

## “THE OFFICE BECOMES A WOMAN BEST” Alchemy, Women, and Healing in *The Winter’s Tale*

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**Abstract** – The purpose of this study is to discuss the role of women in one of Shakespeare’s last plays, *The Winter’s Tale*, in the light of the alchemical and medical context of early modern England. Recent criticism has rescued from oblivion the significant position of women in the healthcare system of Elizabethan and Jacobean London, demonstrating that female practitioners were highly respected in their communities as caregivers, nurses, housewives, and also alchemists. Alchemy, in particular, was one of the areas in which women were most actively involved and renowned figures like Queen Elizabeth and Mary Sidney Herbert engaged in alchemical studies. Moreover, the art of alchemy itself is usually portrayed as a lady in contemporary treatises. By considering the analogies between alchemical and dramatic art and their association with the female dimension, this essay aims at shedding further light on the characters of Queen Hermione, her daughter Perdita, and Lady Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*. If Hermione, whose name recalls the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, stands for the feminine aspect of matter that has to be reconciled with its male counterpart, then it can be assumed that King Leontes is the *rex chymicus*, who is the protagonist of several alchemical allegories and symbolises the raw matter that has to be transmuted into gold. It follows that Princess Perdita can be read as the *philosophical child*, the fruit of the chemical wedding between the royal couple. Finally, in the alchemical performance of the romance, Paulina functions as a personification of the art of alchemy and, as a dramatist, directs the events. She is driven throughout the play by the intention of reuniting the king and queen, Leontes and Hermione, and, in an obliquely alchemical way, employs her magical art to mend nature, thus actualising the healing effects of both alchemy and drama.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; Women; Renaissance drama; Alchemy; Hermeticism.

### 1. Introduction

Studies on the role of alchemy in the Renaissance have emerged with a certain degree of difficulty from that aura of ‘occultism’ that has long enveloped them: eminent scholars have contributed to the academic recognition of alchemical research by employing a wide range of methodologies: historians of literature, art, science, philosophy, and religions, as well as philologists and chemists, have shed light on the history of alchemy and on its role in shaping the early modern mindset.<sup>1</sup> As documented by Pereira (2001, pp. 194-195), from the late Middle Ages onwards, the flow of the alchemical written production became almost overwhelming in the whole of Europe. Marsilio Ficino’s Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1471), the collection of treatises attributed to the ‘father’ of alchemy, the legendary Egyptian priest and magician Hermes Trismegistus, significantly promoted the

<sup>1</sup> On the relationships between alchemy and early modern English literature, see, among others, Abraham 1990, 1991, Healy 2011, and Linden 1996, 2007. Abraham (1998) also edited a dictionary of alchemical imagery that is an invaluable tool for the study of alchemy. On the connections between alchemy and the development of science in Renaissance Europe, see the contributions of Debus (1965, 1978) and the most recent studies by Principe (2007) and Califano (2015). From the perspective of the history of religions, see Eliade 1956 and 1978. Equally worth mentioning are the works of Pereira (2001, 2006) and Gabriele (1986, 1997, 2015).

diffusion of alchemical practices. As far as Renaissance England is concerned, Linden (1996, p. 1) observes that the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the period in which the syncretic body of knowledge defined as Hermeticism reached its apogee, were also the time when, under the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James, the English literary and dramatic production reached one of its highest points of excellence. By exploring the impact of the alchemical culture, “a familiar and controversial subject”, on “a new and flourishing tradition of popular, vernacular literature” (Linden 1996, p. 1), scholars can acquire further insight into a now lost philosophy of man, nature, and the cosmos. Nicholl (1980, p. 7) remarks that the imagery and language of alchemy was undoubtedly “part of the air they [Elizabethans and Jacobeans] breathed” and Healy (2011, p. 9) similarly maintains that Shakespeare’s contemporaries were used to thinking and reading through “alchemical spectacles”. If, as Frye suggests, the “historical Shakespeare” has always to be “present in our minds, to prevent us from trying to kidnap him into our own cultural orbit” (Frye 1986, p. 1), then the complex iconographic and linguistic apparatus of alchemy cannot be neglected when perusing the Bard’s macrotext.

As a result of the vast circulation of alchemical beliefs in the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, alchemical notions are embedded in a number of the playwright’s dramatic and poetic works. Lines such as those spoken by Casca in *Julius Caesar* – “that which would appear offence in us, / His countenance, like richest alchemy / Will change to virtue and to worthiness” (I, iii, 158-60) – or as those employed by King John in the drama bearing his name – “To solemnize this day, the glorious sun / Stays in his course and plays the alchemist” (*King John*, III, i, 3-4) – evidently draw upon alchemical motifs. What is most difficult, however, is identifying that kind of imagery and vocabulary whose alchemical significance has been obfuscated throughout the centuries and, therefore, is hardly recognisable as such nowadays. I believe that alchemy, in its turn complexly intertwined with Biblical and Christian symbolism, offers twenty-first century readers an enlightening perspective from which to interpret *The Winter’s Tale*, whose circular and redemptive pattern has been compared to the “three-fold scheme of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*” (Pilgrim 1983, p. 23). The play is actually imbued with *topoi* proper of the literary and iconographic apparatus of Renaissance alchemy, from the transmutation of the *rex chymicus* to the return of the *filius philosophorum* and the chemical wedding between the king and queen.<sup>2</sup> In the present essay, I will focus primarily on the connections between the women in the play, i.e. Hermione, Paulina, and Perdita, and the imagery of alchemy, which usually assigns a central role to the female dimension. Furthermore, as I will illustrate below, alchemy shares several of the features of dramatic art, thus making Shakespeare’s *tale of winter* worth considering also from an alchemical perspective.

## 2. Alchemy and drama

Scholars have variously pointed out the affinities between alchemy and drama: Shumaker (1972, p. 197), among others, remarks that alchemical theory “approximated the behavior of metals [...] to relationships and processes which [...] had something of the quality of

<sup>2</sup> For an alchemical reading of Leontes’s path of “recreation” (III, iii, 237), a purgatorial journey that, passing through the phases of conspiracy and prophecy, evokes the alchemical parable of the *rex chymicus*, see Zamparo (2016a). The essay also discusses the supposed resurrection of Hermione’s statue in the light of the alchemical phase of *fixatio*: the rebirth of the sculptural work of art, which is repeatedly defined as “stone” in Act V, recalls the alchemical process by means of which the volatile spirit, or divine breath, is restored within the seemingly dead matter in the alembic, so that the body is vivified and the cycle of the *rota alchemica* almost accomplished. On the connections between the statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale* and the alchemical and Hermetic culture of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, see also Zamparo (2016b).

drama”. The theatrical nature of much alchemical imagery is evident in all those treatises and engravings that portray the phases of the *opus alchymicum* by means of metaphors drawn from the life of man. The association of the alchemical work with human generation is to be found in the very first alchemical text that entered Western Europe in the twelfth century, the so-called *Testamentum Morieni*, translated from Arabic into Latin by the English Robert of Chester in 1144. The wise master Morienus reveals to King Khalid that “pairing, offspring, pregnancy, and birth” are the pillars of the alchemical art:

For the conduct of this operation, you must have pairing, production of offspring, pregnancy, birth, and rearing. For union is followed by conception, which initiates pregnancy, whereupon birth follows. Now the performance of this composition is likened to the generation of man (Morienus 1974, p. 29).

If the creation of the philosopher’s stone is imagined as the birth of an infant, the reunion of all the contrasting polarities characterising the earthly dimension is, needless to say, regarded as a *coniunctio* or ‘chemical wedding’ between a man and a woman, often represented as a king and a queen (Figure 1).



Figure 1  
*Splendor solis*  
 ©British Library Board  
 (Harley 3469, f. 10r).

The custom to describe the steps of the *opus alchymicum* in human terms arises from the notion that the microcosm and the macrocosm are one and the same thing: the world of man, the microcosm, and the world of God, the macrocosm, are closely related, the former being a reflection of the latter. The Renaissance model of the two cosmos, according to which *Homo est utriusque naturae vinculum*, “the nodal point” (Tillyard 1972, p. 73) between heaven and earth, perfectly applies to alchemical imagery since alchemists consider the philosopher’s stone as a microcosmic reproduction of man. The fifteenth-century alchemist Thomas Norton, among others, explicitly argues that “our Stone in generation / Is most like thing to Mans Creation” (Ashmole 1652, p. 61).

It is especially the kind of alchemy typical of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance that is conceived of “as the practical pursuit and mental cultivation of the analogy between chemical changes and the life of man” (Taylor 1949, pp. 143-44). Several of the plates collected in one of the most renowned treatises in the history of Western alchemy, Solomon Trismosin’s *Splendor solis* (sixteenth century), clearly show the protagonists of the *opus alchymicum* in the shape of kings and queens. A high number of sources testify that the central character of alchemical allegories is usually a king, also known as *rex chymicus*, who stands for gold that has to be deprived of its impurities before being transmuted into philosophical gold and united in a chemical wedding with his queen. Since all metals are “potentially gold” (Waite 1893, p. 303), as one can read in an alchemical treatise by Eirenaeus Philalethes, Norton claims that “This *Science* [alchemy] shall drawe towards the Kinge” (Ashmole 1652, p. 53). The fact that a considerable number of the illustrations contained in *Splendor solis* represent the phases of the alchemical *opus* as “elevated on a stage” demonstrates “an awareness of the theatrical nature of the work (Abraham 1998, p. 199). From the alchemists’ perspective, the alembic is “the theatre in which the cycle of solve et coagula, beheading and renovation, melting and recasting, was faithfully re-enacted” (Abraham 1998, p. 199). Alchemical authors oftentimes describe the cycle of the *rota alchemica* as if it were a dramatic performance, in which metals, whose role is personified by human characters, undergo a path of torment, expiation, and rebirth. The Egyptian alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis (third century AD) already conceived of the alchemical *opus* in “human terms” (Nicholl 1980, p. 141). In one of his ‘visions’, or ‘dreams’, Zosimos recounts the story of “a sacrificing priest” who, after descending “fifteen steps” into the darkness, finally ascends towards the light:

I went to sleep, and I saw a sacrificing priest standing before me at the top of an altar in the form of a bowl. This altar had 15 steps leading up to it. Then the priest stood up and I heard a voice from above saying to me, ‘I have accomplished the descent of the 15 steps of darkness and the ascent of the steps of light and it is he who sacrifices, that renews me, casting away the coarseness of the body’.<sup>3</sup>

The “sacrificing priest” of Zosimos’s alchemical parable symbolises the matter or metal that, within the alembic, is submitted to a cycle of destruction and re-creation, following the three phases of the *opus alchymicum*, commonly referred to as *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo* and usually identified with the colours black, white, and red. The alchemical journey towards the acquisition of the much sought-for philosopher’s stone is thus structured as a *descensus ad inferos*: the stage of *nigredo* is followed by a rebirth that corresponds to the phase of *albedo*, which, in turn, is finally crowned by the *rubedo*, the “happy end” (Cradock 1995, p. 23), i.e. the moment when the chemical wedding is accomplished.

