

Coniunctio

The theme of sexuality and relationships in Alchemy

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Abstract

This paper is based on C.G. Jung's interpretation of Alchemy as an allegoric description of inner psychospiritual transformation processes that draw directly from the personal and collective unconscious. Based on this hypothesis, the alchemical themes point to archetypal psychological contents and psychic processes that apply to everyday experience.

Among the many fascinating alchemical symbols, I have chosen to focus on the alchemical theme of *coniunctio*. This term, explored by Jung mainly in Jung (1953), signifies the process of union of any pair of psychological opposites, such as heaven/earth, fire/water, bright/dark, and, crucially, masculine/feminine. Coniunctio has a central place in both Alchemy and Jungian psychology. It is one of the main mechanisms to advance towards psychic wholeness and the primary psychological device for the production of new psychic content.

I will specifically explore the theme of *coniunctio* as it relates to sexuality and consider the role of intimate relationships in psychic development from an alchemical standpoint. Finally, I will touch on the position of Alchemy amongst spiritual traditions and its stance on the role of intimacy and sexuality for spiritual growth.

Introduction

Nature, I say, when she turned about the golden circle, by that movement made its four qualities equal, that is to say, she squared that homogenous simplicity turning back on itself, or brought it into an equilateral rectangle, in such a way that *contraries are bound together by contraries, and enemies by enemies, as with everlasting bonds, and are held in mutual embrace* [emphasis added]. (Jung, 1953, p. 3)

These words from the “De circulo physico, quadrato,” a medieval alchemical text, introduce the main themes of this paper: the union between contraries and Nature’s capacity to hold opposites in an almost erotic embrace. Yet these words also give us a transmission of the obscure, symbolic language of Alchemy. Is Alchemy describing a series of complex operations meant to manipulate different substances? Or is it an allegoric representation of spiritual, psychological, and mystical experiences? When approaching alchemical texts, we must choose whether to interpret their rich, often baffling language literally or metaphorically.

My stance throughout this paper will be to consider the alchemical texts and illustrations as metaphors and symbols describing an inner process of a psycho-spiritual nature. I will assume that most of the alchemical language consists of symbols, metaphors, and allegories that refer to the author’s inner experiences rather than to external chemical operations. In so doing, I am following the interpretation championed by C.G. Jung and his disciples, notably Marie-Louise von Franz. Jung, who first became interested in Alchemy by studying Chinese alchemical texts, found that the alchemical processes matched closely with his own ideas about psychic development. As for the theme of coniunctio, Jung noted that our psyche is rich in diverse and conflicting impulses. In his view, psychic growth had to do with expanding our

capacity to contain those contradictory drives and allow the opposites to coexist. Jung saw psychic development as a tendency towards wholeness rather than perfection (Jung, 1953, pp. 428-429).

As we gain more self-knowledge and integrate the complexity of our inner world, we get more in touch with the Self, the archetype of our psychic wholeness and the regulating center of our psychic life. Jung called the process of advancing towards the Self “individuation.” In Jung’s terminology, the Self is the archetype that represents the psychic totality; the individuation process can be seen as a progressive coming into contact and identifying with this archetype. Although everyone is unique, individuation follows a general pattern common to all human beings. From this standpoint, alchemical texts describe the inner psychic tribulations we go through when we engage in the process of individuation. Consequently, they may contain valuable hints for our process of expansion into greater psychic wholeness.¹ If we accept Jung’s hypothesis, then Alchemy becomes an avenue into the kaleidoscopic landscapes of our inner world. By studying alchemical texts, we gain insights into our individual and collective psyche.

Alchemy, moreover, is not just a directionless wandering through the inner realms. The alchemist’s efforts have a clear goal: producing the *lapis*, the mythical philosopher’s stone. In line with our psychospiritual interpretation of Alchemy, we must assume that the philosopher’s stone is some sort of psychic state. Brenda Crowther, a Jungian scholar and analyst, suggests that the goal of the alchemical process is precisely psychic wholeness (Crowther, 2022). Marie-Louise Von Franz (1980) argued that the state represented by the philosopher’s stone consists in getting in touch with an objective, still center within the mutable, ever-changing landscape of one’s personality (p. 169). If we combine Crowther and

¹ For a more in-depth discussion on the motif of psychic wholeness and the process of individuation, see Manacorda (2021).

