

A Short Treatise on the Alkahest

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Introduction

In the early days of the founding of the Royal Society of England, the term “Alkahest” was entered as a topic of research inquiry, into its records thrice between October and November 1661. The word Alkahest was first coined by Swiss born physician Paracelsus. The records of the Royal Society described it as a “universal solvent.” Eirenaeus Philalethes a distinguished English alchemist in *The Secret of the Immortal Liquor Called Alkahest or Ignis-Aqua* published in 1693, described it as a “universal menstruum” or “Ignis-Aqua.” Philalethes also described it as “immortal, penetrative, resolving all things into their first liquid matter.” Franciscus Mercurius von Helmont, a Flemish physician and alchemist, whose father, Jan Baptista van Helmont, worked closely under Paracelsus, described the Alkahest as a liquor that he named *ignis gehennae* (the fire of hell) which reduced “reduced bodies that resisted ‘vulgar fires’ into their constituents.” In operational terms, the Alkahest, had at its bestowal, the power to unlock virtues and potent powers buried within matter, including inherent therapeutic benefits, which formed the iatrochemistry school of thought founded by Paracelsus and perpetuated by the van Helmont father and son duo.

Solvite et Coagulata and The Alkahest

In accordance with the Hermetic dictum of *Solvite Corpora et Coagulata Spiritus*, the requirement that matter be broken into its three primary elements or energetic states of sulphur, mercury and salt, to release the Prima Materia, alchemists fervently sought after a winning substance with superior capabilities to do just that. Johannes Hellmond in *Alchemy Unveiled* described the Alkahest or “the Universal-Menstruum as the proper Separator and the true Chymicus, who separates the impurities of the two Sulphuras.” However, the paradox of the Alkahest was that whilst it existed in the deep recesses of nature, it was only itself available

through the intentional quest of the alchemist to unlock it, capture it and concentrate it.

Hellmond commented that:

“Because our Son of the Sun (the Alkahest) is too deeply entangled in the Earth and bound so much so, with the Superfluity of the same, that he must be liberated from this bondage through the heavenly Vulcan...”

The Emerald Tablet and The Alkahest

At the heart of its operational dynamics, the Alkahest is essentially about the creation of purified states through repeated cycles that increasingly cause the greater concentration and the intensified purification of a body. Based on the Emerald Tablet, the functions of the Alkahest would be equivalent to the stage of distillation, the sixth stage of the alchemical process. In the Emerald Tablet, this step is encapsulated by the phrase “It rises from the Earth to Heaven and descends again to Earth, thereby combining within itself the powers of both the Above and the Below.” It is suggestive of a circulatory and repetitive process. It also implies a process of conjoining of two different levels of reality—the Heaven and the Earth—in the relentless pursuit of purified states. The sixth stage is also the beginning of the Red phase, the final of the three phases, after the Black or Nigredo and the White or Albedo.

The Alkahest as Mercury

The Alkahest is depicted as the Mercury of the Philosophers and symbolized as a “double hermaphrodite fire”—on account of its component and contrarian parts of Fire and Water.

As a chemical substance, the Alkahest is a very pure form of Vinegar. Hollandus described it as the secret “Spirit of Vinegar (Spiritus aceti) of the Hermetics.” Dennis William Hauck exemplified it as “the distilling of wine to make brandy.” Hauck further characterized the form of

distillation as sublimation wherein “vapors condense directly into solid powder at the top of the distilling apparatus and remain ‘fixed’ there.” George Ripley in *The Compound of Alchymy; or, the Twelve Gates leading to the Discovery of the Philosopher's Stone (Liber Duodecim Portarum)* published in 1471 wrote about alchemical sublimation:

And Sublimations we make for three causes,
The first cause is, to make the body spiritual,
The second is, that the spirit may be corporeal ,
And become fixed with it and consubstantial,
The third cause is, that from its filthy original
It may be cleansed, and its saltiness sulphurious,
...Then when they thus together be freed from impurities,
They will sublime up whiter than the snow; (8th Gate)

Equivalents of the Alkahest

At the physiological level, Hauck related the Alkahest to the raising of the vital life force through meditation and breathing from the lower cauldrons of the body to the higher levels of the brain, notably the third eye in the environs of pineal gland and pituitary gland, in gradually increasingly concentrated forms, to become crystallized into a distinctive spiritual body. Oriental alchemists termed this as the Circulation of Light.” Psychologically, Hauck regarded the Alkahest as the “agitation and sublimation” of psychic forces to further breakdown the dominance of the ego. He illustrated “Personal Distillation (as) consist(ing) of a variety of introspective techniques that raise the content of the psyche to the highest level possible, free from sentimentality and emotions, cut off even from one’s personal identity. One example of

such a tool is the Confession to Maat recitals, popularized by the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, was recorded in EA Wallis Budge's translation of the Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum; the confession prescribed "words (that) shall be said by the steward of the keeper of the seal, Nu, when he cometh forth to the Hall of Maati, so that he may be separated from every sin which he hath committed." It is poignant that the recital concludes with purity as an end goal:

"I am pure. I am pure. I am pure. My pure offerings are the pure offerings of that great Benu which dwelleth in Hensu...Therefore let not calamity befall me in this land, or in this Hall of Maati..."

The Alkahest as a distillatory process is symbolically represented by the imagery of the pelican bird using its beak to stab itself and feeding its blood to its young. Alchemy scholars have argued that this imagery implies that "the alchemist must enter into a kind of sacrificial relationship with his inner being. He must nourish with his own soul forces, the developing spiritual embryo within." In the illustration chart of Azoth ritual first published by Basilus Valentinus in 1659, Hauck explained that the sixth stage was also symbolized by the unicorn, that embodied the notion of purity as an end state. In related texts, the horn of the unicorn is associated with the concentration of the pure state in the third eye in the domain of the pineal and pituitary glands. It also is a mark of intentional work that must be undertaken with ruthless objectivity.

Just as it is must be sought for with intentionality by practiced and budding alchemists alike, the Alkahest and the stages of distillation it represents, is better tapped with enduring willfulness, objectivity and detachment. By the powers of the Alkahest, the Mercury of the

Philosophers is born a highly spiritual individual, expressed as a co-creator of Hermes Trismegistus.

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