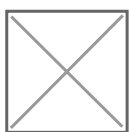


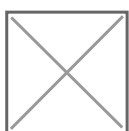
# 11 Cleopatra and the Philosophers

There were three women alchemists early on, all famous. Mary Prophetess (or Maria the Jewess, among other names) was reported to be a gifted artificer of lab equipment, among them the hot water bath, or *bain marie*. Theosobia received letters from her brother Zosimos (whom we will meet later) on the subject of alchemy told in obfuscating allegory.



Here we meet Cleopatra. Not the Cleopatra of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, lover of Marc Anthony, but the alchemist Cleopatra. Again, she might not have been a real person, but a representative used in a dialog.

The dialog is with a group of sycophantic philosophers, followers of Cleopatra. It comes from F. Sherwood Taylor's *The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry* (London: William Heinemann, 1951), 57–9, and is based on Berthelot's French translation in his *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, one of the great translation efforts of science.



“Then Cleopatra said to the philosophers. “Look at the nature of plants, whence they come. For some come down from the mountains and grow out of the earth, and some grow up from the valleys and some come from the plains. But look how they develop, for it is at certain seasons and days that you must gather them, and you take them from the islands of the sea, and from the most lofty place. And look at the air which ministers to them and the nourishment circling around them, that they perish not nor die. Look at the divine water which gives them drink and the air that governs them after they have been given a body in a single being.”

Ostanes and those with him answered Cleopatra. “In thee is concealed a strange and terrible mystery. Enlighten us, casting your light upon the elements. Tell us how the highest descends to the lowest and how the lowest rises to the highest, and how that which is in the midst approaches the highest and is united to it,

and what is the element which accomplishes these things. And tell us how the blessed waters visit the corpses lying in Hades fettered and afflicted in darkness and how the medicine of Life reaches them and rouses them as if wakened by their possessors from sleep; and how the new waters, both brought forth on the bier and coming after the light penetrate them at the beginning of their prostration and how a cloud supports them and how the cloud supporting the waters rises from the sea."

And the philosophers, considering what had been revealed to them, rejoiced.

Cleopatra said to them. "The waters, when they come, awake the bodies and the spirits which are imprisoned and weak. For they again undergo oppression and are enclosed in Hades, and yet in a little while they grow and rise up and put on divers glorious colors like the flowers in springtime and the spring itself rejoices and is glad at the beauty that they wear.<sup>3</sup> For I tell this to you who are wise: when you take plants, elements, and stones from their places, they appear to you to be mature. But they are not mature until the fire has tested them. When they are clothed in the glory from the fire and shining color thereof, then rather will appear their hidden glory, their sought-for beauty, being transformed to the divine state of fusion. For they are nourished in the fire and the embryo grows little by little nourished in its mother's womb, and when the appointed month approaches is not restrained from issuing forth. Such is the procedure of this worthy art. The waves and surges one after another in Hades wound them in the tomb where they lie. When the tomb is opened they issue from Hades as the babe from the womb."

The Alchemy Reader (pp. 44-45). Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.

The death and resurrection motif used here are probably disguising a process which is described later by the Arabic alchemists of the spirit of a substance rising up in sublimation where it is perfected, then recombined with the "corpse" or non-sublimated substance (*prima materia*), so that the perfected spirit will then create a more gold-like material.

References to the womb and to birth are analogous to the creation of the philosophers stone in a flask.



References to colors will be a near-constant theme in alchemy. The changing from one color to the next was accepted as proof that the material has changed its nature and has become a different element or metal.

It surprises me how fully developed alchemy seems to be even at this very early date.

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