Von Franz's suggestions, Alchemy emerges as an attempt to guide an exploration of the inner psychic world, with the aim of reaching a more stable foundation for our psychic life. This definition of Alchemy, as we have seen, is in line with Jung's understanding of the process of individuation, which represents the coronation of psychic development.

Not everyone would agree with Jung's interpretation of Alchemy. Yet the immediate benefit of treating alchemical texts as describing inner states is that we are offered a key to interpreting their cryptic passages and images. We then begin to see the alchemical images and descriptions as products of both the alchemist's personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. Ultimately, Alchemy becomes a way to bring coherency in the fluid and rich stream of psychic images that populate the personal and collective unconscious. This is the territory that Jung himself traversed when he went into the introspective states that gave rise to the Red Book, his most alchemical work. Alchemy then claims a place alongside fairytales, religion, and myth as one of the collective efforts to bring unconscious content into the sphere of collective consciousness and integrate it into the psychic life of the individual.

In fact, according to Von Franz (1980), when it comes to the psyche of contemporary men and women, Alchemy has a distinctive advantage over religion and myth. Once they appear in collective consciousness (through the visions of a prophet or any other form of revelation), myth and religious tradition are subject to a complex process of sedimentation and purification. A few years or centuries after the initial religious impulse, a priestly caste, whose primary duty is the orthodox interpretation of the sacred scripture, is born. Councils are being made to discuss and explain the religious texts. Heresies are denounced and expunged, and a doctrine is created from what was originally an unfiltered content springing forth from the collective unconscious. Even sacred scriptures undergo a dramatic process of modification and adaptation. The passages and images that are not in line with the collective

consciousness and the moral values of the times are removed, often beyond any possibility of recovery. As a result, by the time they come to us, both myth and religious tradition represent the collective unconscious only in a filtered and purified way (Von Franz, 1980, pp. 16-22).

Alchemy, on the other hand, has a much more hands-off approach to the collective unconscious. Alchemy does not pass judgment on the psychic experiences of the alchemist: those experiences are poured into words and images with very little curation. Both Jung and Von Franz found that Alchemy had a *modus operandi* that was quite similar to that of analytical psychology: unprogrammed and explorative rather than normative (Von Franz, 1980, p. 40). As a result, alchemical texts are less prejudiced than religious scriptures and more adaptable to the change of time and culture. All these characteristics may allow Alchemy to speak more to the modern man and woman than any established religion. The flip side of the unprogrammed, unfiltered approach of Alchemy towards the collective unconscious is the notorious obscurity of alchemical language: when we dive into an alchemical text, we find a generous and somewhat baffling outpouring of visions, symbols, and obscure narrations. Take, for example, this passage, from the Arabic alchemical text “*De chemia*,”² cited in Von Franz (1980):

(...) and I saw on the roof the nine painted eagles with their wings expanded (...), and in the talons of each eagle was a big bow (...). (...) I saw the images of human beings standing about (...) They had their hands extended towards the center of the room and were looking at a certain statue in the middle of the room (...) The statue was represented sitting on a throne (...) with on its lap (...) a marble plate (...) and the fingers of the statue were clasped over the edge of the tablet which it held. The tablet

² The author of the *De chemia* is the legendary Mohammed ibn Umail, known in Latin as simply “Senior,” the elder (Von Franz, 1980, p. 107)

had the appearance of an open book facing the person who entered, as if the statue wanted to show it to him (Von Franz, 1980, pp. 108-109).

As the above passage shows, alchemical texts often conjure complex and fantastical images. It is a vast and somewhat disorienting landscape, in which the reader's attention may risk drowning in a sea of symbolism. To make sense of those images, we can avail ourselves of books like Roob (2014): a compendium of alchemical pictures that helps us organize the vast production of Alchemy into themes. This is no easy feat: because Alchemy taps directly into the collective unconscious, it features an incredible diversity of themes involving animals, plants, geometric shapes, the elements, angels, deities, and a plethora of other images and symbols.