The connections between alchemy and theatre are also expressed by Ben Jonson in *The Alchemist*, a comedy almost contemporary with *The Winter’s Tale*. The association between alchemical and dramatic art is clearly established in *The Argument*, a short poem in acrostic lines that summarises the plot and introduces the play. The “Cozeners” (l. 6), the fraudulent alchemist Subtle and his colleague Dol Common, agree with the housekeeper Face to turn his master Lovewit’s house into an alchemical laboratory: “wanting some / House to set up, with him they here contract, / Each for a share, and all begin to act” (ll. 6-8). Lovewit, who has fled London because of the plague that struck the city in 1609 and in the summer of 1610, has left his house in the care of the shrewd Face. The latter determines that he will benefit from the former’s absence in order to undertake an advantageous business: with the help of the con artist Subtle, Face manages to deceive a few gullible

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of Zosimos’s vision is from Taylor (1949, p. 61).

customers, among which is Sir Epicure Mammon, by seducing them with the dream of the philosopher’s stone, which would bring infinite wealth and fame to those who obtain it. The performance they “set up” (l. 7) is both the alchemical delusion devised by Face with the help of Subtle and Doll, and the dramatic illusion staged by the actors before the audience. As if the characters were the members of a theatrical company, the terms “house” (l. 7), “contract” (l. 7), “share” (l. 8), and “act” (l. 8) explicitly evoke the identification of alchemy and drama.<sup>4</sup> In the same way as acting is a fantasy, actors merely playing a role on stage, the art of alchemy is a delusion, an illusory dream that has to be voluntarily believed in order to become true: as Linden (2003, p. 13) points out, “aurifaction is merely aurifiction”. It is, therefore, not surprising that at the end of *The Alchemist*, the characters “all in fume are gone” (*The Argument*, l. 12), thus highlighting the vanishing essence of drama and the illusory nature of the alchemical art. Considering that “[p]laying is a counterfeiting, a continual pretence”, an illusion that “had to be acknowledged openly” (Gurr 2009, pp. 221-22), the connections between drama and alchemy are fairly evident. In Jonson’s satire, the alchemical dream is a mere pretence: as Holland and Sherman argue in their introduction to the comedy (Jonson 2012, p. 548), “the true alchemy of the play is doubly the work of a stage, the stage on which *The Alchemist* is performed and the stage on which the con artists perform to their clients”.

Most interestingly, the set of *The Alchemist* is located “in the Friars” (I, i, 17), in “a building somewhere a street or two from the Blackfriars theatre where the King’s Men were likely to have been performing the play in November 1610”<sup>5</sup> and where *The Winter’s Tale* was also enacted in subsequent years (Tatspaugh 2009, p. 114). The liberty was popular for the new indoor playhouse that was acquired by Shakespeare’s company in 1608 and that would provide winter accomodation to the King’s Men (Gurr 2009, pp. 191-192). Blackfriars was notoriously a district of criminality but was also renowned as one of those “natural science neighborhoods” (Harkness 2002, p. 140) that welcomed scientific instruments makers, chemical experts, and other medical empirics, whose practices were usually opposed by the members of the Royal College of Physicians. Suburbs like Blackfriars allowed the proliferation of such outlawed activities as drama, alchemy, and natural magic, thus offering both dramatists and natural science experts a space of freedom that they would not have had within those areas that were under the control of city authorities.

## 2.1. *Since first We were dissevered. The alchemical performance of The Winter’s Tale*

*The Winter’s Tale*, whose first recorded performance dates from 1611, was very likely composed in late 1610, the same year in which *The Alchemist* was first acted by Shakespeare’s theatre company, the King’s Men.<sup>6</sup> Seeing the parallels between *The Alchemist* and *The Winter’s Tale*, as noticed by Dillon (2013, p. 207), “depends upon recognizing the closeness in time of the two plays and the fact of their performance by the same company in the same theatre for the same fashionable and knowing audience”. Jacobean theatre-goers were well versed in alchemical philosophy, a mental framework that, conversely, is almost meaningless to modern readers and spectators. In *The Alchemist*, in particular, Jonson displays such an outstanding familiarity with alchemical vocabulary and symbolism that, as Holland and Sherman observe, one is prompted to wonder whether

<sup>4</sup> See Ostovich’s note to Jonson (1997, p. 378).

<sup>5</sup> See Holland’s and Sherman’s introduction to Jonson (2012, p. 547).

<sup>6</sup> See Brown’s introduction to Jonson (1983, p. xi).

“quotation is happening” or whether “Jonson had inadvertently repeated an alchemical commonplace” (Jonson 2012, p. 551). Considering that works on alchemy were widely published in the sixteenth-century, both in England and on the continent,<sup>7</sup> it can be assumed that Jonson’s contemporaries would have shared the playwright’s expertise.<sup>8</sup> In a renowned passage, the gamester Surly addresses the shrewd alchemist Subtle and satirizes the obscurities and seeming contradictions that are a peculiar feature of the language of alchemy, thus exhibiting an almost specialistic knowledge of alchemical terminology:

What else are all your terms,  
Whereon no one o’ your writers ‘grees with other?  
Of your elixir, your *lac virginis*,  
Your stone, your med’cine, and your chrysosperm,  
Your sal, your sulphur, and your mercury,  
Your oil of height, your tree of life, your blood,  
Your marcasite, your tutty, your magnesia,  
Your toad, your crow, you dragon, and your panther,  
Your son, your moon, your firmament, your adrop,  
Your lato, azoch, zarnich, chibrit, heautarit,  
And then your red man and your white woman [...]?  
(II, iii, 182-192).

The fact that *The Alchemist* is so close, in terms of time of composition and performance, to *The Winter’s Tale* raises questions concerning the possible parallels between the two plays: it suggests, at least, that Shakespeare’s audience was used to seeing the illusion of alchemy displayed on stage and that the romance might acquire further value if read in the light of Jonson’s satire. It should be recalled that a close relationship exists between another of Shakespeare’s last plays, *The Tempest*, and Jonson’s comedy. Scholars actually assume that the Elizabethan astrologer, alchemist, and mathematician John Dee was very likely a model for both plays and that “Shakespeare’s virtuous Prospero [...] might be an answer to Jonson’s fraudulent Subtle” (Simonds 1997-1998, p. 539).

According to the present study, *The Winter’s Tale* is structured as a redemptive and circular journey that, in its tragicomic pattern, follows the steps of an alchemical process. Scholars have noticed that the *opus alchymicum* does have the features of a tragicomedy, in view of the fact that the descent into the darkness of *nigredo* is followed by an ascent towards the light of the *albedo* and by the final *coniunctio* between the king and queen, first separated and eventually reconciled. Interestingly enough, in her study of alchemical symbolism in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, Simonds (1998, p. 156) defines “the transmutation of matter into higher forms” as “the tragi-comic art of the *Magnum opus*”. In a tragicomedy,

<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning, among others, the collections *Theatrum Chemicum*, first published by Zetzner in four volumes in 1602, and *Artis auriferae*, that was issued in two volumes in 1593. Given its huge success, the former was published again with the addition of more volumes in 1613-1622 and 1659-1661. Zetzner’s *Theatrum* was not the first collection of alchemical treatises to appear in print, since a small anthology entitled *De alchemia* was published in 1541 and, later, in 1550. As documented by Abraham (1991, p. 306), Shakespeare and his contemporaries were acquainted with these alchemical compendia. In particular, the scholar observes that the dramatist could have read the celebrated *Rosarium philosophorum*, an alchemical work attributed to the thirteenth-century Catalan thinker Arnald of Villanova, and see the woodcuts contained therein both in *De alchimia* (1550) and in *Artis auriferae* (1593). The first collection of alchemical treatises that was published entirely in the English language is *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, edited and translated by Ashmole (1652).

<sup>8</sup> See Holland’s and Sherman’s introduction to Jonson (2012, pp. 549-550).

the climax in the third act is not followed by the catastrophe, as in the tragic genre,<sup>9</sup> but, rather, by an ascent, or, as Frye (1965, p. 73) calls it, an “anastrophe”, i.e. an ‘inversion’. The climax of the alchemical cycle usually corresponds to the phase of *ablutio*, when corrupted matter is dissolved into the *prima materia*, the original stuff of Creation, by means of cleansing water, and is thus re-created: “Such an inversion of the world occurs in the middle of the alchemical *opus*, when all is dissolved back into the *prima materia*” (Abraham 1990, p. 103). In other words, the *rota alchemica* is brought back to primeval Chaos in a phase known as *opus contra naturam*. The alchemist George Starkey (1654, p. 67) explicitly remarks that the stone cannot be created unless there is an initial, retrograde movement of dissolution: “But ours is not, until by retrograde / Motion to resolution it intend”.

Though it resists classifications, *The Winter’s Tale*, which closes the section of *Comedies* in the 1623-Folio, is usually regarded as a tragicomedy, or, as Pafford suggests in his introduction to the play, a “romantic tragi-comedy” (Shakespeare 1984, p. 1), since the tragic and the comic modes are evidently united. It has been remarked that, in writing *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare “seems like an astonishingly literal-minded man who, attempting to write tragicomedy, assumes that it must mean a tragedy joined to a comedy” (Young 1972, p. 117). The romance is actually conceived of as a diptych, whose panels are “held together by the hinge of Time” (Moseley 2009, p. 56). Its protagonists, i.e. the king and queen of Sicily, Leontes and Hermione, and their daughter Perdita, undergo a process of transformation, healing, and re-creation in which they are led by Paulina, wife to the lord of Sicily Antigonus. Paulina, in the guise of a “crafty counterpart” of the playwright (Engel 2013: 87), directs the alchemical performance and, therefore, all the other characters are subject to her art. As will be further discussed, alchemy is most frequently depicted as a woman in contemporary treatises and illustrations and, more in general, is associated with the female dimension: the male practitioner is actually required to perform the maternal role of creating the philosopher’s stone, also known as the ‘philosophical child’, the fruit of the *coniunctio* between the opposites, i.e. Sol and Luna, or king and queen.

