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*Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens: Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems*, by H. M. E. DE JONG, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1969, pp. xiv, 461, illus., F1.88.

Surely the key to Alchemy has been lost for a very long time—if there ever existed anyone who possessed or was even seriously believed to possess it. What we can do is to survey its literary and ideological sources and thereby demonstrate the ever-recurring 'motives' of a 'secret' and 'sacred' tradition of venerable age. As such it is bound to reveal the treasure of all that human imagination, conscious and unconscious, is capable of conjuring up. It is bound up with work in the chemical laboratory, and the idea of transmutation of base metal into something better or the best goes with it, though not necessarily so. Moreover the alchemists knew more chemistry than any of their contemporaries and at times were the only people who knew anything of the nature of matter and its behaviour *in vitro*. Some believers in 'transmutation' already and predominantly so displayed the features of the scientific chemist, such as Libavius and Van Helmont. They had significantly dropped alchemical symbolism and were far removed from the type of the followers of the 'threefold-great Hermes'. Indeed the 'laboratory' of the latter is as much an 'oratory'. We see here the adept on his knees in front of an altar with the eternal light above (*ne loquaris de Deo absque lumine*) and adorned with the magical pentagramme and a representation of the squaring of the circle. There is incense—the smoke—which like his prayer should ascend and be acceptable on High. The centre of the lofty place is occupied by a table on which two lutes, a viol and a harp are prominently displayed—for the secrets of nature speak to us not only in the 'work' that visibly unrolls itself or can be captured by the engraver's burin in symbolical emblems, but also in the eternal harmonies and melodies which since ancient days had been believed to make the cosmos 'tick'. The 'chemical' 'work' in search of the Philosopher's Stone or 'accomplished' with it, does not seem to have had anything 'specific' about it: any process starting with something black becoming white and finally red would have done for the purpose. By contrast alchemical symbolism does seem to be 'specific' and attains to a still higher degree of distinctiveness where it is combined with 'musical fugues' and a 'simple melody'. This is significantly achieved in Michael Maier's work of emblems—the subject of the book under notice. Maier (1568–1622) deserves our attention in several respects. First of all he was a medical doctor (Rostock, 1597) practising as a court-physician to the Emperor Rudolph the Second, the well-known patron of alchemists, astrologers, occultists as well as of Tycho and Kepler. Maier must have enjoyed his special esteem, as he made him Count Palatine and his private secretary at Prague. After a series of journeys which led him also to England and a possible meeting with Fludd he settled down at Magdeburg, having also served as physician to Landgraf Moritz of Hessen. He was one of the early spokesmen and defenders of the elusive 'society' of Rosicrucians. His main point with reference to Alchemy was that the whole of Greek Mythology was nothing but a veiled and symbolical representation of it. Hence the keynote of the present book: the story of Atalanta dropping the golden apples of the Hesperides on her flight from Hippomenes, their following 'conjunction' and metamorphosis into a lion and lioness. It is easy to recognize in all this the alchemical

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principles of the union of opposites, i.e. of Sulphur and Mercury, the principal components of metals and minerals, the volatility and flightiness of Mercury (as also 'manifested to the ears' in the canons—fugues, 'the other voice fleeing', which supplement the work), the winged lion as the symbol of volatile Mercury ('primeval water,' moon) to be united with the wingless lion, i.e. Sulphur (sun)—as seen in Emblem XVI (p. 392), and many other stock-symbols of Alchemy. Hence the extensive employment by Maier of ancient poets and those alchemical texts in which ancient Greek philosophy is leading such as the *Turba philosophorum*. Incidentally it may be noted that Jacob Toll who elaborated on the ancient myths in connection with alchemy seems to have omitted any mention of Michael Maier and for that matter even of the Atalanta story (1686–89).—Two further points about Maier deserve attention. He was interested in cosmological symbolism and a synthesis of theology and naturalism—at his time these threatened and actually started to go their own separate ways. The making and the makers of gold, however, he suspected of deceit. The second point interests the medical historian: Maier prominently uses medical analogies in illustrating the alchemical 'work'. For example there is the King Duenech—dropsical and discoloured. He is presented lying in a kind of Turkish bath (Emblem XXVIII, p. 404, and also in his canopied bed and accepting a potion, Emblem XLVIII, p. 424) in the process of being purged of *black bile* until red colour returns to his cheeks—obviously a representation of the alchemical 'work' as a whole and its characteristic colour changes from black to red. There is also the physiological analogy: the three digestions—'cookings'—in stomach, liver and veins are productive of three secretions, namely faeces, urine and sweat (the latter a product of the *dew* arising from the coction of the blood in the veins). These organic 'cookings' correspond to those responsible for the production of metals in nature. The metallurgic 'coctions' are also threefold, taking place in the upper sphere in the 'great aevum', in the middle sphere and in the lower one. An old and indeed fundamental tenet of alchemy—the daughter of hellenistic Gnosis—was the explanation of the baseness of metals in terms of disease and the call for its cure and 'redemption' of the metal by the 'work', i.e. by transmutation into something more noble. This tenet was adopted by Maier and illustrated (Emblem XIII, p. 389): here the 'dropsy of the ore' is cured by purifying water comparable to the waters of Jordan which cured Naaman's leprosy—a comparison taken over by Maier from medieval alchemical sources (the *Clangor buccinae* and the *Aurora consurgens*). Maier, however, enlarges on dropsy and its difficult cure. He does so on the same humoralist lines which guide him throughout his works. This brings us to a further interesting point: his relationship to Paracelsus. He is quite prepared to concede that the latter was felicitous and advanced in collecting old and inventing new remedies and cures—chemical and 'occult'—and should be studied for this reason, in spite of his unpleasant personal features and behaviour. On the other hand Maier feels that 'new medicines do not make a new medicine or medical art—just as new instruments applied by the goldsmith cannot render their art in any way different from its former status' (*nova enim medicamenta non faciunt novam Medicinam seu artem, ut nec nova instrumenta auri fabrorum eorum artem aliam quam prius fuit efficere possunt* in: Maier, *Symbola aureae mensae*, Francof., 1617, p. 288). This is noteworthy in view of Maier's addiction to Alchemy. It shows that to be alchemist is one thing and to be Paracelsist another or at least not

