



Culper me Libros IIIIUS, tibi dico, SOPHISTA:
Omnis HENRIGI cedat Labor AMPHITHEATRO!
Nimius instinctu sacri nam vitæ peregit;
Sicut equidem scripta huc nunquam contraria VERO;
Sed quia Sinceram SOPHIAM, defendit & ornat,
Item refutavit, purgavit, illustrat abisum.
Terminus Homini voluit servire DEO,
Ratione pari KHUNRATHI Nomen & Omen,
MAGNUS CONSILIO, celebraret Dona ICHOVA.
Denique nil superest nisi Alani Scemmata temnat;
Et sic scribendo pergit conducere multis;
Fingente quod iam vult, atq; est Arte potestis.

*M. Andr.
 Riccius.*

Joan. Blaeuw, 1605, Cantabrigiæ, sculpsit.

Heinrich Khunrath
1560-1605

See C. K. Deischer and J. L. Rabinowitz, "The Owl of Heinrich Khunrath: Its Origin and Significance," p. 243

THE OWL OF HEINRICH KHUNRATH: ITS ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE*

CLAUDE K. DEISCHER** AND JOSEPH L. RABINOWITZ**

"Then nightly sings the staring Owl,
Tu-whit; Tu-who, a merry note"

"Midsummer Night's Dream"—SHAKESPEARE

AT THE time the publication of *Chymia* was contemplated, it occurred to the Editorial Board that the title page should contain a distinctive vignette, one which would be significant of the purpose, character and atmosphere of these studies in the history of chemistry or fields closely related to it.

It was suggested that an emblem associated with the symbolism of the alchemists would be appropriate, perhaps something patterned after the bespectacled owl, as used by Heinrich Khunrath. A modern version of this symbol was considered as a possibility, but the results proved to be unsatisfactory, and it was unanimously decided that the most appropriate emblem would be the Khunrath owl (Fig. 1) as it appeared in "Magnesia Catholica Philosophorum," Magdeburg, 1599.

What manner of man was Khunrath? What motivated his choice of the owl as a symbol?

Heinrich Khunrath (Frontispiece) (Khünrath, Kunrath, Kunraht, Cunrath, Cunrad or Conrad) was born in Leipzig in 1560. He studied medicine and was graduated from the University of Basel in 1588. His first practice of the art began in Hamburg; later in Dresden he continued both as a medical practitioner and an extensive writer until his death in 1605.¹

Khunrath was a follower of Paracelsus; he believed in the transmutation of stones and metals and was of the opinion that life could be prolonged by the Elixir. He wrote curious theosophic or mystical

* Based on material submitted by Joseph L. Rabinowitz in a term report in the history of chemistry.

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¹ Opinions differ about the place of death. Ferguson in "Bibliotheca chemica," Vol. 1, p. 464, says Khunrath died in Leipzig, whereas Poggendorff in "Biographisch-literarisches Handwörterbuch," Vol. 1, p. 1251, records his death as occurring in Dresden on Sept. 9, 1605.

books, many of which are obscure and full of symbolism. By some of his contemporaries, Khunrath was considered an authority, by others a charlatan. He is said to have visited John Dee and other alchemists of the period.

John Read says that Khunrath "besides being intolerant" was also "unbalanced."

His writings consist largely of a fevered sequence of mystical pronouncements and adjurations, interlarded with bizarre exclamations in various tongues. Within half a dozen lines [in "Amphitheatrum"] he apostrophises the blessed Viridity, the universal principle of germination; urges the Theosophist to contemplate the Viridity which is Ruah Elohim, the Spirit of the Lord; conjures the Cabbalist to regard the virid Line of the whirling universe; beseeches the Magist to meditate upon Nature; and exhorts the Physico-Chemist to brood over the green Lion and the mysteries of the Quintessence!²

The author of "Fegfeuer," D. Göldner, said: "'Amphitheatrum' and the other works all bear witness to his (Khunrath's) disgusting arrogance and ignorance. He wrote not from the Spirit of God but from the ignorant devil of pride."³

