

Alchimia – The Divine Feminine of *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*.

By Soror Ex Astris Scientia

*"Oh Thou Who giveth sustenance to the Universe,
From whence all things proceed, to Whom all things return,
Unveil to us the face of the true Spiritual Sun,
Hidden by a disk of golden light,
That we may know the truth and do our whole duty,
As we journey to Thy sacred Feet."*

A Treatise on Cosmic Fire, Alice A. Bailey

Much has been written about the meaning behind the seventeenth century allegorical tale *The Chemical Wedding*. The story revolves around the alchemical adventure of our protagonist Christian Rosenkreutz, who is helped along his path by various colourful characters. I wish to focus on the feminine roles in this intricate and enigmatic story, without which Rosenkreutz could never have completed his spiritual journey.

The Rosicrucian path is one rich in symbolism, allegory, and metaphor. Symbols are a concise way to sum up a concept. They manage to transcend most language barriers whilst retaining an inner meaning. Good symbols seem to be capable of expressing fundamental concepts. Many have designs of a geometrical simplicity which belie the beauty and power of numbers as fundamental expressions of the Universe around us. It is precisely this simplicity which gives *The Chemical Wedding*, the third Rosicrucian publication, its accessibility. Written like a fairy-tale, it fires the imagination and ignites the soul. No-one who reads it will be able to avoid making mental associations between what they read and what they know.

The Chemical Wedding, came at a time when the equality of women left a lot to be desired. This is one of several reasons why this book is so amazing. The powerful women in the story, of which there are several, are complex and come richly cloaked in symbolic and alchemical meaning, not relegated to some subservient role, which was the fate of many women back then.

The story opens with Christian receiving an invitation to a wedding from a winged maiden dressed in blue with gold stars. Her wings have 'eyes' on them which alchemically speaking, suggests that she is an astral form, a vision or perhaps an angel, or she could be seen as an aspect of his higher self, or maybe his anima. Through her message, it is clear that he must undertake a journey.

Following the encounter, Rosenkreutz has a dream in which he manages to escape from the bottom of a tower packed with chained people. This could be interpreted as the sephira, Malkuth. A grey-haired old man, 'Father' Chokmah or perhaps merciful Chesed, informs the 'prisoners,' that if they can hang on to the rope that is about to descend, they will be free. At the request of an old woman, Binah - the

Universal mother, an umbilical-like rope is lowered; Rosenkreutz manages to catch hold of it and thus becomes a *Poraio de Rejectis* - brought forth from amongst the rejected.

This dream, like the winged messenger, seems to be divinely inspired and hints at the opportunity that is about to present itself to Christian; one that is tied in with his mysterious wedding invitation. Binah is birthing him onto the spiritual journey that awaits him.

After setting off for the wedding, Christian soon comes to his first major hurdle; he must make a decision as to which of the perilous paths on offer he will take. Pausing for rest, his eye is drawn to a pure white dove. He becomes enamoured by its beauty. In Greek legend the white dove was a symbol of Aphrodite, Goddess of love, her Roman equivalent being Venus, but more of her later. The dove is also often seen as a symbol for the feminine Holy Spirit. The Virgin Mary, mother of the Christ sees a white dove descend from heaven and enter her body during the annunciation. In Christian imagery seven rays can often be seen emanating from the image of the dove. Seven is a number sacred to another feminine divine principle – that of Sophia.

It is through the action of a black raven - a symbol for the beginning of alchemical change, chasing the white dove, that Christian, in his eagerness to aid the beautiful bird, unwittingly chooses the path he is to take.

Arriving safely at the first portal he presents his wedding invitation to the first porter who allows him to pass through and on to the path leading to the second portal. The route is defined by lanterns that a maiden, dressed in the blue colour of expansive Jupiter, has been lighting. Blue is also a colour often associated with the Virgin Mary and according to Rev. Johann Roten of the Marian Library-International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton: *'Mary's dark blue mantle, from about 500 A.D., is of Byzantine origin and is the colour of an empress.'*¹ Furthermore, Mary, through her assumption, is also often equated with the sky which could also explain her blue coloured robes, although it is certainly not unusual to see Mary depicted in other colours, especially red.

The maiden appears to be a Guide of the Path, illuminating it and encouraging him onwards. Her role also appears connected to that of the white dove, whose direction of flight ultimately decided Christian's route.