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necessarily the same. Traditional humoralism went well with alchemy—as shown by the example of the Lullists, Arnald of Villanova and many others. It is also true, however, that not a few theoretical points and techniques of the alchemists provided sources for Paracelsus.

We may finally note Maier expressing the homoeopathic principle in Paracelsian terms of sympathy and antipathy: in the treatment of burns moderate heat should be applied as this will 'draw out' heat and frozen limbs should be immersed in moderately cold water. This will be in accordance with the principles valid in nature as a whole where any sudden transformation into an opposite will be found fraught with danger, but gradual changes often bring success. In this Maier, may, of course, reflect the Aristotelian ideal of the 'mean' (*mesotes*) and certainly connects it with the Empedoclean friendship and hostility between the elements: fire annihilates water by converting it into vapour and water extinguishes fire, but in producing air from water and hardening it to stone fire actually succours water in creating new generations. Indeed air and earth are secondary elements that arise from the 'conjunction' of the primary elements water (mercury) and fire (sulphur), i.e. the union of opposites (p. 109 to Emblem X).

From these few observations the importance of Maier's *Atalanta fugiens* for the medical historian should be evident and so should be the significance of the book under notice. It deeply penetrates into Maier's sources which are brought to the surface and identified with certainty. The commentaries given to each of the emblems, the learned introduction and bibliography are invaluable to scholars in many fields, and so is the full atlas of the Emblems and their analoga in printed as well as a few medieval manuscript sources. It can be said that the immediate literary history of this and related *Maieriana* has been cleared up with singular success. This contributes in its own way to our efforts in understanding at least marginally the limited number of *alchemica* which may possibly be approachable in our own world. Something remains to be done with regard to the artistic side of the alchemical emblem tradition. Some of this may remain dark for ever. An example is the possible influence of Lambsprink on Maier's emblems. This is not to be doubted with regard to Lambsprink's text printed well ahead of Maier—but the illustrated edition appeared only seven years after the *Atalanta*. The author rightly reproduces the fourteenth figure of Lambsprink's (p. 446)—the 'King' shown in his bed covered with spots and 'vehemently sweating' for curative purposes, analogous to Maier's emblem XXVIII (see above) though quite different in detail. Finally attention may be drawn to Emblem II (p. 378). It presents a female figure pregnant with the terrestrial or cosmic globe, symbolizing the latter as 'nurse of the tender child of the Philosophers'—'his nurse is the earth' as the *Emerald Table* has it. The illustration has a long tradition, as seen for example in the frontispiece to an incunable edition of Albertus Magnus, *Philosophia pauperum* (Brescia, 1493) adorned with proto-'masonic' symbols and recurring with proper alchemical symbols for instance in Mylius' *Philosophia reformata* of 1622 (p. 96. See to this the reviewer in *Paracelsus*, Basle and New York, 1958, p. 238–39).

The devoted and deeply penetrating research incorporated in this important, interesting and informative work is well matched by its elegant typographical and pictorial production.

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