It is stated by Waite that: "This German alchemist, who is claimed as a hierophant of the psychic side of the magnum opus, and who was undoubtedly aware of the larger issues of the Hermetic theorems, must be classed as a follower of Paracelsus."⁴

Ever since the beginning of man, it appears that basically, the human mind has not changed in its tendency to associate symbols with the supernatural as well as the natural or to represent certain physical laws by definite objects. Frequently these designs were used to imply or suggest specific bits of information to the person qualified to understand them. To the uninitiated, they denoted either a vagueness on the part of the author, implying an effort to hide his own shortcomings, or an attempt to add other mysterious aspects. To a few, these emblems served as a challenge, creating a desire to search for further clues or information in order to gain a better understanding of the mysterious designs and symbols.

In alchemy one finds this symbolism very extensive. The owl appeared to be a favorite emblem of a number of authors, and especially for Khunrath, who used it in several of his works.

What was the significance of the owl? On the one hand the owl was chosen by the Greeks to represent the goddess Athene (γλαυκῶπις—variously explained to mean bright-eyed or owl-eyed) and was

² John Read, "Prelude to Chemistry," New York, 1937, p. 82.

³ Quoted in J. Ferguson, *loc. cit.*

⁴ A. E. Waite, "Lives of Alchemystical Philosophers," London, 1888, p. 98.



Was helfen Jackeln / Lische oder
Brillen /
Wann die Leute nicht sehen wollen.

Fig. 1

regarded as a symbol of wisdom and prudence or study and reflection; on the other hand the Romans regarded it as a portent of dire calamity and its appearance as an evil omen fortelling death.

The Egyptians and Ethiopians often employed the owl to portray a messenger of death. When this image, a grim token, was sent by a king, it was considered a point of honor for the recipient to kill himself at once. If any attempt were made to evade the message, an indelible stain was placed on the family. Chaucer in his "Parliament of Foules" indicates the same idea in the line: "The oule, that of deth the bodè bringeth." Another illustration of such prophecy is found in Samuel Rowland's "More Knaves Yet":

Wise Gosling did but heare the scrich-owle crye,
And told his wife,—and straight a pigge did dye.

In the Bible and literature of early biblical times this nightbird was usually pronounced unclean and relegated to the desert as a companion of dreadful creatures. No wonder the owl has been regarded with almost insane fear and aversion. The Andalusians called owls the "Devil's birds," the legend being that they drank the oil from the lamps in shrines of the saints and embodied the spirits of the wicked.

The folklore of the two great civilizations of occidental antiquity, the Greek and Roman, shows numerous references to the owl. No doubt much of the owl lore of the Romans was derived from Grecian influence, yet a good deal of the superstition concerning it was inherently and intrinsically its own, just as we find similar superstitions arising independently in various countries of the ancient world. Perhaps some of the oldest traces of this lore came to us from the Chinese, the figure of an owl being frequently depicted in ancient relics in the form of pottery and bronzes.

Classical Chinese texts give only incomplete meanings of the oldest oriental symbols, but there can be no doubt of the connection of the owl with sacrifices, planets, omens or other magical influences. Mention is made of such sacrifices to the legendary founder of Chinese alchemy, Huang Ti. Did he detest this bird or was it sacrificed in order to feed the substance to his genius? Almost all masks of the Shang and early Chao periods are dominated by the figure of an owl in the central part of each.

If alchemy can be claimed to have had its origin in China, so the Chinese may also be considered the originators of many symbolisms, moods and significances of the owl. If there was a contact of western with eastern civilization, it is quite likely that some of these symbolisms were transferred from Asia to Europe. But it is known also that spontaneous appearance of similar beliefs pertaining to the same object in

different localities is not only possible, but indeed frequent. Until more is known of migrations and cultural effects of these early civilizations, we can only generalize.

