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Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival: The Alchemical Inspiration

Ingrid Lotze*

Abstract - The earliest translations of alchemical treatises into Latin appeared in the 12th century. Scholarly analyses about literary works written during the High Middle Ages are limited to general observations and the evaluation of sources from non-specific times. This paper argues that Wolfram von Eschenbach not only read Latin but that he integrated alchemical theories and spirituality from two 12th-century treatises in his *Parzival*. The treatises in question are *De compositione alchemiae* and the *Tabula Smaragdina*.

Introduction

At the end of the second book of his *Parzival*, Wolfram von Eschenbach claims that he does not know a single letter of the alphabet, and that book-learning will not help to understand his “aventure” (115.29). The controversy with regard to Wolfram’s assertion continues unabated, although it appears that scholarly opinions seem to veer towards disavowing the claim and consider it at best a pose. There is, however, one consideration that could bypass the dilemma. Wolfram was obviously familiar with the infiltration of Arabic science into the Latin Culture since the middle of the 12th century. It seems likely that his fascination with medicine, astronomy, and astrology could, equally, have included occult topoi like alchemy. In fact, attempts have repeatedly been made to trace alchemical motifs and spirituality in his work. They have not found acceptance by the scholarly community. Justifiably so, since none of the studies have been based on a careful scrutiny of the alchemical treatises Wolfram might have read or at least heard about.

The Kyot Screen

In the following I intend to exemplify my assertion that Wolfram not only read specific alchemical treatises but integrated alchemical spirituality into his romance. His deliberate denial of booklearning may have been prompted by his decision to conceal his knowledge of a dubious occult science.

The alchemical treatises in question were probably the most easily accessible and inspirational documents. The *Tabula Smaragdina*, Julius Ruska concludes in his momentous study, represents man’s eternal desire to connect the macrocosm with the microcosm. It became, in spite of its brevity and its cryptic language, the most revered and sacred charter document of *Al-Kimia*.

The treatise *De compositione alchemiae*, on the other hand, encloses what the philosophers call the

“maius opus”, the Major Work, in a literary composition, which parallels, in a suggestive way, the first Trevrizent episode in *Parzival*.¹ An old hermit or recluse, Morienus Romanus, knowledgeable about the Superior Work, the “opus superius”, engages in a conversation with King Khalid, who had been most assiduous in his quest for the science, “erat enim iste multum intentus in opere maiore.” Assured of his sincerity and humility, “humilitatem molliciem”, the old hermit entrusts him with the secret of secrets, the “secretum secretorum”, the “magisterium”.

In the final 39-line section of his romance, Wolfram finally mentions Chretien de Troyes, whose narrative *Le Conte du Graal* had been his major source, and humorously belittles Chretien by comparing him with Kyot, whose mystifying tale had enriched his own story.

Ob von Troys meister Cristjan
disem maere hat unreht getan,
daz mac wol zurnen Kyot,
der uns diu rehten maere enbot.
(827. 1-4)

If Master Chretien de Troyes has done this tale an injustice, that may well anger Kyot who gave us the true story.

According to near-unanimous scholarly opinion, “Kyot der meister wol bekant” (453.11), is Wolfram’s invention. Wolfram praises him for having found the true story in Toledo, written in “heidenischer schrifte” (453.13), which he translates with much finesse into “franzoyz” (416.28). With admirable ingenuity, Wolfram hides his fascination with alchemy behind the Kyot screen.

De Compositione Alchemiae

Chretien de Troyes’s last unfinished romance, *Le Conte du Graal*, was Wolfram’s principal narrative source. He transfers the full scope of Chretien’s plot fairly closely into his romance, but he freely changes

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episodic details and reveals enigmatic originality throughout by linking events with religious innuendos. With respect to two of Wolfram's transcending creative ideas, however, no trace can be found in *Le Conte du Graal*. For Chretien, geneology is not an essential issue, but for Wolfram it is a controlling device. Parzival is the lawful heir of the Grail dynasty. For Chretien, the Grail seems to be a bowl made of the purest finest gold and decorated with the rarest jewels one could find. For Wolfram, the grail is a stone that possesses the most miraculous qualities.

Inasmuch as there are no convincing scholarly arguments explaining why Wolfram deviates in such a singular way from the *Conte du Graal*, it is of suggestive importance that a close reading of *De compositione alchemiae* provides the rationale for Wolfram's change.