As stated above, amongst the unending richness of alchemical themes, I have chosen to single out the symbol of coniunctio. In the alchemical universe, coniunctio explores the complex relationship between the polar symbols of Masculine and Feminine, their struggle, their union, and their cooperation. The concept of coniunctio aligns with Jung's understanding of the complex interaction between our conscious psyche and our contra-sexual self: the inner Feminine, or anima, and the inner Masculine, or animus. In very broad strokes, this relationship happens within each of us, and it may be seen as pointing towards an ideal state of cooperation and recognition between the Masculine and Feminine poles within each individual. This state has often been called "inner marriage." In the following paragraphs, we will follow the alchemists' footsteps and explore the symbols and images through which they approached the theme of coniunctio. We will discover that, as obscure as they may seem, the processes described by the alchemist are connected to key aspects of our inner life, and to our most intimate ways of relating with others.

The Lapis and the Rebis

Jung wrote that the essential building blocks of coniunctio are two “opposites, either confronting one another in enmity or attracting one another in love” (Jung, 1953, p. 3). The relevance of the archetypal pair of opposites is supported by many alchemical texts, both in words and in pictures. The Arab alchemists, who played a significant role in developing Alchemy and passing it from the Egyptian and Greek sources onto Europe, spoke about the “alchemical couple” of mercury and sulphur, representing the Female and Male elements (Roob, 2014, p. 37). In European Alchemy, the polarity of Masculine and Feminine was superimposed on a profusion of symbols of polarity and complementarity: from Adam and Eve (Roob, 2014, p. 338), to Spirit and Soul (Roob, 2014, p. 290), Joachim and Boaz (Roob, 2014, p. 167), and King and Queen (Figure 1).

The union between Male and Female, which takes place through successive and complex stages, is seen as the climax of the alchemical work (Roob, 2014, p. 25). Its result is the *lapis*, the Latin word for stone, referring to the philosopher’s stone, the objective of Alchemy (Roob, 2014, p. 111). But the result of coniunctio is also depicted as the *rebis*, the “res bina” (double thing): a state of union of the opposites represented by a hermaphrodite (Roob, 2014, p. 401). The hermaphrodite is thus a powerful symbol used in Alchemy to describe an advanced stage in the alchemical process. To reach the stage of the hermaphrodite, we must start from the Masculine and Feminine principle in their isolated, separated state, represented by the King and the Queen (Figure 1). The monarchs are sovereign, self-contained; they don’t need each other until there appears the urge to produce a new psychic entity, which is the inescapable law of psychic development. In psychological terms, the Masculine and Feminine principles, each of them complete in their own power, decide to unite. Theirs is an act of love, yet also of sacrifice, for they will need to face dissolution and death. Getting to

the hermaphroditic state involves several stages of transformation, including a phase of decomposition called by the alchemists *nigredo*. Psychic contents need to die in their current form before they can produce newness; death is necessary for rebirth to happen (Roob, 2014, p. 198). For Jung, the stage of *nigredo* was descriptive of the deadlock we reach when two opposites confront one another, and the psychic life seems to be brought to a standstill. The *nigredo* is often symbolized by a raven (Jung, 1953, p. 521).³

Coniunctio happens when the Masculine and the Feminine, represented in alchemical pictures by the King and Queen, come together; their union is sometimes represented as a sexual act (see Figure 1). The encounter between King and Queen sets in motion a series of profound transformations, variously described by different alchemical texts. In Figure 2, which represents the final stages of *coniunctio*, the King and Queen are fully united into the *rebis*, the hermaphrodite. The soul, which has left the consorts after their sexual union, is ready to return. The raven, a symbol of decomposition and decay, reminds us that the process has involved the death of something: Masculine and Feminine as separate, sovereign principles.

How do these images and symbols relate to our everyday experience? We can only hazard a guess, remembering that, in the language of Alchemy, sex is used as a symbol of a force that can unite opposites. After a deep sexual encounter, we often experience a few fleeting, precious moments of feeling whole, complete. The presence of the beloved still lingers in us for a while. Eventually, the lovers realize that, after all, they are not one, but two individual beings. The other is a catalyst, a mirror, a reaction agent, but not literally a part of ourselves. This is one of the great mysteries of sexual love: through it, we can have a glimpse of totality and unity, of undifferentiated being, and yet we also feel our essential separation. In the

³ The other canonical alchemical stages include the *albedo*, or whiteness, the *citrinitas*, or yellowness, and the *rubedo*, or redness.

moments of most profound, intimate union, we may feel as if expanded, more complete, and yet also touch feelings of cosmic sadness. In any case, we come back from an intimate union changed, touched, different.