The first three acts of *The Winter’s Tale* are dominated by Leontes’s irrational jealousy and rage over his wife Hermione, whom he believes has betrayed him with his brotherly friend, the king of Bohemia Polixenes. Driven by his diseased imagination and “unsafe lunes” (II, ii, 30-31), the king of Sicily convinces himself that his newborn daughter, later named Perdita by Lord Antigonus, is the result of Hermione’s adultery and resolves to condemn the queen to prison, order the murder of Polixenes, and dispatch the baby to “some remote and desert place” (II, iii, 174). It is only when he has remained “heirless” (V, i, 10) and “issueless” (V, i, 173) that Leontes eventually repents. Immediately after he defies the verdict of Apollo’s oracle, which ratifies Hermione’s and Polixenes’s innocence, the god punishes the king by means of the death of his eldest son Mamilus, an event that is followed by the presumed decease of the queen. Driven by remorse, the king of Sicily submits himself to a path of expiation, or re-creation, as he himself claims: “tears shed there / Shall be my recreation” (III, ii, 236-7). His dissolution into tears is mirrored in the purgation of the outer world by means of water. The turning point of the play is represented precisely by the shipwreck, when, as Pitcher observes, “the themes of rebirth and regeneration are announced” (Shakespeare 2010, p. 17). At the close of Act III, which marks the end of the first, tragic half of the drama and the beginning of comedy, Antigonus arrives on the coast

<sup>9</sup> Freytag (1900, pp. 114-15) compares the tragic pattern to the structure of a pyramid: “Through the two halves of the action which come closely together at one point, the drama possesses – if one may symbolize its arrangement by lines – a pyramidal structure. It rises from the *introduction* with the entrance of the exciting forces to the *climax*, and falls from here to the *catastrophe*. Between these three parts lie (the parts of) the *rise* and the *fall*”.

of Bohemia, after he has been ordered by King Leontes to abandon Perdita. In the light of the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, as the first principle of Hermes Trismegistus's *Tabula Smaragdina* reads,<sup>10</sup> the disease that has infected Leontes's court is reflected in the illness of the natural dimension. As one of the mariners exclaims: "We have landed in *ill time*. The skies look grimly / And threaten present blusters" (III, iii, 3-4, italics mine). A savage storm hits the ship, thus killing the crew, whereas lord Antigonus is devoured by a bear: nature is revolting against humanity as a consequence of Leontes's "unnatural"<sup>11</sup> behaviour, in the same way as the order of the cosmos is completely altered after Duncan's murder at the hands of Macbeth. In *The Winter's Tale*, a bear kills the Sicilian lord and the relationship between man and nature is evidently inverted, the sea swallowing and mocking the mariners and they, in turn, roaring against it.<sup>12</sup> Rather unexpectedly, Perdita, the seemingly 'lost one', is miraculously saved and rescued by two Bohemian shepherds. Life and death clearly meet at the end of Act III, as the Shepherd tells his son, the Clown: "thou met'st with things dying, I with things newborn" (III, iii, 110-111). The world has been brought back to original Chaos, or, in alchemical terms, to the *prima materia*, in order to be healed and created anew, and the second, regenerative half of the romance begins, thus following the upward course of the tragicomic genre and of the *opus alchymicum*. Taking into account that in alchemical imagery the retrieval of primal matter "denotes an act of creation and one of destruction, [...] a retrograde movement and a progressive movement" (Fabricius 1976, p. 17), one might read the scene of the storm in *The Winter's Tale*, in which "things dying" are the source of "things newborn" (III, iii, 110-11), in the light of the alchemical phase of ablution. The latter is a stage of dissolution that, by means of water, generates new life, as one can read in the text known as *Zoroaster's Cave*: "Solution turns the Stone into its Materia prima, that is, into Water" (Eglinus 1667, p. 73). Alchemists actually believe that water, which is both a dissolving and a renewing force, cleanses corrupted matter and leads it to the perfect state of gold. In *The Winter's Tale*, the death- and life-giving water of the shipwreck mirrors Leontes's purgatorial tears, which signal both his symbolical death and the beginning of his path towards renewal.

According to the alchemical stages of *solve et coagula*, dissolve and reunite, and to the circular path of the *rota alchemica*, the play is closed by the reunion of all previously "dissevered" characters, as Leontes himself remarks in the very end of the romance:

Good Paulina,  
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely  
Each one demand and answer to his part  
Performed in this wide gap of time since first  
We were dissevered.  
(V, iii, 151-5)

Most interestingly, it is Paulina who, in the role of alchemy, guides Leontes, the *rex*

<sup>10</sup> "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" (Linden 2003, p. 28). Defined by Pereira (2006, p. 240) as the "Urtext of Western alchemy", the *Tabula smaragdina* was supposedly found in the grave of the mythical Hermes Trismegistus by Sarah, usually identified as the wife of Alexander the Great or of Abraham, a detail that inevitably contributed to heighten the status of the text.

<sup>11</sup> Paulina defines Leontes as "a most unworthy and unnatural lord" (II, iii, 111).

<sup>12</sup> The Clown illustrates to his father, the Shepherd, how the mariners died in the shipwreck: "But to make an end of the ship – to see how / the sea flapdragoned it! But first, how the poor souls / roared, and the sea mocked them" (III, iii, 96-8). In a similar way, when recounting the death of lord Antigonus, the Clown describes the events as if the respective roles of man and nature had been suddenly reversed: "and how the poor / gentleman roared, and the bear mocked him, both / roaring louder than the sea or weather" (III, iii, 97-9).

*chymicus*, throughout his purgatorial journey and leads him to the final *coniunctio* with Queen Hermione, whose union is crowned by the symbolical rebirth of Perdita.

### 3. Medicine, alchemy, and women in Shakespeare's time

It has been remarked that one of the long-term effects of the acquisition of the Blackfriars theatre by the King's Men was that commentators were prompted "to write more and more about the women in the audiences" and, consequently, "the plays written for the new repertory started providing a woman-centred perspective" (Gurr 2009, p. 11). *The Winter's Tale* is undoubtedly the Shakespearean play where the role of women is most noticeable: Paulina, Hermione, and Perdita embody "the female forces of recovery" (Adelman 1992, p. 228). Paulina, in particular, is one of the strongest of Shakespeare's female characters and, like Prospero, she evidently functions as an alter ego of the dramatist. Diehl (2008, p. 71) defines the lady as "a consummate playwright capable of arousing wonder, manipulating illusions, and casting a magical spell over her audiences". Her role within the romance is primarily that of a healer: from the very beginning of the play, she presents herself as Leontes's "physician" (II, iii, 53), whose purpose is to cure the latter's "diseased opinion" (I, ii, 295) with "words as medicinal as true" (II, iii, 36). One of the questions that still arouses the scholars' interest is which sort of art Paulina employs. Like Helena, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, the Sicilian Lady in *The Winter's Tale* devotes herself to the cure of an ailing king. However, Leontes's illness is spiritual and metaphorical rather than physical, as it is, instead, the disease afflicting the king of France in *All's Well*. Metaphors related to the imagery of sickness abound in Shakespeare's romance as, for instance, when Lord Camillo warns the king of Bohemia Polixenes against a sickness that is affecting the Sicilian court: "There is a sickness / Which puts some of us in distemper, but / I cannot name the disease" (I, ii, 380-82). Recalling the heroine of *All's Well*, Paulina is at first rejected by Leontes, who defines her as a "mankind witch" (II, iii, 66): in a similar way, in *All's Well*, the king of France initially refuses the remedies of Helena since she is an unlicensed practitioner, whose art, bequeathed to her by her deceased father, Gerard de Narbon, stands in opposition to the medicine sanctioned by the physicians of the Royal College. The figure of Helena, like Paulina, has been interpreted in various ways: as testified by Floyd-Wilson (2013, p. 28), the former "has been identified as a cunning woman associated with fairy magic, a Paracelsian, a domestic medical practitioner, and a student of her father's medicine", and, as the scholar concludes, "to some degree, all of these critics are correct".

In early modern England, unlicensed female healers were usually relegated at the margins of the healthcare system by male medical authorities, who generally refused to officially recognise their central role. However, as documented by Harkness (2008), the picture portrayed by the Royal College of Physicians and the Barber-Surgeons' Company does not correspond to actual historical data, that testify, instead, that women were active participants in the health service of Elizabethan London. In particular, Harkness (2008, pp. 54-55) points out that, by relying on urban documents, such as parish, probate, and hospital records, as well as individual manuscripts, namely receipt books and medical formularies, one would be able to ascertain that female practitioners were not only numerous but were substantively valued by their patients and neighbourhood. The stance against female healers assumed by the male medical establishment was usually gender-based: women, working as midwives, searchers, nurses, surgeons, and empirics, were regarded as a sign of "urban disorder" (Harkness 2008, p. 56). In Pettigrew's words, the licensed members of the College "have spent a great deal of time honing a narrative of their own" (Pettigrew 2007, p. 50): according to their official accounts, female physicians did not exist and should be excluded from actual medical practices. The Fellows of the College also attacked those women who, working as empirics or midwives, collaborated with their husbands and established "a joint

practice” with them (Harkness 2002, p. 144). Harkness (2002, p. 144) recounts the cases of Emma Philips, who was sent to prison because she married a member of the Barber-Surgeons’ Company, and of Lieven Alaertes, dismissed as a bold and ignorant woman in view of the fact that she assisted her husband and surgeon Guillaume Alaertes.