The superstitions concerning owls which have persisted therefore belong to primitive cultures as well as to civilized peoples. Quotations, stories, definitions, legends—all this information—make it appear that the symbolism is mainly represented by two opposite trends of thought—one, the symbolism of protection, wisdom, wit, perception, sagacity, calmness, reflection; the other trend, that of cruelty, perversion, calamity, fear, death, bad luck, taciturnity, foolishness, eeriness, weirdness and evil.

Many writers have mentioned various other ideas and superstitions in connection with the owl. Among these were Virgil, Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sydney, Ben Jonson, Schiller, Byron, Shelley, Washington Irving, Tennyson and Hardy.

A pretty legend current in Normandy, to account for the owl's nocturnal habits, says that the wren, in its successful effort of bringing fire from heaven to man so that it could be used, lost all of its plumage. Each of the birds except the owl presented the wren with a feather, and hence to this day the owl is ashamed to show its face in daytime.

"Possibly because it can see in the dark, and is the only bird which looks straight forward,"⁵ may be another reason for calling the owl the bird of wisdom.

These birds, like cats, have their secret. The dog lives for man. The cat and the owl have their world to themselves, independent of ours. And their calm seems to be able to come only from a satisfaction that escapes us. That is why, probably, the Athenians believed in the wisdom of the owl. And that is why, also, other peoples made it into a demon. They understood only themselves, and what they did not understand was an enemy to them. From this come those popular customs, too often cruel, towards cats and night-birds, whose placidity is an injury to our agitation. They do not need us. We will not pardon them for this.⁶

We believe most of the alchemists used the owl to represent the favorable attributes as listed earlier. The nature of their work, their behavior, their search for power and wisdom, their apparent satisfaction with inadequate equipment, all seem to indicate this.

A small number of alchemists used the owl to represent the adverse attributes. These alchemists were trying either to gain power through

⁵ J. E. Harting, "The Ornithology of Shakespeare," London, 1871, p. 83.

⁶ G. Pierre, *Bull. des Musées Royaux d'art et d'histoire* [3], 15, 115-117 (1943). Translated by Josephine Rabinowitz.

fear, bias, and low morality or to indicate the futility of trying to initiate the general reader into the mysteries of the art. During the alchemical period the alchemist frequently was regarded as a social outcast and the Devil's friend, with the unavoidable result that his association with the owl, in the minds of the multitude, did not represent integrity, profundity, and wisdom. This was partially due to the gullibility, ignorance, and superstition of the people. The surreptitious methods and quackery of some alchemists did not help to dispel this popular misconception.



Fig. 2

Towards the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century there flourished in England publications known as almanacs, whose chief aim was to collect odd data and to experiment in prophecy. Their extreme popularity was due to the great stress given to signs and superstitions. After a time this led to the creation of the "Owle's Almanack," a satire on almanacs in general. This work was attributed by some to Thomas Dekker, an eminent Elizabethan playwright. An interesting plate⁷ (Fig. 2) shows an owl expounding alchemical wisdom. Note the

⁷ D. C. Allen, "The Owle's Almanacke," Baltimore, 1943, p. 25.

quill pointing to a few well-known symbols in the volume. Is the instrument seen directly overhead a form of astrolabe? It is apparent that the owl represented in this work expresses the spirit of buffoonery.

Khunrath knew and must have understood many of the symbolical and diametrically opposite meanings usually associated with the owl. We can only speculate why he chose to use this particular symbol in several of his works, for he once exclaimed impatiently, "He who sets out to make wise men of fools will be kept very busy."⁸

The iconography of the emblems used by Khunrath is not known. A close examination of them reveals differences in design and legends. The design in fig. 1 is found as a tailpiece in "Magnesia Catholica Philosophorum," Magdeburg, 1599. This same emblem is found in "Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae . . .," Hanovia, 1609 and "Vom hylealischen, das ist, pri-materialischen . . . Chaos," Franckfurt, 1708.

In the 1708 edition of the latter work the frontispiece is again an owl (Fig. 3) flanked by torches with candles at its sides, yet the poem accompanying it has been considerably expanded to fourteen lines and includes a Latin motto at the end.