After successfully passing through the second initiatory portal, Christian must make a hasty dash for the castle for the lanterns are now being extinguished. It is only the light being cast from the lantern of the guiding maiden, who is right behind him, that ensures he makes it through the door and into the castle. The door closes sharply behind him, trapping his coat and reminding us that over attachment to earthly possessions are often a hindrance to spiritual goals. The maiden takes the door key with her so nobody else can enter without her guidance. It seems that the way into the castle can only be found through ones own reconnaissance and the illuminating help of this female divinity.

At this point, we meet the character known as 'The Virgin', her name further suggestive of parallels with the Virgin Mary or indeed, numerous pre-Christian Virgin Goddesses such as Artemis and Kore. Christian appears to recognise her for he says;

'I thought that she was the same as had formerly lit and extinguished the lights... But now she no longer wore blue, but a shimmering snow-white garment that glittered with pure gold.' ²

We learn that the Virgin is the same female figure who was instrumental in aiding Christian in getting to the castle except, now clad in white, she is no longer in the role of lantern maiden and guide of the path. Furthermore, the white of her dress and her beauty seems to echo that of the white dove which had so captivated Christian at the beginning of his mission. Indeed, by the time we get to the end of day two, we realise that all of the decisions that Christian had to make over the previous 48 hours were influenced by this multi-faceted female character.

On day three, the Virgin is wearing a red dress with a white belt and donned with a laurel chaplet on her head. Laurel is usually seen as a symbol of victory, its evergreen leaves triumph over nature's decay. High Priestesses at Delphi chewed laurel leaves to assist in receiving prophetic visions and spiritual enlightenment. Laurel is also often seen in connection with the symbol of the dove for it enhances the feeling of purity and eternity. Combined with the red of her dress, it suggests that the Virgin is representing a potent and decisive force. Indeed, she must now sort out the wheat from the chaff; it is time for the 'soul-weighing' ceremony. This is obviously analogous to the weighing ceremony in the judgement hall of Osiris as described in the 'Egyptian Book of the Dead'.

Those who successfully pass are presented with a red jacket and crowned with the laurel of victory. The unsuccessful candidates remain unadorned, become prisoners, and are assigned to a group dependant upon which weight (virtue), caused them to fail the test.

In his commentary, Adam Mclean point out that there have been six 'tasks' leading up to this point, the weighing being the final and seventh task. For those not too familiar with *The Chemical Wedding*, it is important to stress its plentiful seven-fold symmetry; seven being a perfect number. In the first instance, the entire book is set over a period of seven days, echoing the seven days of Creation. [Strictly speaking, six days – on the seventh God 'rested']

The Virgin visibly exhibits compassion during the weighing process, for when one emperor tips the scales on the addition of the seventh and final weight, his disappointment is acute. Christian notices the Virgin's feeling and sorrow for him as she signals her people, telling them not to deride the unfortunate emperor. With other candidates her reaction is more severe, for now she is the spiritual mother of a child who has not paid close enough attention to the moral way!

The red colour of the Virgin's dress seems especially important. Alchemically speaking, Vermilion red is a rare artists pigment made from Mercury sulphide, a naturally occurring compound of Mercury and Sulphur – both important alchemical elements representing lunar and solar energies respectively. The red of the Virgin's gown and the jackets of the successful candidates may be symbolic of the fact that they, as individuals, are 'balanced' for they have passed the weighing test and get to continue their alchemical journey. This is further emphasised by the table that the successful candidates then sit at, for it is covered in red velvet and laid with pure silver and gold goblets, again suggestive of a balance between the lunar and solar.

Towards the end of the third day, Christian asks the Virgin her name. She answers with a riddle, the answer to which, Rosicrucian scholars generally agree, is 'Alchimia.' She embodies the power of feminine alchemy and like the moon her capacity for change is boundless for she is transformation incarnate. Do not forget however, that the Moon's many faces are only revealed by the light of the Sun. As if to reinforce this polar dance, the seven men including Christian, are joined by seven maidens, each one different and each one, like the phases of the moon, exhibiting an individual personality.