The Inheritance Motif

Most of the earliest alchemical works were written in Greek. In almost all of them, religious considerations are prevalent. Morienus the Greek, the most important protagonist in *De compositione alchemiae*, is firmly rooted in the religious tradition. He begins his instruction of King Khalid with an incantation of the Lord, holy and compassionate: "In nomine Domini pii et misericordis". He twists, however, the religious bias in a direction which corresponds to Wolfram's linkage of the grail story with the regency of a chosen family. Almighty God in his power, Morienus explains, created powerless servants. "Omnipotens deus et creator ex potentia servos impotentes creavit." And from among his servants, he chose to select certain ones to seek after the knowledge he had established. "Et iste posuit ex suis servis eos quos voluit et quos elegit ut quererent sapientiam." Those so chosen used to hand down this knowledge to their own heirs. "Et semper isti unus post alium hanc, sapientiam sibi hereditabant."

The stratification of the alchemical society, as sketched by Morienus, conspicuously resembles that of the Grail society in *Parzival*. From among the society at large, or the powerless servants, the Grail—through an epitaphium—names those which have been chosen to join the brotherhood and become privileged members of the grail society. It is the hierarchical structure of this society, and its importance in the overall narrative, which differentiates *Parzival* from the *Conte du Graal*. Wolfram regards his romance as a story of a family, of a succession of rulers of the same line of descent.

The inheritance motif is of significant interest, since it is not a frequently recurring motif in alchemical treatises. It may have originated with the society

of the Brethren of Purity, a secret society of Muslim philosophers in Iraq in the 8th or 10th century CE. Ja'far al-Sadiq (700 or 702 to 765) the sixth Shi'ite imam, wrote a missive to his son and heir about the science and art of the noble stone (see Ruska 1924). "Our ancestor has said that the beginning of this art was a revelation of God to his prophets and the brethren of Purity (seine Reinen)." He continues by admonishing him that the science has to remain in the keeping of his descendents. They will be the guardians, "Schatzhueter" of the secret. "My son, I bequeath to you a kingdom which will not vanish."

Although not linked anymore with religious considerations, the treatise *De compositione alchemiae* in the same manner couples the inheritance motif with the acquisition of worldly riches. He who masters the opus maior, will be rescued from the wretchedness of the world, from the "mundi miseria", and is assured of future riches, "et ad bona futuri seculi eum reducit".

In all alchemical treatises, the material wealth of the adepts is tied to the production of the elixir, the transmuting agent that can turn all basic metals into gold. Tell me all about the mastery of this operation, "Perfice michi narrando huius operis magisterium", king Khalid pleads with his teacher, whereupon Morienus discourses expertly, "mirabiliter", the various stages of the operation and explains the philosophical underpinnings. After all, when he had lived as a recluse in the mountains of Jerusalem, he had been sending large amounts of gold to Jerusalem every year.

Emphatically, in *Parzival* there is not the slightest indication that on Munsalvaesche the elixir or the transmuting agent is being produced. The void of an alchemically important motif, however, is irrelevant since Wolfram emphasizes the result of the transmutation, the abundance of gold.

The golden objects highlighting the luxurious splendor in the great hall of the Munsalvaesche may be regarded as a covert allusion to an alchemical meaning. The first golden objects, two candlesticks, are carried into the hall by two noble maidens, beautifully adorned with wreaths of flowers.

iewederiu uf der hende
truoc von golde ein kerzstal. (232.18–19)

Chamberlains then bring heavy golden basins to serve the knights seated in the palace, one for every four knights.

swaz ritter do gesezzen was
uber all den palas,
den waren kameraere
mit guldin becken swaere
ie viern geschaffet einer dar. (236.23–27)

“Let me tell you more about the wealth”, Wolfram introduces the appearance of the next golden objects. Four trolleys bring in many precious golden vessels for each knight sitting there.

hoert mer von richheite sagen.
vier karraschen muosen tragen
manec tiwer goldvaz
ieslichem ritter der da saz. (237.21–24)

Finally, small golden vessels supply the knights with the condiments that befitted each food.

in kleiniu goltvaz man nam,
als ieslicher spise zam. (238.25–26)

To summarize: with 400 knights seated, a hue of gold suffused the hall of Munsalvaesche.