Despite the obvious parallels between Helena and Paulina, a crucial detail distinguishes the one from the other: their social status. Helena is clearly defined as “A poor physician’s daughter” by Bertram,<sup>13</sup> who at first abhors the possibility of marrying her precisely because of her low social class. Pettigrew (2007, p. 48) actually states that “poor female medical practitioners were treated in a way wholly different from their aristocratic counterparts”. Gentlewomen, like Paulina, were more likely to be allowed to display their expertise by the male élite, although even noble female healers were expected not to overstep their limits (Pettigrew 2007, p. 47), i.e. the very limits of being a woman. When Lady Paulina offers her unconditional aid to Leontes, in the attempt to convince him that his judgment has been overshadowed by his “follies” (II, iii, 126), she is immediately reminded of her gender and, therefore, of her inferior position. The king dismisses her as an “audacious lady!” (II, iii, 41), a “bawd” (II, iii, 67), “A gross hag” (II, iii, 106), and “A mankind witch” (II, iii, 66). The term *witch* is especially worth considering in view of the fact that, as pointed out by Pitcher, it was commonly used “for women who were a threat to men, because they might overwhelm male authority with magic” (Shakespeare 2010, p. 210). When Leontes refuses to place himself in the care of Paulina, she nevertheless reminds him that, even though she is a woman and, therefore, can only act as a healer and not as the official king’s physician, “her social position brings with it certain privileges” (Pettigrew 2007, p. 171). The lady clearly reclaims her right to speak: “I beseech you hear me, who professes / Myself your loyal servant, your physician, / Your most obedient counsellor” (II, iii, 52-54). Upholding her paramount, even though unofficial, role within the household, Paulina gives voice to all those female healers who were active in Elizabethan London but whose contribution to the history of science and medicine has been most regularly eclipsed. The Sicilian lady also embodies the role of the midwife and, indeed, “the mother-midwife relationship is central in the play” (Bicks 2003, p. 38). Even though she does not actually attend Hermione’s delivery, since the queen gives birth to Perdita while she is imprisoned, Paulina is explicitly defined as a “midwife” (II, iii, 158) by the king. As Leigh remarks, “both holy and occult powers become mingled in the label ‘midwife’ which Leontes gives to Paulina” (Leigh 2014, p. 141). Recent criticism has made significant progress in unveiling the status of early modern English midwives as “influential and integral members of the societies in which they lived” (Bicks 2003, p. 7; see also Evenden 2000, Fissell 2008, and Marland 1993). Earlier studies, conversely, silenced the role of these women by blindly pursuing the ‘myth of the midwife-witch’ (Harley 1990, Bicks 2003). Paulina, addressed to as both “midwife” (II, iii, 158) and “witch” (II, iii, 66), personifies this kind of stereotype, “a literary convention which passed from the demonologists into other kinds of writing” (Harley 1990, p. 8). Harley attests that midwives were not “ignorant old crones” (Harley 1990, p. 1) or “dangerous illiterates” (Harley 1990, p. 19), but, rather, were highly respected in their communities. The scholar, thus, suggests the urgent need to debunk the tale of the midwife-witch in order to truly understand the controversial position of women healers in Renaissance England.

At the time when *The Winter’s Tale* was composed and performed, there was a specific area of medicine that the Fellows of the Royal College often tried to outlaw and, interestingly enough, this area was most frequently associated with women: the art of

<sup>13</sup> “I know her well: / She had her breeding at my father’s charge. / A poor physician’s daughter, my wife? / Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever” (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, II, iii, 114-117).

alchemy. Alchemical practices were usually performed by unlicensed practitioners like Simon Forman, who was very likely a model for Jonson’s *The Alchemist* along with John Dee. However, chemical treatments were gradually being accepted also by eminent members of the College, such as Thomas Moffett, Francis Anthony, whose alchemical and Hermetic research was endorsed by King James himself, Sir Theodor Turquet de Mayerne, the chief physician to the Stuart monarch, and the son of the celebrated John Dee, Arthur. The latter became physician to Queen Anne of Denmark and was deeply appreciated also by James.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the writings of the Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus, also defined as ‘the Luther of medicine’ for his attempts to overturn established medical theories, were widely circulating precisely in late sixteenth-century England, when “a widespread search for his manuscripts” began (Debus 1978, p. 20). Shakespeare himself mentions both Galen and Paracelsus in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, thus attesting that his audience was deeply familiar with the dispute that opposed the latter’s chemical remedies to the former’s conventional practices.<sup>15</sup> It is very likely through John Hall, his son-in-law and a renowned physician in Stratford-upon-Avon, that Shakespeare became well acquainted with Paracelsus’s groundbreaking ideas. Hall relied on both traditional medical theories, based on Galenic medicine, and on the new Paracelsian treatments. In his casebook, Hall explicitly mentions the so-called *Laudanum Paracelsi* (Hall 1657, p. 169; see also Murray 1966, p. 36), which he prescribed to the twenty-eight-year-old Mrs. Peerse to cure her from “melancholy”, “weaknesse of the whole body”, and “daily Fever” (Hall 1657, pp. 168-169), until “she was well recovered” (Hall 1657, p. 170). Iyengar (2011, p. 5) attests that Hall integrated the two competing medical philosophies of the time, the Paracelsian and the Galenic, with little difficulty, as a considerable number of his contemporaries did. Most interestingly, distinguished women engaged themselves with alchemy: as it is well known, Queen Elizabeth practised alchemy with John Dee. A comment in the latter’s journal is especially significant in order to understand the queen’s absolute support of Dee’s alchemical practices: “Mr. Candish receyvved from the Queen’s Majestie warrant by word of mowth to assure me to do what I wold in philosophie and alchimie, and none shold chek, controll, or molest me” (Dee 1842, p. 37). Besides the queen, who was addressed to as both the supreme patron and a symbol of the alchemical art by alchemists who asked for royal support (Archer 2007), other renowned women in Elizabethan England devoted themselves to alchemical research. Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke and sister to the poet Philip Sidney, cultivated her studies at Wilton House (see Hunter/Hutton 1997, pp. 113-114), as documented by the antiquarian and biographer John Aubrey:

In her time Wilton house was like a College, there were so many learned and ingeniose persons. She was the greatest patronesse of witt and learning of any lady in her time. She was a great chymist and spent yearly a great deale in that study. (Aubrey 1898, p. 311)

Margaret Russell, Countess of Cumberland, was likewise a “lover” of alchemical experimentations, thanks to which she produced “excellent medicines” (Archer 2010, p. 197), and, in a similar way, the Countess of Oxford, Anne Cecil de Vere, was a well-known devotee of alchemy. It is under the latter’s protection that George Baker published the treatise *The new Jewell of Health* (1576), the English translation of Gesner’s *Thesaurus Euonymi Philiatri de remediis secretis* (1552).

The striking relationships between alchemical symbolism and the female dimension have been investigated by scholars such as Archer (2007, 2010), Ray (2015), and Warlick

<sup>14</sup> See Abraham’s introduction to Dee (1997, p. xxv).

<sup>15</sup> As Paroles says to Lafeu: “So I say – both of Galen and Paracelsus” (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, II, iii, 11).

(1998). Legendary female figures like Cleopatra and Maria Prophetissa have always been connected with the alchemical tradition, but the relevance of women is especially manifest in “the gendered imagery of alchemy” (Ray 2015, p. 5). Since the *opus* entails several operations that recall the chores women daily perform in their households, alchemists compare “the work of cleansing and purifying the matter of the Stone” to “women’s work” (Abraham 1998, p. 219). Scenes of women washing sheets appear in a number of alchemical plates and represent the phase of abluion, when matter is purified and cleansed of the blackness of *nigredo* and the stage of *albedo* is attained (Figure 2).



Figure 2

*Splendor solis*

©British Library Board (Harley 3469, f. 32v).

In alchemical texts, sheets stand for “the unclean matter of the Stone which must be washed and dried at the abluion” (Abraham 1998, p. 182). Trismosin himself, in *Splendor solis*, dwells upon the comparison between women’s activities and the *opus alchymicum* when he observes that “this Art is compared to Woman’s Work, which consists in cooking and roasting until it is done” (Trismosin 1920, p. 40). Emblems 3 and 22 in Michael Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens* further exploit the association between alchemy and housewifery, an identification that is to be found in the earliest alchemical writings, namely *Opus mulierum and ludus puerorum*, a Latin treatise collected in *Artis auriferae* (1593, vol. 2, pp. 171-204). The illustration that accompanies emblem 3 in *Atalanta fugiens* portrays a woman who is “cleaning dirty laundry by pouring hot water over it” (Maier 1969, p. 21) and the corresponding motto urges the alchemist to imitate the lady in the plate: “Go to the woman who washes the sheets and do as she does” (Maier 1969, p. 66). Emblem 22 similarly draws on the imagery of women’s house duties, notably cooking. The illustration accompanying the emblem portrays a pregnant woman standing before a stove and, in the motto, the author associates the phase of refinement, when matter reaches “clear perfection over the fire” (Abraham 1998, p. 29), with the art of cooking: “When you have obtained the white lead, then do women’s work, that is to say: COOK” (Maier 1969, p. 176)

Knowledge of the art of distillation, along with the ability of preparing medicines and drugs, was thought to be an essential part of a woman’s education, thus further testifying

to the connection between housekeeping and, therefore, women, and *chymistry*, a term that designates “*the sum total of alchemical/chemical topics as understood in the seventeenth century*” (Principe 1998, p. 9, emphasis in original). As a matter of fact, Ray (2015, p. 4) points out that “[t]he stillroom (or ‘distillatorie’) and the manuscript receipt book were two of the most important sites of female creativity in early modern England”. All this considered, it is not surprising to notice that several contemporary illustrations portray the art of alchemy as a lady. In a treatise by Leonhard Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia* (1570), the alchemical art is represented in the shape of a woman (Figure 3). The text was released in 1570 and 1574, the two editions containing two slightly different versions of the same plate: in both engravings, *Alchymya* appears while standing between the opposites of Sol and Luna and is surrounded by several tools belonging to the alchemical apparatus. The representation of the art of alchemy in female terms was well known also in England, as testified by an illustration in Baker’s *The newe Jewell of Health*. The work was published in London in 1570, 1576, and 1599, this time with the title of *The Practice of the new and old Physicke*. The title-page of Baker’s translations shows Lady Alchimy who, as in the case of Thurneysser’s *Alchymya*, stands between the sun and moon, carrying a still and a poker in her hands (Figure 4). As will be discussed below, Paulina’s healing and semi-magical role in *The Winter’s Tale* acquires further significance if read in the light of contemporary alchemical symbolism: by promoting the *coniunctio* between the king and queen of Sicily and the recovery of Perdita, Paulina fosters the play’s redemptive, and obliquely alchemical, journey of dissolution and renewal.