This powerful alchemical experience may well happen in an actual sexual relationship with someone. Yet, if we are to follow the alchemical wisdom, sexual union is a doorway rather than the destination. The power of sexual energy helps bring the two opposite principles into a union, much like we need massive amounts of energy to fuse two atoms together and generate a new element. But once the coniunctio is set in motion, the following stages of that process happen inside ourselves and do not require closeness to others.

While sexual intimacy is not the only way we can feel union with another human being, its transformative power is hard to overestimate. There is something about sexuality that fundamentally shifts our perception of a bond: a relationship that becomes sexual enters a different category, with different expectations and rules or agreements. Where does this special significance of sex in regard to inner psychic development come from? When two people unite sexually, there is the possibility of letting go of psychological and physical barriers. Layers of our personality and psyche usually hidden from view come to the surface. We act in a less civilized way and drop some of the social conventions. A more instinctive, primal part of us comes to the surface. In a sexual union, at least under certain circumstances, we let someone into layers of our psyche and inner world that are usually well protected from intrusion. Consequentially, relationships with a sexual component are unique not just by social convention but also because they allow us to access parts of our inner world that may not be available in other forms of human relating. In the alchemical pictures, the alchemical couple works together, kindles the fire of sex and emotional passion, and uses it for inner transformation. In our everyday reality, we enter into relationships with their trials and

tribulations, and those relationships transform us. Under the surface of the ups and downs of a relationship, through the lovers' coming together and falling apart, their inner marriage is advanced. If we continue drawing these parallels, then the alchemists' descriptions may give us keys to understanding our own psychic processes.

Yet the alchemical pictures represent the union of the Male and Female opposites in a somewhat idealized state. Much like an instruction manual, they do not take into account the myriad of variables and imperfections we may encounter when we attempt that union ourselves. For instance, in the alchemical drawings, both King and Queen appear as equals, and the coniunctio takes place with their full consent and collaboration. Even so, they need to go through an excruciating process of death and rebirth before they can reach the hermaphroditic state. However, for most of us, the inner Feminine and Masculine are neither in a state of equality nor necessarily in a relationship of cooperation and understanding. I came to this realization through the personal journey of accessing my inner Feminine, an aspect of myself that was well buried in my unconscious and to which I had very little access.

As is the case for many men, during childhood, I learned, through positive and negative feedback, that some of my traits and behaviors were considered acceptable for my identity as a boy, and some were not. Through a continuous reinforcement process, I unconsciously allowed the attributes that were deemed to be masculine in my culture to form my identity or "persona," while I relegated those considered to be feminine into the unconscious. My contra-sexual self, or my anima in Jungian terms, was starting to shape. She was made of all those traits, qualities, and behaviors that I was unwilling to embrace, for they could not be assimilated into my male identity. Much later on, in my late thirties, through a series of experiences of inner discovery, I had the opportunity to bring up my inner Feminine from the basement where she had been confined all these years. At that time, the mere idea of having a

feminine entity nested in the depth of my psyche was all but inconceivable. Yet, as I went through those experiences, I was offered a vision of my inner Feminine as a young woman, with a specific appearance, and much younger than I was. At the time of my first conscious contact, I was perhaps thirty-nine; my inner Feminine appeared to be perhaps eighteen or nineteen.

That significant age difference was baffling at first. Later on, I understood it made perfect sense. We grow psychologically and biologically through experience and exposure to stimuli and challenges. Like the Feminine of so many other men of my generation and culture, my inner Feminine had little chance to be exposed to life, for I had so far made most of my decisions and lived most of my experiences from my Masculine persona. As a result, while my inner Masculine had developed and grown, my inner Feminine was in a state of arrested development. However, as I discovered, when offered conscious opportunities to grow, my inner Feminine would develop fast. After a couple of years of work with her, I realized that her age had grown to be around twenty-five years old.⁴ The experience with my inner Feminine taught me that when our unconscious aspects are exposed to consciousness, they mature with surprising speed, a lesson that I have applied in many other areas of my psychic development.