The Stone as the Grail

To substantiate the assertion that Wolfram viewed the Grail or the stone as a transmuting agent, it is essential to focus on the definition and the properties of the stone as described by Wolfram in his romance and in *De compositione alchimiae*. A comparison will lead us deeper into the alchemical thought processes. When the Grail first appears during Parzival’s first visit to Munsalvaesche, it is carried by the Queen Repanse de schoye. The narrator vaguely describes it as a thing.

daz was ein dinc, daz hiez der Gral. (235.23)

Since Wolfram compares the grail a second time with a thing, in Flegetanis’s astronomical treatise, a seemingly innocuous statement may betray an understanding of alchemical doctrine. It is clearly spelled out by Morienus in *De compositione alchimiae*. The wise know that this unique thing is hidden and that it is what contains the four elements. “Et sapientes noverunt quod hec sit res una celata et in ea sunt iiii elementa.”

The statement by Morienus, or the author of *De compositione*, draws on very ancient aspirations, when the credibility of alchemy was assured by tying it to Greek philosophical theories. According to Aristotle, the 4 elements—fire, water, earth, and air—are forms or appearances of an underlying single matter, the prima materia. The transformation of one element into another—the underlying matter, the prima materia remaining constant—was the key to transmutation or the production of the philosophers’ stone (see Linden 2003:34–37). “I have for a long time studied the books in order to learn about this unique thing,” Socrates in the *Turba Philosophorum* tells his students, “and I asked God to show me what it is.” When the *Turba* was translated,

sometime in the 12th century, the concept of “the thing” had become a standard doctrine (see Ruska 1931:198).

As for the property of Wolfram’s stone or Grail, the most puzzling characteristic is its changeability: in the hands of “diu falschlich menscheit” (477.17), of false mankind, it is so heavy that it cannot be carried away. Yet in the hands of Repanse de schoye, who had renounced all falsehood, the grail, now almost weightless, permitted itself to be carried.

The identical contrast between heaviness and weightlessness is also a characteristic feature of the stone in *De compositione alchimiae*. In mass it is very weighty, Morienus informs the King, but its proper nature is aerial. “Sed eius pondus est multum grave, ... et eius natura est natura aeris.” It appears that Wolfram infused an enigmatic reference to the alchemical opus with the grail’s mythical and poetic aura.

For the most daring suggestion with regard to the *De compositione alchimiae*, the Latin name Wolfram ascribes to the stone will be used as the basis for a new interpretive analysis. On Munsalvaesche, Parzival’s hermit uncle informs him, dwells a combative group, the grail knights or templeisen.

sie lebet von einem steine :
des geslahte ist vil reine.
hat ir des niht erkennenet,
der wirt iu hie genennet.
er heizet lapsit exillis
(469.3–7)

They live from a stone whose nature is most pure. If you know nothing of it, it shall be named to you here. It is called lapsit exillis.

In spite of a tremendous amount of scholarly effort, and an extensive diversity of interpretations surrounding the name “lapsit exillis”, no general consensus is in sight, except perhaps to view “lapsit” as a distortion of the latin for stone, i.e., lapis. Admittedly, *De compositione alchimiae* offers no easy solution for the conundrum. The stone or lapis is mentioned 11 times but it is not assimilated with exillis. It is only when Morienus shifts the focus to the precious first matter, the prima materia needed for the opus to begin, that an ancient axiom surfaces in his sayings. It could prompt a new interpretation of “lapsit exillis”.

In a 1953 article of *Ambix*, entitled “The Antiquity of Alchemy”, H.E. Stapleton (1953:40) suggests that the author of *De compositione alchimiae* was acquainted with a treatise by Agathodaimon, an alchemist in late Roman Egypt. For Agathodaimon, the “One Thing” from which the noble stone pro-

ceeds “is found among both rich and poor, and from which no spot in the market is free.” Responding to a question of the King, and citing an Authority, “sicut sapiens dixit”, Morienus closely reiterates the theory of Agathodaimon. “It is there for both rich and poor, it is cast in the streets.”

The prima materia, the omnipresent starting material for the magnum opus was known by many names, but “stone” was not one of them. The author of *De compositione alchemiae*, however, appears to connect the starting material, the prima materia, with the end product of the opus, the philosophers’ stone. “Whoever has required other than this stone for the Major Work”, he states, “is like a man who is attempting to climb a stair that has no steps.” It is this ambiguity in conception that allows an unusual explanation for “lapsit exillis”. In manuscript Gm, which was produced in the 13th century, exillis is written with one “l”. Lapsit exilis could then be translated as the slender, small, undistinguished, inadequate stone which is “cast in the streets” and is found among both rich and poor.