Adam Mclean and John Courtis, both of whom have written their own commentaries on *The Chemical Wedding* suggest that this Queen is yet another aspect of the Virgin. Mclean draws our attention to Rudolf Steiner who identified this Queen as Theologia, thereby complementing the Virgin, Alchimia. Mclean very succinctly summarises this thus:

*'The task of Theology is surely to bring humanity to an awareness of the Spirit through an upward gaze and renunciation of the world, whereas Alchimia is the sacred science of transformation that does not require a rejection of the path of the earthly realm.'*³

These two facts are often seen as complementary to the wise Sophia, the bride of Christ. Along with Theologia and Alchimia you have a powerful feminine triad around which the whole of 'The Chemical Wedding' seems to unfurl.

On Day four, there is even greater emphasis on polarity. Christian is adorned with a jewelled golden fleece on the back of which is written; 'The Moon's light shall be like the Sun's light, and the sun's light shall be seven times as bright.' On a physical level, the Moon's light *is* really the Sun's light for the Moon 'shines' by reflecting the light that the Sun generates. In this respect, the Sun is certainly the source of all and could be likened to Kether. From there, the emanation has to travel through seven sephiroth before encountering the lunar realm of Yesod. It hints at the enrichment it receives by the process of separating itself up into seven different spheres, enabling the light of God's expression to better understand itself, the merits of which, are fed back via the Moon acting as the grand reflector.

Day four is the day of the wedding, but it is not the sort of wedding one would expect. Christian is first introduced to the head King and Queen in a magnificent room that gleams with precious stones and

gold, the colour of the Sun. The Queen's robes are so bright that Christian can barely look upon her. The Queen could be seen to be personifying Sophia. *'Like a fine mist she rises from the power of God, a pure effluence from the glory of God... the brightness that streams from everlasting light, the flawless mirror of the active power of God and the image of his goodness'* (Wisdom of Solomon, 7:25-26).

There are also three other pairs of Kings and Queens seated together, each sharing one of three other thrones in the bejewelled room. They are seen to change out of their splendid snow-white robes, into black ones. Black is the colour of mourning which is also often associated with beginnings in many alchemical texts, in the same way the black raven seemed to help mark the beginning of Rosenkreutz's journey.

The members of this royal party are, disturbingly, beheaded and placed in individual coffins much to the distress of Rosenkreutz and some of his companions. This is promptly followed by the slaying of the executioner, a black man, whose remains are put separately into a chest. The Virgin reassures them saying; *'The life of these now rests in your hands; and if you follow me, you will see this death give life to many.'*⁴ This is of course a fundamentally true statement, for the first law of Thermodynamics (ignoring the philosophical question of how 'everything' got here in the first place) states that energy cannot be created, nor can it be destroyed, it can only change form. This provides us with a succinct example of how matters scientific and matters spiritual are inextricably tied together on a macro and micro cosmic level, the main difference being merely that of perspective and scale.

Throughout the night, the Virgin must keep vigil over the corpses, an action which seems to be quite Crone-like. Through the 'birthing' of the dead, she is also ensuring that the birthing of life will occur.

That night, Christian bears witness to the mysterious arrival of seven ships. They are met by the Virgin who brings with her the six coffins containing the three beheaded couples, and the chest which contains the body of the executioner. In a scene, reminiscent of the dead crossing the River Styx, the coffins are loaded onto the boats and return the way they had come. The Virgin seems to have taken on the cloak of Hecate and in this funerary role, oversees the departure of the bodies of the three couples, ensuring that they are safely on their way.

On the fifth day we are introduced more fully to a vitally important female character, that of Venus. Her appearance at this point seems to be the missing piece in the whole cycle of events. We have had delightful maidens, the Virgin in a compassionate, maternal and guiding capacity, and the Virgin in a more crone-like aspect. But, all along we have lacked that powerful force which links them all and which leads to union on so many levels; the power of love.

We are told that the door to Venus' tomb was only opened on the previous day for the coffins had to be bought out to the ships, through her room. This reaffirms the life, death and love connection. It is interesting to speculate whether we can also consider Venus as another aspect of the Virgin; certainly it

seems to complete the latter's already well-rounded roles. We know that the Virgin stayed with the coffins at all times so she would have also been in Venus' dwelling. Maybe it is the Virgin's presence that is needed to awaken the sleeping Venus.