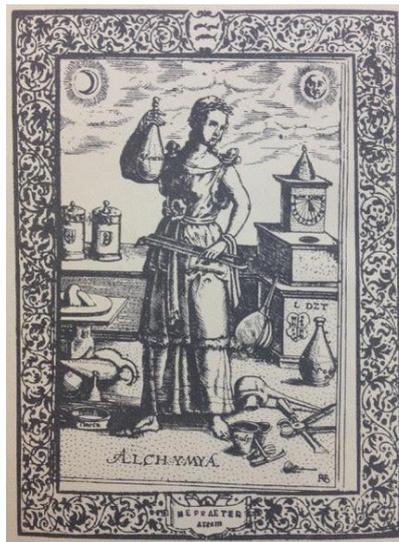


Figure 3  
L. Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia* (1570).

The newe Jewell of Health, wherein is contained the most excellent Secretes of Physicke and Philosophie, divided into fower Bookes. In the which are the best approved remedies for the diseases as well inward as outward, of all the partes of mans bodie: treating very amplye of all Dyphillanous of Waters, of Oyles, Balanes, Quinences, with the extraction of artificial Saltes, the use and preparation of Antimonie, and potable Gold. Gathered out of the best and most approved Authors, by that excellent Doctor Geberius. Also the Pictures, and maner to make the Vessels, Furnaces, and other Instrumentes thereto belonging. Faithfully corrected and published in English, by George Baker, Chirurgian.



Figure 4

G. Baker, *The newe Jewell of Health* (1576)

©Warburg Institute

### 3.1. *We shall not marry till thou bidd'st us. Paulina as Lady Alchymia.*

Paulina's complex role as healer, midwife, cunning woman, and, I believe, alchemist, can shed further light on women's "crucial but often obscure position in the history of science" (Floyd-Wilson 2013, p. 15). In early modern England, women were usually regarded as favoured vehicles to the understanding of Nature's *occulta*, even though their expertise "was constantly subject to a sorting process" (Floyd-Wilson 2013, p. 25): as Floyd-Wilson (2013, p. 25) remarks, "it could be classified as illicit witchcraft, specious nonsense, or useful information, ripe for more official appropriation". Thanks to their prophetic-like knowledge of the cosmos, "women, like Nature, were repositories of secrets" (Floyd-Wilson 2013, p. 16). Alchemy itself is constantly portrayed as a *ministra naturae* and, therefore, as a woman. "Lady *Alcumy*",<sup>16</sup> as Elizabeth's chaplain in ordinary, John Thornborough, defines it, is a helper of nature, that other "Dame" (Ashmole 1652, sig. B4v) with which the alchemical art cooperates. In *The Practise of Chymical, and Hermetical Physicke*, a treatise published in London in 1605, *Halchymie* is defined as "Gods created handmaid" because it has "a chyrurgical hand in the anatomizing of euery veine of whole nature" (Tymme 1605, sig. A3v and ff.).

From the very beginning of the romance, Paulina declares her intention to employ her art in the service of "good goddess Nature" (II, iii, 102) and, further underlining the centrality of the female dimension in Leontes's healing, she remarks that the task of curing the king from his "unsafe lunes" (II, ii, 29) must be performed by a woman: "The office / Becomes a woman best; I'll take't upon me" (II, ii, 30-31). Moreover, she shows a precise awareness of the path the king and queen of Sicily should follow in order to be finally

<sup>16</sup> In a letter addressed to Lady Knowles, John Thornborough explicitly invokes "Lady *Alcumy*": "I thought good to write to your Ladishippe how muche the Lady *Alcumy* rejoyceth. That a Lady of your birth and worth will [...] knock at her first and outmost gate". John Thornborough, *Letter of Chemistry to the right Honourable the Lady Knowles* (British Library, MS Sloane 1799, fols. 75r-76r), quoted by Archer (2007, p. 47).

reconciled and, therefore, she “patiently manipulates the conditions for actualising the possibilities of transformative and redemptive art” (Engel 2013, p. 75). That the Sicilian lady is moved by the “definite intention of preparing him [Leontes] for Hermione’s return” (Pilgrim 1983, p. 62) is fairly evident especially in Act III, when she convinces both the characters on stage and the audience that Queen Hermione is truly dead. While Leontes remarks that his wife’s “heart is but o’ercharged” (III, ii, 148) and pleads Paulina to “apply to her / Some remedies for life” (III, ii, 150-51), the latter replies that the queen is irremediably dead: “I say she’s dead – I’ll swear it” (III, ii, 200). If considering that alchemists conceive of the *opus alchymicum* as a process of *separatio* and *coniunctio* (Abraham 1998, p. 35), as a divorce followed by a wedding (Abraham 1998, p. 56), it can be assumed that Paulina is perfectly conscious of the fact that the final *coniunctio* cannot occur unless the king is first cleansed of his disease. Prompting the bystanders to believe in the queen’s death until the end of the performance, Paulina seems to act in the light of the alchemical theory according to which “When there is made a Seperacion [...] there schalbe a glad Coniunccion” (Ashmole 1652, p. 258).

One of the reasons why women were regarded as better suited than men to perform alchemical practices is because “they are more neat and patient”, as pointed out by the alchemist Eugenius Philalethes (1650, p. 118), whose actual name was Thomas Vaughan. Time is essential in *The Winter’s Tale*, as testified by the actual presence of Father Time at the beginning of Act IV: in the role of the Chorus, he introduces the audience to the comic half of the play and reveals that Perdita, whom the other characters believe to be “lost for ever” (III, iii, 49), has “grown in grace / Equal with wondering” (IV, i, 24-25) in “fair Bohemia” (IV, i, 21). The imagery related to time is central also in alchemical literature since the adept is constantly required to patiently tend to the phases of the *opus alchymicum* and revere nature: “sis patiens intima naturae passim vestigia servans” (Bonus of Ferrara 1546, page unnumbered). In the parable known as *Blomfields Blossoms*, an alchemical allegory attributed to the Elizabethan alchemist William Blomfild, “Father Tyme” guides the alchemist to the “Campe of Philosophy”, the garden where the philosopher’s stone grows:<sup>17</sup>

I am, said he, *Tyme, The Producer of all thing*:  
 [...] My intent is to bring thee to *the Campe of Philosophy*.  
 If thou wilt enter this *Campe of Philosophy*  
 With thee take *Tyme* to guide thee in the way.  
 (Ashmole 1652, p. 305 and p. 308)

In *The Winter’s Tale*, the regenerative aspect of time is associated with Paulina, who reconciles King Leontes with his queen only when “’Tis time” (V, iii, 99), as she herself claims before urging Hermione’s statue to descend and “be stone no more” (V, iii, 99). Interestingly enough, Kenneth Branagh’s 2016-production of *The Winter’s Tale* openly and clearly emphasises the parallels between the female dimension, nature, and time, since Paulina, played by Judi Dench, speaks also the words of Father Time, a role usually performed by male actors. Rather surprisingly, it is Paulina herself who, at the opening of Act IV, announces the beginning of comedy, thus focusing on the healing action of time and on the cyclical course of nature.

In line with the alchemical belief according to which the work of cleansing corrupted matter from its impurities is a task that should be accomplished by women, Paulina guides Leontes in his journey of expiation. When the king of Sicily repents, she condemns him “To

<sup>17</sup> The ‘Garden of the Philosophers’ or ‘Campe of Philosophy’ is a metaphor for “the alchemists’ secret vessel” (Abraham 1998, p. 83).

nothing but despair” (III, ii, 207) and to “winter / In storm perpetual” (III, ii, 209-210), to a path of atonement that recalls the alchemical phase of *nigredo*. Since the latter is a stage of “suffering, despair and melancholia” (Abraham 1998, p. 135), it is usually associated with everything that is linked to the idea of blackness: “hyt [*nigredo*] hath Names [...] / after each thyng that Blacke ys to syght” (Ashmole 1652, p. 134). More specifically, alchemists identify the *nigredo* with the season of winter, with melancholy, and with the planet traditionally related to the humour of the black bile, i.e. Saturn. In a paradoxical way, the blackness of *nigredo* represents the beginning of the alchemical journey of renewal: as the Elizabethan alchemist Edward Kelly (1893, p. 138) writes, “The blackness must precede whiteness. [...] Our whole magistry, then, is based on putrefaction; for it can come to nothing, unless it is putrefied”. In the same way as winter stands for the initial state of barrenness that leads to rebirth, both physical and spiritual, a “melancholy death” is, in alchemical imagery, “the starting point of a three-stage journey to eternal bliss” (Brann 1985, p. 135). In view of the fact that alchemists “begin their yeare in Winter” (Espagnet 1999, p. 182), the outset of Leontes’s story of “recreation” (III, iii, 237) in what is the season of the *nigredo* turns out to be highly significant for the alchemical reading of the play. The first half of *The Winter’s Tale* is actually dominated by Leontes’s *tale of winter*, as suggested by his son, Mamilius. At his mother’s request to tell her a story, the boy claims that “a sad tale’s best for winter” (II, i, 25) and thus begins his narrative about “a man” (II, i, 28) who is “Dwelt by a churchyard” (II, i, 30), foreshadowing his father’s decision to expiate his faults by shedding tears on the grave of his son and wife. The boy’s story, which is interrupted by the entrance of Leontes, mirrors the king’s own life, i.e. a life that, in Pitcher’s words, is made of “mysterious deaths, lingering beside graves and reanimations” (Shakespeare 2010, p. 189). The *sad tale of winter* that alludes to Leontes’s own story, at least until Act III, might also be read in alchemical terms, sadness, melancholy, and winter being exactly some of the features applied by alchemists to the phase of *nigredo*.

That Paulina conceives of Leontes’s healing journey as an alchemical one is attested by a few lines she addresses to the king in Act III, after the presumed death of Queen Hermione:

If you can bring  
Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye,  
Heat outwardly or breath within, I’ll serve you  
As I would do the gods  
(III, ii, 201-4).