Since Wolfram was intrigued by the metaphysical level of alchemy, the name “lapsit exillis” may very well be a veiled reference to Parzival himself. From an alchemical point of view, it would be possible to argue that Parzival’s journey is a purification process. Because of the dual nature of his genealogy—Gahmurets’s and Herzeloide’s child—his journey was destined to become a struggle. The paternal influence emerges first, but Herzeloide’s inheritance prevails: Parzival becomes the Grail king. In the final 14 lines of his romance Wolfram proudly declares:

Parzivals, den ich han bracht
dar sin doch saelde het erdaht.
(827.17-18)

Parzival whom I have brought to where destiny had, nonetheless, intended him to go.

These concluding lines of Wolfram’s *Parzival*, typically ambiguous, could refer to the Christian history of salvation, or they could equate the young Parzival in the forest of Soltane with the longed-for substance that would, through purification, become the ruler of the grail society (see Principe 2013:190–192).

The assumption that Wolfram grasped the intricacies of *De compositione alchemiae* resulted, I contend, in a plausible interpretation of the motifs of which no trace can be found in the *Conte du Graal*, namely the concept of the dynasty of a grail family and the depiction of the grail as a stone.

Tabula Smaragdina

Attributed to the legendary figure of Hermes Trismegistus, the *Emerald Tablet* became the most revered and sacred founding treatise of alchemy. If Wolfram, as I maintain, immersed himself in alchemical doctrines, he would have known it, and it would have left its mark in his romance. There is indeed one character, Flegetanis, whose indistinct contours become intelligible by connecting them with the *Tabula Smaragdina*.

The fact-based introduction of Flegetanis, which precedes Parzival’s visit with his hermit uncle, is both impressive and imaginative. Flegetanis lived in biblical times, and was famous for his erudition. Through his mother he was descended from Solomon, but his father was a heathen. He wrote the “aventure” of the grail. It disappeared but was found by Kyot in Toledo, the famous center for Arabic-Latin translation literature. As a famous astronomer, his “kuenste”, Flegetanis could explain celestial movements and planetary revolutions, “iesliches sternen hinganc / unt siner kunfte widerwanc; / wie lange ieslicher umbe get, / e er wider an sin zil gestet.” (454.11–14).

Abruptly, in line 17, the narrative viewpoint shifts from one of immanence and factual description to one of transcendence when Flegetanis, the heathen scholar of astronomy, reads in the stars, “im gestirn mit sinen ougen,” (454.19) the hidden mysteries of the grail.

er jach, ez hiez ein dinc der gral :
des namen las er sunder twal
imme gestirne, wie der hiez.
(454.21–23)

He said a thing was called the grail whose name he had read clearly in the stars, how it was called.

There is a relative paucity of scholarship on the Flegetanis episode. The two interpretations that stand out are highly speculative and contradictory. Rudolf Palgen (1922:11), who singles out alchemical elements in *Parzival*, contends that Flegetanis could only have read the name of the grail in the stars if he himself had undertaken a visionary heavenly journey. He cites the 9th-century Book of Crates to substantiate his assertion that visionary journeys occur quite often in alchemical literature.

Wilhelm Deinert, more audaciously, connects the grail with the creation of the world. Flegetanis read the name of the grail in the stars “des namen las er sunder twal/imme gestirne wie der hiez.” (454.22–23) Since the celestial sphere or the vault of heaven remained unchanged since its creation,

it appears that the grail, Deinert (1960:90) argues, goes back to the beginning of time when God created the world.

At first glance it seems improbable, that the merely one-paragraph-long *Tabula Smaragdina* could efface the Flegetanis controversy. Its ambiguity triggered myriad attempts of clarification. “The mysteries of the *Emerald Tablet*”, Lawrence M. Principe (2013:32) concludes, “—both its origins and its meaning—are not likely to be resolved any time soon.”

Viewed as a whole, the *Tabula Smaragdina* would remain a tempting irrelevancy. The first 2 lines of the *Tabula*, however, refer to a topos which is anchored in ancient philosophical thought patterns of which alchemy was a part, i.e., the belief in the analogical relationship of the microcosm and the macrocosm. The English version of R. Steele and D.W. Singer reads as follows:

True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.²

The vision of Flegetanis, in ancient times highly praised for knowledge about the stars, thus illustrates that Wolfram had no qualms about correlating his knowledge of scientific astronomy with the belief that there is correspondence between celestial and terrestrial affairs.