Curiously, the tomb is also the King's treasury and although it is adorned with stunning and brilliant jewels, Venus' presence there would seem to indicate that the greatest treasure is that of love. However, the question remains as to why this great treasure has ended up in the depths of the castle; behind a door that we are told is kept tightly locked most of the time. There is something about this room that is reminiscent of the vault of Christian Rosenkreutz as told in the *Fama*. The altar in the centre, a metal plate, and a body that looks real - though the actual presence of life seems uncertain. In the *Fama* the Vault of Christian Rosenkreutz contains many secrets and so too does there seem to be a fundamental secret, a key, to be found in Venus' tomb. In both instances, part of that key seems to be the secret of eternal life.

Adam Mclean suggests that the reason for Venus' room being so inaccessible is due to the other inhabitants of the Castle who '*seem unable to make a positive relationship with the powerful elemental forces of the feminine.*'⁵ Mclean suggests that they are too focused on the lofty pursuit of abstract science, something which he believes to be personified by the Castle. This viewpoint certainly reflects the real-life events of the seventeenth century, for it was a period of time that saw a rapid increase in modern philosophy and science. René Descartes and Issac Newton are just two of the highly influential philosophers and scientists that came out of that time period.

This part of *The Chemical Wedding* could be seen as cautionary; warning us that in the pursuit of the new science something spiritual and wonderful is lost, buried and perhaps even feared. This is the divine feminine as seen in Venus hidden behind a door made of iron, metal of Mars and masculinity.

Whilst in this room Christian, notices a peculiar tree on an altar. His page tells him that when this tree, which seems to be continually bearing fruit and yet also keeps melting, has completely melted, that Lady Venus will awake and be mother of a King.

There is another door in the room, this time triangular and made of copper, the metal of Venus. Rosenkreutz is led down through this door into Venus' inner sanctum, her bedchamber, where he glimpses her lying naked and as still as a statue. Christian is not sure if she is real or not. This is a familiar and age-old quandary; how do we know if love is real or not; if what we feel is really the hand of Venus or an illusion born from hope.

After leaving the room, we once again meet the Virgin dressed in black but still carrying her laurel branch of office. The funeral commences and Christian is the only person besides the Virgin who knows that the coffins must be empty for he had witnessed their departure the evening before. Regardless, there is a burial ceremony and the coffins are entombed in the ground under a stone slab.

The banner of the Phoenix, emblem of rebirth is flown. The Virgin gives an oration to honour the departed and tells Christian and his companions that it is time to help them be reborn. They are led to waiting ships which take them on a sea journey. On the way they encounter sirens, nymphs and sea-goddesses who entreat them to stay and listen to them sing. The Virgin agrees and the watery emotional beings sing of love:

*'From whence have we our birth?
From Love...
So may we too, through flame of love
With joy unite them once again.
This sorrow, then,
To greatest joy,
Though many thousand generations come,
Shall be transformed for all eternity.'*⁶

This again seems to be reinforcing the connection between love and death's journey. The song deeply affects Christian who says *'I became aware that Cupid was also beginning to work on me'*. The Siren's song had enchanted him and reminded him about the importance of the power of love which he has been made aware of through his encounter with the various female forms on his alchemical journey.

The ships arrive at Olympus Tower, an alchemical laboratory separated into seven levels where the process of rebirth is about to take place. Under the Virgin's guidance, Christian and his companions set about the alchemical processes of transmutation and transformation as they assist in the distillation of the bodies of the royal couples into an egg from which hatches a bird which willingly sacrifices itself. After its body is burnt, its ashes are to be used in the next alchemical stage.

At this point, the Virgin declares that Christian and three others have been lazy and indolent workers. Upset by this accusation, the Virgin, who previously always seemed quite caring, is now seen to be suddenly quite cold in her humiliation of them. Her derogatory words are baseless and turn out to be just a sly way of getting Christian and three of his other companions up to the very top of the tower and to the next alchemical stage of their mission. On their arrival, they are met by an old man who laughingly tells them *'... man never knows what good things God intends for him.'* At which point the Virgin enters, laughing it seems, at their lack of faith in her.

Christian and his three companions set to work on the bird's ashes and two small beings, a boy and a girl are created. They are fed on the bird's blood, receive their souls and thus a new King and Queen are born.

After everyone has returned to the Castle, we learn that Christian is considered to be the new King's 'father'. We also know from what the page said to Christian on day five, that Venus was to be the

mother of the next King. Is Christian considered to be the father due to all of his hard alchemical work which bought about their birth, or is it because he, and only he, gazed upon the sleeping Venus thereby cementing a connection with the divine feminine which was vital to the whole process? Christian was also the only one privy to the departure of the bodies on the boats under the auspices of the Virgin, the night before the burial service. He was also privy to being personally guided to the castle by the light of the maiden in blue. These are all powerful female archetypes through which Christian has enjoyed a special and privileged experience, one which seemed to place him slightly ahead of all of the other men who also successfully passed the soul-weighing test.