I share parts of my journey with my inner Feminine to show that, in real life, the process of coniunctio may be more complex and uneven than what the alchemical images show. When we make contact with the inner Feminine or Masculine, we don't always find a mature King or Queen, ready and willing to engage in the process of inner marriage. Instead, we may find a resentful, uncooperative boy or girl that will need time to come to the surface and feel

⁴ Naturally, each process of growing up has its pains. For instance, my inner Feminine went through several cycles of projection and disillusionment. Through those experiences, she learned how to express emotions without being overwhelmed by them.

acknowledged. Even if our inner Feminine and Masculine are, in some way, yearning and destined to connect and cooperate, often when we make contact, we find them in a fragmented relationship. A lot of repair may be needed to bring those two principles to a state of cooperation. At the same time, once we acknowledge the existence of the inner Masculine and Feminine and decide to support them in recognizing one another, a significant shift of perspective happens in our lives, and new avenues of inner development start unraveling before our eyes.

In particular, once we recognize the inner relationship between our Masculine and Feminine, intimate relationships become an incredible opportunity for growth. Relationships of a sexual and romantic nature seem to offer the most substantial opportunities to work through the alchemical process of coniunctio with the support of others. We realize that in every relationship, there are at least four entities involved: us, our partners, and our respective contra-sexual selves. In the following paragraphs, we will explore how and why intimate relationships can offer a fertile ground for experimentation with inner marriage. However, we will also note that those same relationships have the potential to hinder and interfere with our process of psychic maturation and growth, which can present us with an apparent paradox. The goal of Alchemy is inner psychic development, not comfort or stability. And indeed, for some of us, relationships are a catalyst for inner exploration, the vessel for an internal alchemical process. However, for others, relationships are mainly a container to find peace, stability, support—and those needs and priorities may shift over time. If we choose to engage in intimate relationships for the purpose of transformation, we invite powerful energies into our lives and homes, energies that may well shatter our existence. Thanks to such disciplines as Alchemy and Jungian psychology, we can become more conscious and respectful of the transformative power of sexuality. Rather than treating it as a casual source of comfort and

pleasure, we can recognize sex as a powerful, fiery force with immense transformative power. Choosing to enter into an intimate sexual relationship means entering into a container that can transform our lives.

What is it, then, that makes relationships of an intimate, sexual nature so different as to be in their own category? One key to answering this question, and finding out why intimate relationships can both boost and hinder the process towards inner psychic unity, is in the mechanism of projection. This process, while largely unconscious, sits at the very core of every form of deep human interaction. Still, when it comes to romantic and sexual relationships, its power is amplified in ways that are difficult to ignore.

The Power of Projection

What is projection, and how does it affect our lives? At its core, projection happens when we apply some contents of our unconscious onto another person, using them as a screen to project unseen parts of our own psyche. Jung defined projection as an unconscious identification with an object or a person, whereby we attach a part of our inner world to something or someone else; moreover, because projection is unconscious, we perceive the projected content as an objective fact, an external reality as real as a tree or a cloud (Jung, 1953, p. 488). In other words, while projection can be recognized by an external observer, it is never seen by its creator while it is in full force. Only after a significant amount of time and inner work, if ever, can we become aware of our own projections. Genuine projections happen without our conscious participation or volition (Jung, 1953, p. 345). Additionally, being hidden in the unconscious makes projection even more powerful: a mechanism that works without our conscious knowledge yet influences our choices and relationships.

We can project on anything and anyone, but one particularly potent form of projection happens when we attach parts of our anima or animus onto a romantic partner. This mechanism is so ubiquitous in intimate relating that Crowther (2021) states that projection, and the opportunity to recognize it, represent the gist of love relationships from a psychological standpoint. The fact is that projection, once brought to the light of consciousness, transforms into insight: we get to see parts of ourselves so far hidden from view. Consequently, intimate relationships can be a veritable treasure trove of insights and revelations. For example, I have often projected the qualities of sensitivity and emotionality onto my female romantic partners. As long as that projection was unconscious, I was unaware that those qualities were part of my anima, my inner Feminine. Instead, I saw those qualities reflected by the external world as objective and appealing traits of those romantic partners.