In the language of alchemists, the term *tincture* refers to the ‘philosopher’s stone’, or ‘elixir of life’, that kind of medicine that is allegedly able to transmute, change, and heal matter, purging it of its imperfections and, therefore, leading it to the perfect state of gold, i.e. to a condition of total health and incorruptibility (Abraham 1998, p. 200). The tincture “has virtue to change, tinge, and cure every imperfect body” (Waite 1893, p. 38). By encouraging Leontes to “bring / Tincture” (III, ii, 201-202) to the seemingly dead body of his queen, Paulina is alluding to an alchemical process that recalls the allegory known as George Ripley’s *Cantilena*. The poem, composed of thirty-eight stanzas of four lines each, was originally written in Latin in the fifteenth century and translated into English by an anonymous “earlier than 1581” (Taylor 1949, p. 177). Ripley was one of the most renowned alchemists of Shakespeare’s time: as in the case of other medieval authors, such as Roger Bacon, Ripley’s reputation was enhanced in the Renaissance, when his writings first appeared in print. His most popular work, *The Compound of Alchymie*, dating from the late fifteenth-century, was first published in 1591 and, as Linden (1998, p. 75) attests, “was popular from the time it was written until well into the seventeenth century”. The protagonist

of Ripley’s *Cantilena* is “a certaine Barren King by Birth” (l. 9) who, first “Infoecund” (l. 27), undergoes a process of death and rebirth in order to restore health to his body and realm. As already said, alchemists employ the imagery of the *rex chymicus* as a metaphor for the soteriological journey experienced by the human soul in the course of the *opus alchymicum* (Gabriele 1986, p. 31): the cleansing of the king does not only stand for the outer purification of physical matter, but also indicates an inner process of renewal, i.e. the attainment of that “hidden Stone”, *lapis occultus*, of which Petrus Bonus speaks.<sup>18</sup> According to alchemists, once the chemical king has been symbolically transmuted, he can project his own tincture on others. The phase of ‘projection’ is actually defined as the moment when the king, symbol of gold refined at its highest level, transmutes and perfects the other metals. Shakespeare himself dwells upon the alchemical concept of projection in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when the queen celebrates his beloved in alchemical terms, claiming that he has metaphorically projected his tincture on Alexas: “How much unlike art thou Mark Antony! / Yet, coming from him, that great med’cine hath / With his tinct gilded thee” (I, v, 34-6).

At the beginning of Ripley’s *Cantilena*, the king acknowledges to be “Restrain’d” and “Infoecund” and, therefore, unable to produce any tincture: “my Nature is so much Restrain’d, / No Tincture from my Body can be gain’d: / And therefore it is Infoecund” (ll. 25-27). In like manner, Leontes has to be cured of his barren condition, a state that is mirrored in the setting of the first two acts of the drama in winter. The “issueless” (V, i, 173) state of Leontes culminates in the latter’s reflection on the idea of *nothingness*. By depriving himself of his newborn girl, Perdita, and causing the actual death of Mamilius and the presumed decease of Hermione, Leontes “has reduced all the world outside himself to nothing”, to a sort of “wasteland” (Garber 2004, p. 834):

Is this nothing?  
 Why then the world and all that’s in’t is nothing,  
 The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,  
 My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,  
 If this be nothing.  
 (I, ii, 290-4)

It is a widespread practice among alchemical authors to depict the stage of *nigredo* as a state of barrenness in which nothing prospers. To cite an instance, the alchemical allegory of the *rex marinus*, also known as *Visio Arislei*, a text ascribed to the Arabic alchemist and philosopher Arisleus and collected in *Artis auriferae* (1593, pp. 146-154, vol. 1), recounts the story of a king whose reign is completely sterile since only beings of the same sex are conjoined. The allegory draws on one of the central concepts of alchemy, i.e. the *coniunctio oppositorum*. Alchemists believe that regeneration is possible only by means of the reconciliation between the opposites, or chemical wedding:

The male without the female is looked upon as only half a body, nor can the female without the male be regarded as more complete. For neither can bring forth fruit so long as it remains alone. But if the two be conjugally united, there is a perfect body, and their seed is placed in a condition in which it can yield increase. (Waite 1893, p. 167)

The alchemical notion of *coniunctio*, which is the subject of the fourth “Gate” of Ripley’s *Compound of Alchymie*, following that of “Separacion”, evidently bears a certain relevance

<sup>18</sup> “et hic lapis occultus est qui proprie dicitur donum dei, et hic est lapis divinus occultus, sine cuius commixtione lapidi annihilatur alchimia, cum ipse sit ipsa alchimia, et perditur opus eadem hora”. (Bonus of Ferrara 1546, p. 38).

to *The Winter's Tale*: in the light of alchemical beliefs, the condition of sterility characterising the first half of the romance might be considered as consequent upon the *separatio* (Abraham 1998, p. 35) of the royal couple. Again, Paulina demonstrates to be conscious of the course the events should take when, as an alchemist who patiently follows the rhythm of dissolution and reunion of the *opus alchymicum*, she prophetically claims that Leontes will re-marry only when the first queen, Hermione, is restored to life:

LEONTES: My true Paulina,  
We shall not marry till thou bidd'st us.

PAULINA: That  
Shall be when your first queen's again in breath.  
Never till then.  
(V, i, 80-84)

Leontes's journey of re-creation has lasted sixteen years, a "wide gap of time" (V, iii, 154) during which he has performed a "saint-like sorrow" (V, i, 2), and at the end of which he ultimately acknowledges Paulina to be his healer: "O grave and good Paulina, the great comfort, / That I have had of thee" (V, iii, 1-2).

That the union between the king and queen of Sicily in *The Winter's Tale* might have been interpreted as an alchemical *coniunctio* is a hypothesis that is further supported by the very names Leontes and Hermione. The former evokes the Latin word for lion, i.e. *leo*, like Leonatus in *Cymbeline*.<sup>19</sup> In alchemical imagery, the lion represents the "hot, dry, male seed of metals", also known as Sol, that has to be united with "feminine mercury or argent vive" (Abraham 1998, pp. 166-167; see also Abraham 1998, p. 162). It is possibly no coincidence, then, that the name of the queen of Sicily, Hermione, recalls that of the Greek god Hermes, referred to as 'Trismegistus' in the alchemical tradition, and of the Roman Mercury (see Smith 2017, p. 55). The latter has several meanings in alchemy, among which is precisely that of the substance, mercury or argent vive, that has to be conjoined with sulphur in order to give birth to the philosopher's stone. In alchemical writings, the pair of opposites that have to be wedded together are represented in several different ways, namely mercury and sulphur, bride and bridegroom, Sol and Luna, king and queen. Mercury, however, is a much more complex symbol: it stands for "the universal agent of transmutation" (Abraham 1998, p. 124) and "consists of all conceivable opposites" (Abraham 1998, p. 126). Like the *uroboros*, the serpent that both kills and generates itself, Mercury represents all the transformations that occur in the course of the *opus circolatorium*: as a protean character, it embodies the very essence of the alchemical work. In *The Winter's Tale*, the transformation of Hermione-Hermes-Mercury from stone to living woman mirrors Leontes's inner re-creation, so that the symbolical rebirth of the queen becomes the actual emblem of the transmutation of the chemical king. In a recent study, Delsigne (2014, p. 105) actually defines Leontes's final redemption and Hermione's metamorphosis as "hermetic miracles". The scholar argues that the king's "spiritual purification corresponds to the slow, painful softening of the stone statue into Hermione's flesh" in the same way as "in alchemy, the spiritual transformation in the magician is directly related to the magical metamorphosis of a material object" (Delsigne 2014, p. 105).

<sup>19</sup> See Pitcher's introduction to Shakespeare (2010, p. 140).

### 3.2. *What you do Still betters what is done. Perdita as the Philosophical Child*

As already said, alchemists equate the genesis of the philosopher’s stone with the birth of an infant, who is the fruit of the *coniunctio* between king and queen, Sol and Luna, sulphur and mercury (Abraham 1998, p. 148). A number of alchemical illustrations depict the philosophical child enclosed within the hermetically-sealed alembic that fulfils the function of a female uterus (Figure 5).



Figure 5

*Donum dei* (XV cent.)

©British Library Board (Sloane 2560, f. 6)

Shakespeare himself dwells upon the concept of alchemical distillation in sonnet 5, when the poet alludes to the creation of the stone-child within the alchemical vessel:

For never-resting Time leads Summer on  
 To hideous Winter and confounds him there;  
 Sap check'd with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,  
 Beauty o'ersnow'd and bareness every where:  
 Then, were not summer's distillation left,  
 A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,  
 Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,  
 Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was.  
 (Sonnet 5, ll. 6-12)

The “liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass” is distilled in the alembic, also referred to in alchemical treatises as a “*Vessell or Glasse*” (Ashmole 1652, p. 467, emphasis in original), and is, therefore, preserved from “never-resting Time”. One of the features attributed by alchemists to the philosopher’s stone is precisely its immunity against decay and change, thus becoming “a heavenly thing that has its habitation in the highest region of the firmament” (Waite 1893, p. 172). Also termed “a Quintessence wherein there is no corruptible Thing” (Ashmole 1652, sig. Bv), the stone is conceived of as a reproduction of the fifth element, or aether, i.e. the imperishable substance of which the heavenly bodies are composed according to Aristotle’s *Physics*, a text alchemical authors constantly refer to. In their attempt to control time, alchemists aim at removing the cosmos from time’s sway and recreate eternity, as Sheppard (1986, pp. 16-17) observes: “[a]lchemy is the art of liberating parts of the Cosmos from temporal existence and achieving perfection which, for metals is

gold, and for man, longevity, then immortality and, finally, redemption". Alchemists, however, do not regard Time-Chronos merely as a negative force since they believe that metals are naturally transmuted within the womb of the earth: in view of the fact that it leads nature to perfection, then, Time is also a healer.