After triumphantly returning to the castle, Christian is rewarded by being made a Knight of the Golden Stone. Then comes an unexpected twist in the story, just when we think that our protagonist can do no wrong, it is revealed to the King that Christian stole a glimpse at Venus on day five, he has seen 'Isis Unveiled'; an action that requires punishment. Christian must take the place of the first porter at the first portal, where he must then spend his time judging for himself who is and who is not worthy of passing through to the Castle.

Whilst he is greatly disappointed, his punishment is actually his crowning glory. It is partly because he saw Venus, because he acknowledged and beheld the power of the feminine, that the new King and Queen were able to be reborn. He has admirably and faithfully trodden the path of service and is rewarded by the opportunity to continue serving others; he is an adept, a priest. He knows nothing, but yet is wise.

So Christian takes the first porters place and through his delightful allegorical tale, leaves us knowledge of the spiritual and alchemical processes through which God operates and the Universe unravels. We can read his words and they can help us to find our way to the alchemical castle, where we too can discover the vision of Venus for ourselves.

The Chemical Wedding should not be seen as *just* a description of personal transmutation; for then we are in danger of missing one of the main messages of the book - the connectedness of all things that comes through the interplay of polarities. For if you are a fatalist, then we are all puppets on God's overcrowded stage where strings are tangled and paths are ready made. If you believe in free-will, you must also acknowledge that your thoughts and actions will always influence others – and there are those threads again.

The Chemical Wedding relies heavily on this interconnectedness. Dualistic manifestation and paired symbolism is seen everywhere and we could certainly consider the Virgin, through her interaction with Christian, to be a complimentary and a balancing force for him. Indeed, if the book was written with all genders reversed and we followed the path of a 'Christine' Rosenkreutz would the story change significantly? I don't think it would, though maybe Eros would have been locked away at the top,

instead of at the bottom of the Castle for it is also important to remember the context and time period in which this tale was written. Perhaps this is something for further debate?

The central polar dance of the Wedding was not that of the Bride and Bridegroom, it was that of the Virgin and Christian. She guided and helped him from the very beginning. Yet her mission could not have been accomplished without Christian's actions, for their paths are inextricably entwined.

Adam Mclean, in his commentary to the Joscelyn Godwin translation of *The Chemical Wedding*, says of The Virgin '... it is the relationship of Rosenkreutz to the Virgin which provides most of the entertainment and brings liveliness and sparkle to the action. ... It is fascinating to picture this bright, charming, witty and wise Virgin as she leads us through the action at a fairly brisk pace, teasing the men and thoroughly enjoying the role she plays with them. ... She seems so lively and rounded as a personality that she along with Christian Rosenkreutz are perhaps the only figures in the work one can think of as real persons ...'⁷

This very human quality, coupled with the more ethereal dimension of the Virgin is highly reminiscent of the Virgin Mary who, is understood as having been both a human woman and yet was also divine. On reflection, if you accept that the Virgin was also the white dove of the Holy Spirit and sacred bird of the Goddess of love, then we can be confident that the sleeping Venus is also an aspect of the Virgin's character. We have a multi-faceted, well-rounded and balanced divine female figure; the Virgin Mary merged with Mary Magdalene, Artemis with Hecate, Kore Persephone with Demeter, a reclamation and recognition of female divinity in various forms, from the sexual, to the nurturing, to the severe and mocking. These are faces that, whilst not all are pleasant, are all manifestations of the polar forces coming down from the Tree of Life's supernal triad.

Whilst the Tree of Life is based on opposites, the importance of following the middle pillar is often stressed. But how can we know where the middle is without first knowing where the extremes are and is it actually possible to know them from a singular point of view? It is through our interactions with others, both good and bad, that we find the key to experiencing those aspects of ourselves. Personally, I think we need to embrace our multiple faces and not fear our shadow selves, for this is what truly enables us to see clearly the middle pillar, which leads us on our own alchemical journey to divine love.

¹ <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/questions/faq/faq12.html>

² *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. Translated by Joscelyn Godwin with commentary by Adam Mclean.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*