How can we work with projection, if it is impossible to see? We noted that seeing our projections is challenging because, by definition, we are not conscious of them. But although we can't observe our projections when they are active, we can feel their presence when the mechanism starts to falter. When other people fail to live up to the content that we are—unknowingly—projecting onto them, a deep feeling of discomfort usually ensues, which leads to disappointment, reproaches, and outright conflict. Von Franz (1980) argues that we can only speak of projection once this distinct feeling of uneasiness has entered into the relationship (p. 35). As long as projection does not set off any alarm bells, like is often the case in the first phases of falling in love with someone, we are instead in a state of *participation mystique*, of complete blissful union, with the object of our projection. However, sooner or later, something happens that cracks that projection, and we are jolted out of the participation mystique (Von Franz, 1980, p. 122) and catapulted into a state of doubt. Coming back to my example: when my beloved acts in a way that I deem to be neither

sensitive nor emotional, I will have a unique chance to recognize projection at work. Is the person I love who they seem to be? The screen has been fractured, and a different reality is peeking from the cracks. The person we saw under a constant shining light appears to have transformed. They don't match our inner content anymore, but we are unaware: we just see them behaving strangely, perhaps cruelly. We are likely to feel betrayed, let down, cheated. It can be one of the most heartbreaking, soul-wrenching experiences—and the closer and more intimate a relationship is, the more breaking a projection might wreak havoc.

And yet, this is the pivotal moment in which we have an opportunity to transform projection into insight. Jung describes this conjuncture in eloquent terms: we must bring the projection back to where it started, which is within us; we must “celebrate a Last Supper with ourselves, and eat our own flesh and drink our own blood”; and ultimately, we must recognize the other in ourselves (Jung, 1953, p. 364). In my case, this meant acknowledging the existence of a sensitive, emotional female entity in my own psyche. The process of recognizing and digesting a projection will inevitably transform our identity and, therefore, the nature of our intimate relationships. Whether we manage to acknowledge and integrate projections or succumb to them, they constitute an element of instability and transformation in our most intimate bonds.

So the question arises: can't we avoid projections, or at least avoid the relationships that elicit them the most? As it turns out, even if we could dispense with projection, we would throw away the proverbial baby with the bathwater because projection is needed for deep inner work. Von Franz (1980) sees projection as a necessary psychological mechanism for making first contact with a new person (p. 34). In order for us to relate to someone new with any degree of intimacy, part of our inner world needs to be projected onto them. Ideally, in time, we will withdraw the projection, as described above; but a projection-free intimate

meeting is an oxymoron. Secondly, projection gives a relationship an element of entrancement, turning the other person into an irresistible magnet for our attention. Von Franz (1980) explains that this element of fascination is necessary for learning (p. 117). When we are projecting onto someone, we can't help putting them onto some sort of pedestal. This is not entirely to our detriment: the fact that our attention is riveted onto another person allows us to enter profound stages of transformation. In the same line, Crowther (2019) says that the emotional heat created by relationships that contain an element of projection is a foundation for transformational work. In a sense, by relating with another that we are projecting upon, we are literally entering into a relationship with ourselves. However, as a result, the stakes are higher now, and any disappointment will hurt. Emotional heat will show up as the warmth of passion and sexuality, but also as the scathing fire of conflict.

In sum, when we relate deeply, a part of our inside world gets projected and attached to the other person. This opens a possibility for the relationship to be a vessel for a process of alchemical coniunctio, where the opposites inside of us get into deeper contact. But sustaining a projection is also costly, in both emotional and energetic terms, and it introduces an element of instability, because the projection is always liable to be broken. When that happens, we have an opportunity to take back the projection: the projected parts of ourselves come back to us, sometimes violently, and we are left to face our inside world with no one outside to blame or praise. If we move through this phase with awareness, we come out of it enriched by the whole process. In time, whether through one long relationship or a series of shorter ones, we can expand our sense of Self by getting to know parts of ourselves that were altogether unconscious. Intimate relationships have helped me become aware of a sensitive and emotional part, one that has been projected on so many partners and lovers before I could recognize it as my own. Yet today, thanks to those projections and the painful process of

reclaiming them, I can carry a more expansive sense of myself, one that has more space for diverse and even contradictory parts. That is one crucial step towards psychic wholeness and a precondition for my inner Masculine and Feminine to enter into a process of coniunctio.

