that is, that religious hermetism was not a theological system as such, but its spiritual roots were to be found in various unorthodox currents in Christian thought. Consequently, Ashmole, like Dee, as well as many other «hermetic philosophers», cannot be regarded as devout members of a particular denomination by virtue of being hermeticists. Besides, it would be an unjustified oversimplification that somebody who believed it was possible to summon an angel thanks to the alchemical wisdom, might then be called a devout Christian. Angels are God's messengers; God chooses when and to whom he wants to send them. People cannot even dare to think they can summon them. The powers alchemists were meant to acquire by the time they succeeded in producing the red stone, that is, the angelical stone, as Ashmole calls it, are just not contemplated in orthodox Christianity.¹¹⁰ This would suggest that it is right to regard Ashmole as holding unorthodox religious beliefs. Alchemical texts were a good way to express them because they could, as Merkur said, express ideas as if they were in cypher.

Ashmole had several contacts with another Familist, John Everard. While Ashmole was reflecting on Dee's angelical conferences, he acquired Everard's gloss upon Hermes Trismegistus' *Smaragdine Table*.¹¹¹ On the

108 Frances A. YATES, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1964), p. 188.

109 HARKNESS, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels*, cit., p. 56.

110 For an introduction to Christian theology, Alistair McGRATH, *Christian Theology. An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

111 Ashm.MS.1440, on the first page Ashmole annotated: «The copy whence I transcribed this was lent me by Mr. Britton, 22 Oct:1678». Everard's gloss is dated Fulham, 9 August 1640.

same occasion, he also copied a manuscript of Ripley's *The Marrow of Alchemy*.¹¹² Ashmole underlined in red ink some key-sentences of Everard's gloss.

There being one universall matter & form of all things, differenced only by accidente, and particularly by the greate mystery of Rarification and Condensation. [...] Mercury to shew the great variety and deuersity of operations wrought by the Spirit it worketh all things in all things. God having created all things [...] in number, weight, & measure, for wisdom builde her owne house. The Father of this one thing, is the Sun, or the which he useth instead of an Agent, in all the Operations thereof, and the Mother thereof, which supplies the place of a Female and Patient, is the Moone; the Nurse thereof receiving in her Lappe all the influences of heate & moisture, the Sulphur and Mercury of Nature (for the Spirit of GOD moveth not but upon the face of the water) is the Earth. As one of the links in the chayne, it the Superiour things to them it are below. This is the Father, originall & fountaine (of all perfections), and all the Secret and miraculous things done [...] to performe these miracles and many mo; that is from a Volatile & unfixt thing as it was both before & in the preparacion, a most fixed Earth, but quintessential, wherein all the Virtues are both concentrated & doubled, nay infinitely increased. [...] for to every thing is there as an appointed tyme, & for this production of all animalls, vegetables & Mineralls [...] Thus was the world created.¹¹³

Thus, in the case of the first English translator of the writings of the legendary founder of alchemy, Familism provided the ideal religious beliefs to sustain the idea of God's enlightened adepts. It cannot be proved that Ashmole was in any real sense a Familist, but he appears to have held views similar to those maintained by members of the family of Love.

Ashmole's cure for the soul was, as has been seen, the etherial or the angelical stone. According to his definition, it was «so subtile, that it can neither be *seen, felt, or weighed*».¹¹⁴ This means that it was purely spiritual. Ashmole's deep interest in John Dee's angelical tables, therefore, may be understood as Ashmole's practical attempt to attain the cure for

112 Ashm.MS.1440, ff. 205-207.

113 *Ibi*, ff. 18-19.

114 TCB, *Prolegomena*, Sig. B1v.

the soul. The fact that he did not «set himself into the manual practice» of the philosopher's stone may be regarded as the logical consequence of his belief in the spiritual meaning of the angelical wisdom. He did believe in the actual possibility of turning base metals into gold, but his aim was to achieve angelical wisdom, that is salvation. The fact that Ashmole reflected on Dee's angelical papers for so many years may suggest that he was trying to gain angelical wisdom, because he believed that Dee had succeeded in receiving the Enochian tables. Ashmole worked out a system whereby to interpret Dee's angels' names. According to his ideas about «God's elected sons of art», it is possible that he regarded that achievement as the proof of God's illumination. A Familist would have described the same process as the manifestation of 'God's within'. On the basis of the evidence available, it is possible to suggest that Elias Ashmole's religious beliefs may have been at least partly unorthodox, despite his claims to be a devout High Church Anglican. Surely, Ashmole's cure for the soul has never been preached from the pulpit.