The renewing aspect of time is fairly evident in the development of *The Winter's Tale*: as a preserver and redeemer, Chronos allows the final reconciliation, or chemical wedding, to occur and enables the recovery of Perdita. The latter, emblem of truth and goodness, is reunited with her parents after "a wide gap" (V, iii, 154) of sixteen years. In a paradoxical way, the cycle of *solve et coagula* presupposes that the union of husband and wife is followed by a separation, known as a "chemical divorce" (Abraham 1998, p. 56): "If the first work proceed not, how is the second attained to? Because if no division be made, there is no conjunction" (Dee 1997, p. 32). It is, therefore, not surprising that the philosophical child is sometimes represented as an orphan. Paracelsus himself writes that "the most wise Mercurius, the wisest of the Philosophers affirms, the same, hath called the Stone an Orphan" (Paracelsus 1894, p. 66, vol. 1; see also Abraham 1998, p. 149). As if following the steps of the alchemical *opus*, the orphan Perdita is separated from her parents immediately after her birth and is raised as a shepherdess in "fair Bohemia" (IV, i, 21), awaiting the propitious time to return to her birthplace, the court of Sicily.

In the circular path of the play, Perdita is associated with the alternation of seasons and the benign features of time. At the beginning of the fourth act, Father Time leaves Leontes's *tale of winter* and switches to another "tale" (IV, i, 14), that of Perdita, who personifies the "freshest things now reigning" (IV, i, 13). The spring-like spirit that will dominate the second half of the drama is celebrated by the song of the daffodils sung by the peddler and rogue Autolycus:

When daffodils begin to peer,  
With heigh, the doxy over the dale,  
Why then comes in the sweet o'the year,  
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.

The white sheet bleaching on the hedge,  
With heigh, the sweet birds, O how they sing!  
(IV, iii, 1-6)

Autolycus's lyric presents several images of regeneration, among which is that of the "white sheet bleaching on the hedge" (IV, iii, 5). As already said, plates of women washing and drying white linen recur in alchemical illustrations as a symbol of the *albedo*, a phase of rebirth that succeeds the winter-like phase of *nigredo* (Figure 2). Perdita herself is identified with spring and, specifically, with the goddesses of vegetation Flora and Proserpina.<sup>20</sup> Prince Florizel, the son of the king of Bohemia Polixenes, takes part in the sheep-shearing celebrations of Act IV and praises Perdita's virtues by comparing her to "Flora / Peering in April's front" (IV, iv, 2-3). The connections between the shepherdess and the cyclical rhythm of nature are even more explicit when the girl invokes the Ovidian goddess Proserpina: "O Proserpina, / For the flowers now that, frighted, thou let's fall / From Dis's wagon!" (IV, iv, 116-118). The myth of Ceres and Proserpina, who might be identified with Hermione and Perdita, evidently functions as a metaphor for the natural cycle of birth, decay, change, and rebirth and is traditionally considered as an allegory of the course of the seasons. According

<sup>20</sup> According to Sutherland (2007), the play's focus on the theme of cyclical regeneration should be interpreted in the light of the myths of Ceres and Proserpina, Castor and Pollux, as well as Saturnus and Cronus. As the scholar observes, the several metaphors of transformation that recur in the drama also allude to coeval astrological and alchemical notions concerning the relationship between man and the cosmos.

to some versions of the myth, Proserpina, kidnapped by the god of the underworld Pluto, is allowed to spend half of the year on earth, thus embodying the regeneration of nature in springtime (Grimal 1951, pp. 362-363). Like the Classical heroine, Perdita is reunited with her mother, Hermione-Ceres, after a wide lapse of time, during which she was thought to have been “lost for ever” (III, iii, 32). Frye (2011, p. 9) suggests that Shakespeare’s decision to reverse the relationship Sicily-Bohemia as it is in the major source of *The Winter’s Tale*, Robert Greene’s *Pandosto*, should also be read in the light of the myth of the two goddesses of grain and agriculture: according to this theory, Shakespeare, unlike Green, would have decided to begin and end the play in Sicily because this is where Proserpina was abducted by Pluto.

Patience is one of the main qualities an alchemist is required to possess, as it is made explicit in the alchemical parable *Blomfields Blossoms*: “Night and day thou must tend thy worke buisily, / Having constant patience never to be weary” (Ashmole 1652, p. 310). By drawing on the analogy between alchemy and agriculture, the alchemist known as Basil Valentine states that the fruit cannot be plucked before the time of ripeness comes:

If the fruit of a tree be plucked before it is ripe, it is unfit for use; [...]. In the same way you must exercise considerable patience in preparing our Elixir, if it is to become all that you wish to become. No fruit can grow from a flower that has been plucked before the time. He who is in too great a hurry, can bring nothing to perfection, but is almost sure to spoil that which he has in hand. (Waite 1893, p. 174)

Since haste is the major hindrance to the success of the *opus*, the good alchemist has to await with patience the true conjunction of husband, child, and wife:

*Ripley* doth bid you take it for no scorne,  
With patience to attend the true Conjuccion,  
[...] For after death reviv’d againe to lyfe,  
This all in all both Husband Child and Wife.  
(Ashmole 1652, p. 328)

The main purpose of the alchemical art is to assist nature in the way that leads the cosmos to perfection and, therefore, the philosophical child is the product of the careful cooperation of nature, art, and time. As Pereira (2006, p. xxv) observes, the philosopher’s stone is a perfect synthesis of art and nature because it is made of the same primordial matter of which the macrocosm is composed. Moreover, in reproducing the quintessence in the microcosm of the alembic, the alchemist thoroughly emulates the processes through which the cosmos was shaped and respects nature’s pace.

Perdita herself, the daughter of time, is surprisingly associated with both the natural and the artistic dimensions and represents the same paradox she cannot accept: the conflation of human art and nature. In a renowned dialogue with King Polixenes, the shepherdess strongly refuses to grow any gillyflowers in her “rustic garden” because she conceives of grafting as an intrusion of art into the world of nature:

the fairest flowers o’th’ season  
Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors,  
Which some call Nature’s bastards; of that kind  
Our rustic garden’s barren, and I care not  
To get slips of them.  
(IV, iv, 81-85)

The gillyflower was one of those *double* flowers that were created by means of grafting. The adjective *double*, signifying ‘to make a copy or duplicate’ (OED, entry 3a), most

regularly appears in Renaissance treatises to discuss the relationship of art and nature (Romero Allué 2016, pp. 54-55). George Puttenham, among others, explicitly mentions the gillyflower as an example of *double* flower and, unlike the herbalist John Parkinson,<sup>21</sup> believes that human art can effectively make “the single gilliflowre, or marigold, or daisie, double” (Puttenham 1970, pp. 303-304). Perdita condemns the “streaked gillyvors” (IV, iv, 82) but, in fact, she is herself a *double*, i.e. a product of art and culture transplanted into the realm of “great creating Nature” (IV, iv, 88). The girl is, indeed, a princess, and, therefore, does not belong entirely to the pastoral world of “fair Bohemia” (IV, i, 21): her true birthplace is the court of Sicily since she is the legitimate daughter of King Leontes and Queen Hermione. King Polixenes, who attends the sheep-shearing feast disguised as a peasant, immediately remarks that the girl’s presence is so notable that it “smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place” (IV, iv, 158-159). The term *bastard* further identifies the girl with the same flowers she disdains: the princess, who defines the carnations and streaked gillyflowers as “Nature’s bastards” (IV, iv, 83), is herself considered a “bastard”<sup>22</sup> by her father, King Leontes. It follows that, when Polixenes suggests that the girl should not call the gillyflowers “bastards”, Shakespeare is somehow foreshadowing what the audience already knows, i.e. that Perdita is not a true product of nature: “Then make your garden rich in gillyvors, / And do not call them bastards” (IV, iv, 97-8). As Tayler (1995, p. 133) notices, “[a]t the time when she [Perdita] takes her stand on the question of Nature versus Art, she is by Nature what she conceives herself to be by Art”. The princess, raised as a shepherdess, belongs both to the lavish world of Sicily and to the idyllic and Arcadian dimension of Bohemia. The two countries, which symbolise the contrast between court and countryside, or culture and nature, are opposed from the very beginning of the romance. The former is a “place of formality and rank” and the latter, conversely, “a place where there are no ‘gentlemen born’” (Garber 2004, p. 829). The “great difference” (I, i, 3-4) between the two realms is immediately drawn by the lords Camillo and Archidamus in the opening scene. Discussing about the visit Leontes will pay to Polixenes “this coming summer” (I, i, 5), the Bohemian lord Archidamus highlights the distance that lies between the two courts: “you shall see, as I have said, great difference betwixt our Bohemia and your Sicilia” (I, i, 3-4). Archidamus, in particular, focuses on the superiority, in terms of hospitality and “magnificence” (I, i, 12), of Leontes’s court over his friend’s: “Wherein our entertainment shall shame / us, we will be justified in our love” (I, i, 8-9). The two lands are opposed also from a geographical point of view: being located on a north-south axis, they are separated by “the ends of opposed winds” (I, i, 28-31). Perdita, princess and shepherdess at the same time, symbolically overcomes the *great difference* that exists between the two realms and embodies the *coniunctio oppositorum* that will be accomplished at the end of the romance, when art and nature are conjoined in the scene of the statue coming to life, and the two kings, Leontes and Polixenes, are harmoniously reconciled.

During the sheep-shearing festival the social order is clearly reversed: as if they were attending a saturnalian rite, Polixenes, Camillo, and Florizel are dressed as peasants, whereas Perdita, whom everybody believes to be a shepherdess, wears some clothes that make her seem a “goddess” (IV, iv, 10). Although she complains about the “borrowed flaunts” (IV, iv, 23) she is wearing and even abhors the possibility of wearing cosmetics, she still appears as “a piece of beauty” (IV, iv, 32). In the romance, as attested by Pitcher in his

<sup>21</sup> Parkinson (1629, p. 25) rejected the possibility to use art in order to create flowers “of contrary or different colours or sents”.