The mechanism of projection helps us understand how the processes of outer marriage (the deepening of intimacy between two people) and that of inner marriage (the deepening of self-knowledge and psychic wholeness) can both support and interrupt each other. We need others in order to take the first steps in the process of coniunctio, because others can offer both a mirror and a necessary counterpart for projection to happen. Yet, eventually, we must liberate them from our projections and take back what is ours, so that the opposites within us can start to merge.

Alchemy as a Spiritual Path

Based on the hypothesis of Alchemy as an inner psychospiritual journey, we focused on the central role of the theme of coniunctio. From this angle, we explored how intimate relating of a sexual nature offers both an opportunity to advance towards psychic wholeness and a risk of interruption and disturbance. This dual nature of intimacy may be the reason why all spiritual traditions and lineages have something to say about sexual relating. Simplifying, we can recognize two major trends in spirituality's attitude towards relating. On one side, there are those spiritual traditions, including all current major religions, that have admonished against relating and sexuality in the name of spiritual evolution. According to these traditions, the risks of engaging in sexuality outweigh the benefits, and the distraction and drama caused by intimate relating can make us lose sight of inner development. In those lineages, for the most part, mistrust towards sexuality has expanded to a general suspicion of matter, nature, and the body, all seen as varying degrees of hindrances to spiritual growth.

The second group of spiritual traditions and lineages has offered an opposite and complementary view, one that recognizes relating and sexuality as meaningful forces for spiritual growth. Historically relegated to the fringe of spirituality, these traditions are making a powerful comeback today. They include Tantra, Daoism, and various forms of Shamanism. Tantra, for instance, offers profound teachings on sexual polarity, understood as the tension, difference, and exchange of energy between two poles—particularly between the Masculine and the Feminine. Those two principles are often symbolized as the divine couple of Shiva and Shakti, equivalent to the King and Queen of Alchemy. According to Tantra, the tension between the two poles must be understood as energy, and it can be used for spiritual evolution and transformation.⁵ Several tantric techniques support us in cultivating polarity and directing the generated energy. Like Alchemy, Tantra also offers a vision of the hermaphroditic state of wholeness, embodied by Shiva Ardhanarishvara, a deity that is half male and half female, perfectly balanced and united, having integrated the masculine (Shiva) aspect and the feminine (Shakti) aspect. The traditions belonging to this second group have generally adopted an inclusive attitude towards the human body, nature, and matter, seeing them not as an illusion but as the manifold manifestation of Spirit and as the playground for our transformation and growth.

Of the two groups of traditions we have just identified, the first is more aligned with the principles of perfection, purity, and asceticism. This is the flavor of spirituality that has prevailed in the last two to three thousand years, a period in which the masculine principle has imposed itself across the political and cultural spectrum across the globe. Since the onset of the Iron Age, the second group of traditions, more aligned with the principles of wholeness, inclusion, and embodiment, has gone into various degrees of concealment to

⁵ I have written more about Tantra and its attitude towards the Feminine in Manacorda (2020).

avoid persecution and defamation. The various alchemical traditions seem to belong in the second group, and, as such, they are being redeemed from a centuries-long period of contempt and misunderstanding. Today, the pendulum is swinging back, and we are witnessing a renewed interest in Tantra, in all forms of Shamanism, and in Alchemy. Jung was part of this movement by his prolific interest in such an obscure subject. When Jung first started being interested in Alchemy in the period between the two World Wars, he had to dig this subject out of “the dunghill of the past” (Von Franz, 1980, p. 13). In the 20th century, Alchemy was considered to be little more than a mass of intellectual rubbish.