More consequentially, the *Tabula Smaragdina* may have inspired Wolfram to advance a concept which could be considered heretical and which scholars are at pains to explain away. Cundrie, the Grail messenger, in describing the movements of the heavens, insinuates that Parzival will not only become the Grail king, but that his regency will include the sphere below the circling planets.

swaz der planeten reise
umblouft, ir schin bedecket,
des sint dir zil gesteket
ze reichen und zerwerben.
(782.18–21)

All that the planets' journey encompass and that their radiance covers are goals staked out for you to attain.

She thus confirms Sigune's prediction, proclaimed when Parzival came upon her after his first visit to the Grail castle.

wol dich der saelden reise!
wan swaz die lufte hant beslagen,

dar ob muostu hoehe tragen :
dir dienet zam unde wilt,
ze richeit ist dir wunsch gezilt.”
(252.4–8)

A blessing on you for this blissful journey, for you shall have sovereign power over all that the air has touched! Tame and wild will serve you. Along with wealth perfection is allotted to you.

In analyzing Cundry's and Sigune's proclamation that Parzival will be invested with the dominion of the entire universe, scholars have suggested interesting, albeit tenuous and implausible, hypotheses. As Herzloyde's child, Parzival is a member of the Grail family. Through his Father Gahnuret, the Angevin, he is descended from the patriarch Mazadan. The etymology of Mazadan's name, “Mac Adan, designates him as a son (however remote) of Adam” (see Stevens 1999). Ultimately, then, as Groos (1955:185) suggested, we find in Genesis 1.26 the “model” for Parzival's “Weltherrschaft”.

And he said : Let us make man to our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth.

The model for Parzival's Weltherrschaft, I contend, we find in line 7 of the *Tabula smaragdina*.

Thus thou wilt possess the glory of the brightness of the whole world
And all obscurities will fly far from thee.

Or

In this way you will acquire the glory of the whole world, and all darkness will leave you.

To be sure, the *Tabula's* referral to world dominion is not connected with anything specific. But generations of alchemists have believed that the *Tabula* contained secret information about the philosophers' stone, the arcanum of all arcana, the panacea for all worldly imperfection. In the late Middle Ages, Arnold of Villanova linked the philosophers' stone with Jesus Christ. Was he the originator of this linkage or did he express something that was emerging in alchemical circles?³ If so, the attempt to find heretical motifs in Wolfram's *Parzival* would gain a new perspective. It has not been possible for scholars to connect Wolfram's suspected heresy with any of the contemporary heretical movements, such as the

Manichean gnosis and Catharism. However, if Wolfram indeed equated “the stone = the grail” according to the emerging alchemical concept with Jesus Christ, he could use in his description of the grail traditional Christian imagery like the dove for the holy spirit and connect it with unorthodox imagery like the glorious phoenix for resurrection. A tantalizing aura of mystery and ambiguity would result.

Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* was the most admired and celebrated verse narrative in medieval Germany. What contributed to the success was perhaps his intermingling of realistic but ingenuous foreground action with a background realm of mystery and puzzling innuendos. As part of this realm, I contend, alchemy deserves to be explored in a wider context than the one used in this brief paper.

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End Notes

¹Page references for *De compositione alchemiae* (the second number refers to the Stavenhagen’s translation):

- maius opus 4/5
opus superius 8/9
erat enim iste multum intentus in opere maiore 2/3
humilitatem molliciem 10/11
secretum secretorum 28/29
Omnipotens deus et creator ex potentia servos impotentes creavit 10/11
Et iste posuit ex suis servis eos quos voluit et quos elegit ut quererent sapientiam 10/11
Et semper iste unus post alium hanc, sapientiam sibi hereditabant 10/11
et ad bona futuri seculi eum reducit 10/11
Perfice michi narrando huius operis magisterium 14/15
Et sapientes noverunt quod hec sit res una celata et in ea sunt .iiii. elementa 26/27
Sed eius pondus est multum grave ... et eius natura est natura aeris 22/23
ad divitem et pauperem 26/27
et hoc in viis pericitur 26/27
omnes qui aliud ab hoc lapide ad opus maius petierunt assimilantur viro volenti per scalam sine gradibus ascendere 26/27

²The English translation—from a 12th-century Arabic version—is by R. Steele and D. Waley Singer; see Linden, S.J. (2003:28).

³As Principe (2013:68) states: “While the pseudo-Arnald’s *Tractatus parabolicus* provides the earliest-known extended linkage of alchemy with Christian theology, the two would thereafter remain close in many (but not all) alchemical writings.”