<sup>22</sup> Leontes defines Perdita “a female bastard” when ordering lord Antigonus to abandon her in a remote place: “We enjoin thee, / As thou art liegeman to us, that thou carry / *This female bastard* hence, and that thou bear it / To some remote and desert place, quite out / Of our dominions; and that there thou leave it, / Without more mercy, to it own protection / And favour of the climate” (II, iii, 171-77, italics mine).

note to Shakespeare (2010, p. 261), the word *piece* also carries the meaning of ‘work of art’ and ‘masterpiece’. When Paulina’s Steward describes the statue of Queen Hermione, he defines it as “a piece many years in doing and now newly performed by that rare Italian master Giulio Romano” (V, ii, 93-5). It follows that, by defining his beloved as “a piece of beauty” (IV, iv, 32), Florizel further identifies Perdita with the world of art. A few lines below, Polixenes similarly praises the girl as “a fresh piece / Of excellent witchcraft” (IV, iv, 427-28). The Sicilian princess, however, is not compared to art in general but, rather, to a kind of art that *better*s nature: as Prince Florizel remarks, “What you do / Still better what is done” (IV, iv, 135-136). Rather surprisingly, Perdita is associated with Polixenes’s own definition of art. According to the king of Bohemia, art does not surpass nature, but, rather, perfects it, as he himself explains to Perdita:

So over that art,  
Which you say adds to Nature, is an art  
That Nature makes. (IV, iv, 90-92)  
[...]  
This is an art  
Which does mend Nature – change it rather – but  
The art itself is Nature. (IV, iv, 95-97)

By comparing her to the perfective role performed by art with regards to nature, Shakespeare is not only connecting Perdita with Polixenes’s ideas on art but also implies that the girl is not a counterfeit, or a *bastard*, a product of the illegitimate intrusion of human art within the natural world, but a refined synthesis of art and nature. More specifically, Florizel’s assertion that Perdita “better what is done” (IV, iv, 136) suggests that her role in the romance is to perfect what has been left imperfect, thus recalling the alchemists’ conception of art (see Zamparo 2017). Alchemical philosophers believe that every kind of art that better nature is a form of alchemy. Paracelsus (1894, p. 148, vol. 2), among others, defines the alchemical art as “a method of perfection” since it leads nature to its final end: “She [nature] brings nothing to the light that is at once perfect in itself, but leaves it to be perfected by man. This method of perfection is called Alchemy”.

In her perfective, and obliquely alchemical, role, Perdita recalls the features alchemists ascribe to the philosophical child. When “it has grown to maturity”, the so-called *filius philosophorum* “has the power to conquer all disease and transform all things to perfection” (Abraham 1998, p. 149). The girl’s refining role is further highlighted by Florizel when he notices that all her actions bring perfection:

Each your doing,  
So singular in each particular,  
*Crowns* what you are doing in the present deeds,  
That all your acts are queens.  
(IV, iv, 143-46, italics mine)

With the meaning of ‘brings to completion’ (see Shakespeare 2010, p. 269) and ‘triumphant culmination’ (OED, entry 7a), the verb *to crown* perfectly applies to Perdita’s function within the play. It is not before the princess is recovered that Queen Hermione’s transformation from stone to living woman is completed. Frye (1986, p. 161) actually points out that the queen of Sicily “doesn’t come to life [...] until Perdita, whose name means the lost maiden, is said to be found”. When Paulina commands the statue to “descend” and “be stone no more” (V, iii, 99), Hermione does not speak: “it appears she lives, / Though yet she speak not” (V, iii, 117-18). However, when the lady reveals to the queen that her daughter has been found, Hermione breaks the silence, thus becoming truly human: “Turn, good lady,

/ Our Perdita is found” (V, iii, 120-21). The alchemy of reunion and the alchemy of transformation are finally accomplished. The reborn queen explains to Perdita that she has preserved herself only to be reconciled with her, underlining the princess’s healing role in the drama:

Tell me, mine own,  
Where hast thou been preserved? Where lived? How found  
Thy father’s court? For thou shalt hear that I,  
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle  
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved  
Myself to see the issue.  
(V, iii, 23-28)

Somehow acting as the philosopher’s stone itself, Perdita “betters what is done” (IV, iv, 136) and her return evidently corresponds with the symbolical rebirth of the queen of Sicily and with the consequent reunion or, in alchemical terms, *coniunctio* between Leontes and Hermione, what alchemists define as a “happy end to winne” (Cradock 1995, p. 23). Alchemical authors conceive of the chemical wedding as the moment when perfection is achieved:

Even so the Man our *Stone* is said to sleepe,  
Untill such time his Wife be fully wrought;  
Then he awakes, and joyfully doth keepe  
His new made Spouse, which he so dearely bought,  
And *when to such perfection they be brought,*  
Rejoyce the beauty of so faire a bride,  
Whose worth is more then halfe the world beside.  
(Ashmole 1652, p. 325; italics mine)

The parallels between the last scene of *The Winter’s Tale* and the alchemical phase of *rubedo* become even more apparent if considering that the end of the romance seems to be set in autumn, which in alchemical imagery represents “the season of ripeness” (Waite 1893, p. 131), i.e. the time when the philosopher’s stone is created. In his introduction to *The Winter’s Tale*, Pafford remarks that “the first part of the play takes place in winter [...] and even in the pastoral scene the season approaches winter” (Shakespeare 1984, p. liv) since the sheep-shearing festival has “autumnal overtones”, the season of the year being “late summer or even autumn” (Shakespeare 1984, p. lxix). Even though the sheep-shearing feast was usually celebrated in June and, therefore, at the end of spring, Perdita offers “flowers of winter” (IV, iv, 78) to King Polixenes and Lord Camillo and argues that the year is “growing ancient, / Not yet on summer’s death, nor on the birth / Of trembling winter” (IV, iv, 79-81). The perpetual cycle of the seasons, a sort of imagery that is at the basis of *The Winter’s Tale*, is also the model of the *opus alchymicum*, as one can read in the following excerpt from the alchemical treatise *Le Don de Dieu*:

Car l’an est party en quatre partie, ainsi est partie nostre benoiste heuvre: la premiere partie est l’hiver froit et humide pluviant; la seconde est le prins temps chaut et humide fleurissant; la tierce est l’esté chaut et sec et rouge; la quart est l’automne froict et sec et pour amasser les fruitz. Avec celle disposicion [...] de pluie gouverne la nature jusque atant quelle pourte en avant tout meurs jusques a la vraye fleurs. (Gabriele 1988, p. 35)<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> As Gabriele (1988, p. 12) remarks, the high number of extant manuscripts of the text, collected both in the British Library and in other libraries (in Paris and Rome), testifies that it had been widely circulating in Europe from the late fifteenth to the eighteenth century at least.

If *The Winter’s Tale* ends in autumn, as Shakespeare seems to imply in a few passages, then it may be asserted that the romance, which is closed by what can be read as a chemical wedding between Leontes and Hermione and by the rebirth of the philosophical child, does allude to the *rubedo*, the last and successful step of the *opus*.

#### 4. Conclusion

At the end of the performance, Leontes asks Paulina to lead him and the other characters where they can discuss the “part” (V, iii, 153) they have performed in “the wide gap” since they were “dissevered” (V, iii, 154-155), thus acknowledging her leading role as dramatist. It has been remarked that Shakespeare “uses Paulina to validate the stage and to contain fears that it is idolatrous, magical, and transgressive” (Diehl 2008, p. 77; see also Rosenfield 2002, p. 96). In Renaissance England, dramatic art was usually associated with women and, specifically, with witchcraft and magic: “watching plays may be the first step towards engaging the services of a cunning woman” (Floyd-Wilson 2013, p. 22). Furthermore, books of receipts and of secrets most frequently contained also directions for theatrical illusions and notions of natural magic and chymistry (Floyd-Wilson 2013, pp. 28-29). The identification between magic, drama, and women was especially exploited by antitheatricalists, who would “gender the stage female and appeal to misogynist sentiments to arouse fear of the theatrical enterprise” (Diehl 2008, p. 76).

I believe that the “gendered imagery of alchemy” (Ray 2015, p. 5) might further enlighten women’s role in *The Winter’s Tale* and Shakespeare’s own view of theatre. In the romance, the symbolism and language of alchemy are employed as a metaphor of positive, spiritual transformation, rather than as an example of fraudulent self-deception, as Jonson does in *The Alchemist*. Kermode points out that, being “essentially a set of transformative techniques”, alchemy was an invaluable source of tropes, metaphors, and allegories: it could be used “as an image of perpetual disappointment or even fraud on the one hand, or of mysterious natural and spiritual transformations on the other”.<sup>24</sup> Paulina herself, as both alchemist and dramatist, protests against potential accusations of necromancy and denies to be “assisted / By wicked powers” (V, iii, 90-91). She invites the characters on stage as well as the audience members to attend a magical, possibly Hermetic transformation:

Either forbear,  
Quit presently the chapel, or resolve you  
For more amazement. If you can behold it,  
I’ll make the statue move indeed, descend  
And take you by the hand. But then you’ll think –  
Which I protest against – I am assisted  
By wicked powers.  
(V, iii, 85-91)

The seeming resurrection of the queen of Sicily has oftentimes been read as an allusion to the rituals of statue animation recounted in the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius*,<sup>25</sup> which was attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus and which was known to the Elizabethans and Jacobeans thanks to a Latin translation fathered upon Apuleius. By asking the bystanders to awake their faith and evoking that kind of “suspension of disbelief” that Samuel Taylor Coleridge would theorise centuries later, Paulina validates both dramatic and

<sup>24</sup> The quotation is from Kermode’s Foreword to Abraham (1990, p. ix).

<sup>25</sup> On the connections between the statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale* and the Egyptian statues of *Asclepius*, see Delsigne (2014, p. 104); Smith (2017, p. 377); Yates (1975, pp. 90-91).

Hermetic art: “It is required / You do awake your faith” (V, iii, 94-5). Leontes himself recognises her magic to be “lawful” and eventually accepts it: “O, she’s warm! / If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating” (V, iii, 109-11). In *The Winter’s Tale*, the transformative art of alchemy and of drama correspond and their healing effects are actualised by Paulina, who, I believe, personifies that “mysterious identity of essence between the principle of theatre and that of alchemy” (Artaud 1958, p. 48).

**Bionote:** Martina Zamparo completed her PhD in Linguistic and Literary Studies in October 2018 at the University of Udine with a thesis on the alchemical culture in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. Martina’s dissertation won the “PhD Award 2019” for best doctoral thesis defended in 2018 at the Humanities Department of the Universities of Udine and Trieste. Martina has been visiting scholar at the Warburg Institute twice and she is now a Post-Doc Fellow at the University of Udine. She has been lecturer of English literature at the University of Trieste for two consecutive years. She is currently studying the female characters in the Blakean macrotext and has previously worked on Neoplatonism in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

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