If we shift our perspective and regard Alchemy as a spiritual and psychological enterprise, it isn't difficult to view it as rightfully belonging alongside Tantra, Daoism, and Shamanism. The theme of coniunctio, Alchemy's answer to the problem of polarity and the union of opposites, matches the Tantric and Daoist teachings in both complexity and refinement. Like Tantra, Alchemy includes the element of sexuality in the toolbox that we can tap into for the purpose of inner work. Alchemy features an intimate, if somewhat ambivalent, relationship with matter, the elements, the plants and animals, in one word with nature.⁶ Everywhere it appeared, from Egypt to the Arab world to Europe, Alchemy provided a more mystical counterpoint to the literal interpretations of the scriptures (Von Franz, 1980, p. 108). In medieval Europe, where the masculine spirituality of Christianity was strengthening its hold on individual and collective life, Alchemy represented a balancing force that sought to bring back, albeit in a hidden and protected way, the Feminine principle represented by Sophia, the Wisdom of God.⁷

⁶ The alchemists saw nature both as a guiding light, and as a *prima materia* to transform and perfect (Roob, 2014, pp. 408-409), but definitely not as an illusion or a figment of imagination.

⁷ See for example this passage from the medieval treatise *Aurora Consurgens*: “She, the Wisdom, is what Solomon says one should use as a light and he placed it above all beauty and all salvation, for even the value of gems and diamonds was not comparable to her value.” (Von Franz, 1980, p. 187)

Ultimately, the split between these two groups of spiritual traditions is a fracture we can recognize in our own hearts. All of us, at some point, may need to choose between excluding sexuality and relationships from our path of inner growth, or including it, with all the opportunities and risks that it brings. If we choose the second option, then turning to traditions like Tantra, Shamanism, and Alchemy may help us feel included in a broader collective quest towards psychic development. Personally, I have chosen to walk the path of inclusion of relating and sexuality into my spiritual growth. Although this path is fraught with obstacles, after years of missteps and breakthroughs, I am reaping the fruits of the work. One of the most significant results of having chosen an inclusive path is, without doubt, having made contact with my inner Feminine. Few things have expanded my sense of self and changed my way of relating with myself and others in a more profound way.

Through the richness of its unfiltered words and pictures, Alchemy offers a vast repertoire of symbols and associations that we can draw from. This will not be to everyone's taste, and the logical, structured part of our consciousness may not be the best guide to navigating the waters of alchemical texts. But if we are willing to put that part to momentary rest and instead use more of our imagination, intuition, and sensitivity, then Alchemy is a rich, abundant spring to drink from. For some, Alchemy might even become a spiritual path, a framework in which to develop one's inner growth, and the toolbox with which to face the inevitable challenges along the way.

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Figures

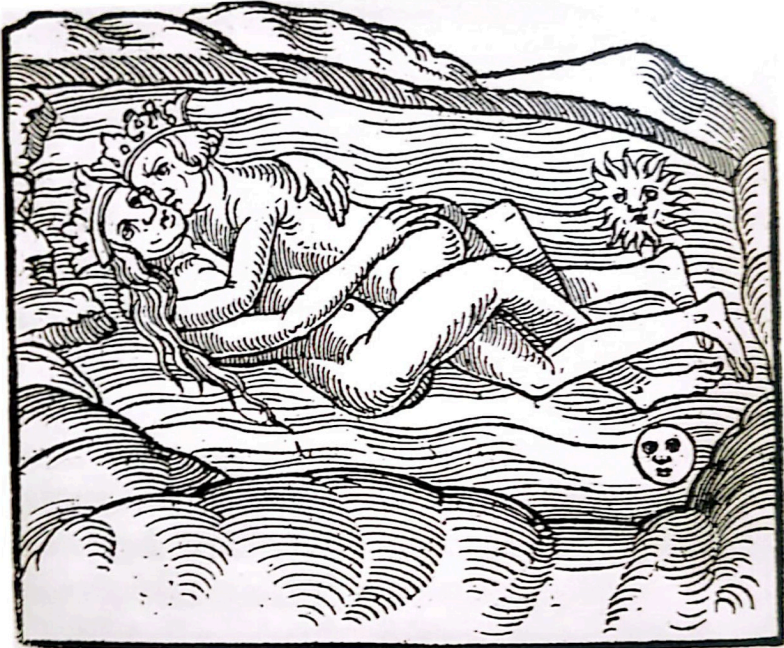


Figure 1: The King and Queen making love (Roob, 2014, p. 366)



Figure 2: The Hermaphrodite, or Lapis (Roob, 2014, p. 367)