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SUMMARY

SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY FROM THE AGE OF JACOB BOEHME TO MARY ANNE ATWOOD, 1600–1900

‘Spiritual alchemy’ is a contested term that is often accompanied by far-reaching claims about the presumed essence of alchemy. During the past two centuries, alchemy was often viewed as essentially ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’, ‘psychological’ or ‘moral’. Through recent Anglophone scholarship, known as the New Historiography of Alchemy, this older understanding has been repudiated and alchemy could emphatically be positioned within the history of science. The New Historiography has shown that most alchemists worked primarily in laboratories and, in this manner, contributed to the scientific revolution of the early-modern era. However, the paradigm of the New Historiography appears to be influenced by implicitly essentialist presuppositions, as a consequence of which the spectrum of alchemy is not yet recognized nor researched in its full breadth and complexity. It appears particularly difficult for the New Historiography to convincingly integrate modern forms of alchemy, which frequently have less to do with laboratory work.

In this thesis, by following the methodology of the New Historiography to its logical conclusion, I historicize alchemy as a complex of historical phenomena that do not have a single religious or scientific essence. By expanding the field upon which the New Historiography can be brought to bear, I show that there is considerably more continuity between the early-modern and modern ages than previously assumed. It appears that a formerly marginal strand of early-modern alchemy exerted crucial influence on the first major presentation of modern alchemy.

Despite the troubled past of this term, I reclaim ‘spiritual alchemy’ as a precisely definable category for historical research. The term stands for the practical pursuit of inward but physically real transmutation, its goal being the reversal of the Fall as a preparation for the resurrection of the dead at the Last Judgment. As such, spiritual alchemy is closely connected to spiritual rebirth, an important idea in church history. This alchemical school developed around the turn of the seventeenth century, due to the confluence of two important currents: German mysticism and alchemical Paracelsianism. In underground networks of religious dissenters, mystical and spiritualist as well as alchemical and Paracelsian writings circulated side by side, for which reason they could influence one another. In some pseudepigraphic writings, attributed

to Valentin Weigel, a three-way analogy between the philosophers' stone, Christ's Incarnation and the spiritual rebirth of the believer was first posited around 1600. Through this, the reach of the widespread, traditional *lapis-Christus* analogy, already encountered in earlier alchemical literature, was expanded in a crucial manner. The Nuremberg alchemist Johann Siebmacher and the Torgau astrologer Paul Nagel were among the earliest readers of this pseudo-Weigelian alchemy. They further disseminated it in printed as well as manuscript works. In this context, spiritual alchemy eventually reached Jacob Boehme. Although he initially knew little about alchemy, Boehme – who would become a towering figure in intellectual history – developed his own spiritual alchemy in a number of works written between 1619 and 1622. According to Boehme's understanding, laboratory alchemy was but a lesser, grossly material reflection of spiritual alchemy.

All of the later key figures discussed throughout this thesis drew on Boehme's spiritual alchemy. They retained its core elements but also added their own individual emphases. Based on letters, manuscripts and printed works, I show that there was contact and exchange of ideas between Abraham von Franckenberg, Georg Lorenz Seidenbecher, Friedrich Breckling and Dionysius Andreas Freher in this regard. Geographically, spiritual alchemy thus travelled from Silesia to the Low Countries and thence to England. Subsequently, English Behmenists preserved Freher's manuscript works until the nineteenth century. In 1850, Mary Anne South (later known as Mrs Atwood) wrote her especially influential *Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*. In the years leading up to this, she and her father, Thomas South, had engaged with Mesmerism and the writings of Freher, as documented by their correspondence with Christopher Walton, who amassed the world's largest collection of Freher manuscripts. My analysis of the *Suggestive Inquiry* differs from past interpretations by assessing Mesmerism as relatively unimportant, highlighting instead the crucial impact of the spiritual alchemy of rebirth, as developed by Boehme and Freher. In contrast to the suggestion of the New Historiography, we do not encounter a radical break with the alchemical past in the *Suggestive Inquiry* – to the contrary, the work directly derives from early-modern spiritual alchemy.

To the extent that the New Historiography remains based on an implicitly essentialist vision of alchemy as science, it does not leave any room for the phenomenon of spiritual alchemy described throughout this thesis. To arrive at a more accurate picture of how modern forms of alchemy are related to earlier texts and phenomena, historians have to abandon every kind of essentialism (whether implicit or explicit) and pay due attention to all relevant historical actors, even if they did not directly engage with laboratory alchemy. Only with such an expanded

perspective of the field does it become possible to understand and describe the historical and content-related connections between modern and earlier forms of alchemy.

SAMENVATTING

SPIRITUELE ALCHEMIE VAN DE TIJD VAN JACOB BOEHME TOT MARY ANNE ATWOOD, 1600–1900

“Spirituele alchemie” is een omstreden begrip dat vaak samengaat met verstrekken- de beweringen over de veronderstelde essentie van de alchemie. Gedurende de afge- lopen twee eeuwen werd alchemie vaak gezien als in wezen ‘religieus’, ‘spiritueel’, ‘psychologisch’ of ‘moreel’ van aard. Door recent engelstalig, wetenschappelijk on- derzoek, bekend als de Nieuwe Historiografie van de Alchemie, is deze oudere opvat- ting verworpen en is de alchemie nadrukkelijk binnen de geschiedenis van de natuur- wetenschappen gepositioneerd. De Nieuwe Historiografie heeft aangetoond dat de meeste alchemisten voornamelijk in laboratoria werkten en op deze manier bijdroe- gen aan de wetenschappelijke revolutie van de vroeg-moderne periode. Het paradig- ma van de Nieuwe Historiografie blijkt echter zelf te worden beïnvloed door impli- ciet essentialistische vooronderstellingen, en als gevolg daarvan wordt het spectrum van de alchemie nog niet in haar volle breedte en complexiteit onderkend en onder- zocht. In het bijzonder blijkt het voor de Nieuwe Historiografie moeilijk om moderne versies van de alchemie – die vaak minder met laboratoriumwerk te maken hebben – overtuigend te integreren.

Door de methodologie van de Nieuwe Historiografie met volle consequentie te volgen, historiseer ik de alchemie in deze dissertatie als een complex van historische verschijnselen die geen gezamenlijke religieuze of natuurwetenschappelijke essen- tie gemeen hebben. Door het gebied waarop de Nieuwe Historiografie kan worden toegepast op deze manier uit te breiden, laat ik zien dat er tussen de vroeg-moderne en moderne perioden aanzienlijk meer continuïteit bestaat dan voorheen werd aan- genomen. Zo wordt duidelijk dat een voorheen marginale vorm van vroeg-moderne alchemie aanzienlijk invloed uitoefende op de eerste belangrijke presentatie van mo- derne alchemie.