A comparison of Figures 1 and 4 shows that the first drawing is extremely simple in its design. The shadow appears on the left side and the feathers are poorly drawn. The eyes are indistinct, and the beak curves towards the left. The candle sticks are primitive. In the second one the shadings are to the right and the candle holders somewhat more elaborate. The beak of the owl curves towards the right. The eyes and feathers are more distinctly drawn. The framed legend at the feet of the owl has been replaced by a fragment of stone. In both drawings the left candle is slightly off center from the holder. It would appear that the second was traced from the first with the addition of several details.

A variation of the owl engraving, with floral arrangements (Fig. 6) appears as a tailpiece in "Brunnen der Weisheit und Erkänntniss der Natur . . .," by Anonymus von Schwartzfuss. This is contained in "Fünff curieuse chemische Tractätlein," Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1767. Again our friend, the bespectacled owl, is presented with smaller torches (burning less fiercely and smoking quite a bit) and bordered by more elaborately designed candle holders and branches with leaves and fruit. The small plants formerly close to the bird have now been moved to the rear. The frame for the legend has taken on a new design—that of a shell. The legend, a new modification of the original verse, precedes the tailpiece.

⁸ See reference 2.



Was helfen *FACKELN*, *LICHT* und *BRILLEN*,
 Weil jedermann nach seinem Willen
 In der *CHYMIA* ängstlich sucht,
 Daz ihm das *HERTZ* im Leibe pucht!
 Er suchet zwar die creutz und qver,
 Alleine *NICHTS* das findet er,
 Und setzte er auf alle *Brillen*,
 Weil er nur thut nach seinem Willen,
 So vird er doch nicht treffen an
 Die *WAHRHEIT*, so erfreuen kan,
 Versuchs, und lis das mit *VERSTAND*,
 Und tapp nicht blindlings nach der *WAND*,
 Gebrauch recht *FACKELN*, *LICHT* und *BRILLEN*.
 So vird *GOTT* deinen Wunsch erfüllen.

VOLENTI NON FIT INIURIA.

Fig. 3

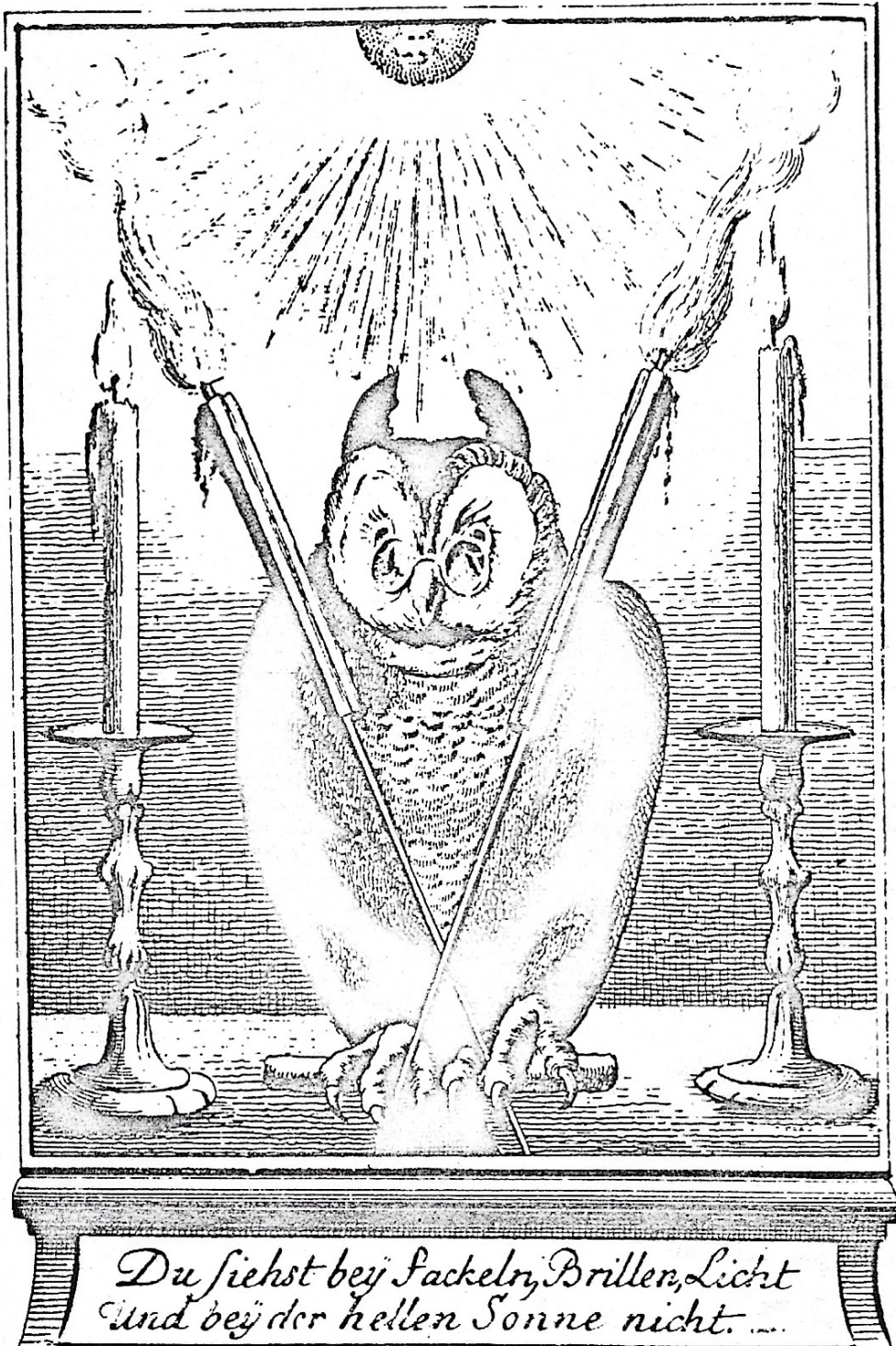


Fig. 4

Another author, Hans von Osten, also uses our allegorical drawing as a frontispiece to his work "Eine grosse Herzstärkung für die Chymisten," Berlin, 1771. Here we find (Fig. 4) a much improved emblem with more effective shading. The tufts of feathers on the head, simulating ears, are somewhat exaggerated. The legend is similar to the original and is mounted in a frame of later design. The most important addition to be noted is the presence of the sun in the upper center with its rays beaming in the background. The candle holders are more tastefully ornamented. The owl is a more accurate depiction of the common European owl with a less weird or eerie effect.

A modern version (Fig. 5) of the Khunrath Owl, suggested for the title page of *Chymia*, did not meet with the approval of the Editor-in-



Fig. 5

Chief, the late Tenney L. Davis, who commented that in this drawing "the owl has the forehead and ears of a cat, a body like that of a penguin, no visible wings or legs, and stream-lined eye-glasses like a movie star."

In view of this apparent gradual evolution of drawings and changes in the legends, is it fair to speculate that the use of the owl as an alchemical symbol may be traced back to mediaeval and ancient arts? May we believe that Khunrath and some other writers in this Renaissance period revived the use of the owl symbolism, an idea that was latent for many centuries and now seemed quite appropriate? Was this favored symbol in alchemical literature to serve as another indication of man's emerging from the middle ages towards a period of

greater enlightenment, vital curiosity and concern with knowledge? Perhaps! The torches tend to strengthen these theories.

It is possible that these allegorical drawings may express the position of the alchemist towards the world, with the owl, spectacles, torches and candles offered as devices against intolerance, superstition, and above all, ignorance.

* * * *

Die Sackeln, Licht und Brill in diesem Werck
 nicht taugen,
 Wann du in deinem Kopff hast finst're Eulens
 Augen,
 Wo nicht das wahre Licht erleuchtet deiner
 Sinn,
 Hast du vor deine Müh nur Schaden zum
 Gewinn.



Fig. 6