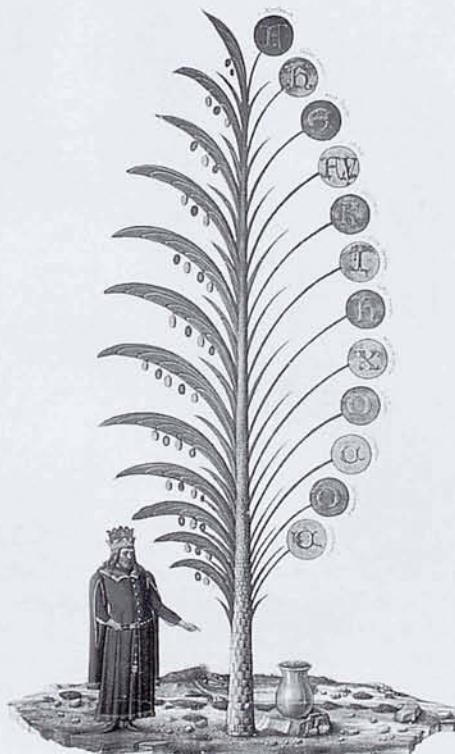


# RAMON LLULL AND THE ALCHEMICAL TRADITION

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MINIATURE FROM THE PSEUDO-LULLIAN MANUSCRIPT BR52  
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The name of Ramon Llull has been attached, as is commonly known, to a large number of alchemical writings since the second half of the fourteenth century, i.e. about fifty years after his death. Past followers and modern scholars have shown divergent opinions about the attribution to Llull of alchemical works which, on their own account, have always been highly appreciated by the adepts of the Hermetic tradition. A reconsideration of the whole problem of the pseudo-Lullian alchemy has been undertaken recently, starting from a different point of view: instead of questioning whether Llull is the author of alchemical writings or not, the works attributed to him are regarded as a focus of interest per se, and their link with the historical figure of the Mallorcan philosopher is but one aspect (admittedly a very important one) of a multi-faceted historical and hermeneutical problem.

The manuscript tradition of the alchemical works attributed to Llull and their mutual relationship, confirmed by cross quotations and affinity of content, enable us to trace back the origin of the whole *corpus* to an original nucleus of a few writings. The earliest of them, the *Testamentum*, written in or little before 1332, and a small number of other works by the same author (*Liber lapidarii*, *Liber de intentione alchimistarum*), are strictly linked to the *Codicillus* (perhaps written by the same alchemist or by his disciple): all of them converge on the theme of the alchemical elixir and illustrate its multi-

ple applications. The same development of the *opus* appears in two widespread writings, *Epistola accurtationis* and *Compendium animae transmutationis metallorum*, which seem to derive from the previous ones. Then there are several works focusing on the distillation of wine alcohol for alchemical purposes: the first and most relevant among them is the *Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia*, largely depending on the *De consideratione quintae essentiae* written by John of Rupescissa about 1351-52. Some minor writings concerning distilled waters, alchemical fifth essence and potable gold can also be traced back to the fourteenth century.

A basic difference distinguishes the *Testamentum* from the *Liber de secretis naturae*, though in the totality of known manuscripts both texts are invariably ascribed to Ramon Llull: in addition to developing different alchemical doctrines,



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the *Testamentum* was completely without foundation: Lullian ideas (such as the correlatives) and style (mainly the use of alphabet and figures) give this book a peculiar character inside the alchemical tradition from which it stems; moreover, an authentic work by Llull is cited in it, the *Arbor philosophiae desideratae*. So the *Testamentum* shows that, within a few years after Llull's death, his thought had already been brought into contact with just those alchemical doctrines that Llull himself had clearly rejected in many of his works, and especially in the famous dialogue between alchemist and fire in the *Felix*. Subsequently, such an association was energetically fostered in the *Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia*. Its three books concerning the alchemical and pharmacological use of the fifth essence are given a unitary frame by means of a prologue and an epilogue in which the author argues for the continuity between Lullian natural philosophy and alchemy, even assuming that Llull's sentences contrary to transmutation were directed against "false" alchemists. Therefore in the *Liber* alchemy is presented as a veritable branch of Llull's *arbor scientiarum*; from our vantage point, it may rather be thought of as if it were a successful graft.

The attempt made in the *Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia* to make alchemy cohere with Lullian philosophy was soon to give way to a legend in which many topics coalesced, which had already appeared, though in a scattered manner, in the earliest alchemical works attributed to Llull. The legend, in its final form, told that Llull had been "converted" to alchemy by another great Catalan, Arnau de Vilanova; then the discovery of the alchemical elixir had given him an exceedingly long life (a motive still present in the literary production of our century: see for instance *Quim-Quima*, by Maria Aurèlia Capmany). He had been summoned to the court of the English King Edward, where he had produced alchemical gold to be used for the King's purpose of crusade against the Moors; and eventually he had been imprisoned by the impious King, who had decided to use the alchemical gold for a war against the French. A sixteenth century version of the legend adds that during his captivity Llull was visited by Angels who revealed further alchemical secrets to him. Moreover, an imaginary genealogy of Kings is portrayed, drawing on the prologues and dedications of the earliest works of the *corpus*: the treacherous King is now called Robert, while

Edward (Robert's son) offered protection to Llull, who wrote many books for him; ultimately Edward's son, Charles, became the beloved disciple whom the old alchemist entrusted with all his knowledge, giving him the key to his secrets and writing for him his last and clearest books. In this accomplished version the legend introduces us to the extreme branch of the pseudo-Llullian alchemical *corpus*, a collection of writings whose titles imitate those of the earliest works and whose contents orientate pseudo-Llullian alchemy towards Rosicrucian developments.

At the foundation of this alchemical building we find, as we have seen before, the *Testamentum*. This is a very important work not only because it stands as the cornerstone of the whole pseudo-Llullian *corpus*, but, and perhaps principally, because it is the main evidence of a peculiar change in the meaning of alchemy at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Indeed, the *Testamentum* is the largest work illustrating the development of alchemy from a metallurgy imbued with religious and/or philosophical values to an art of perfecting the entire realm of matter, human body enclosed. The author, whose name is still unknown, elaborates a veritable alchemical philo-



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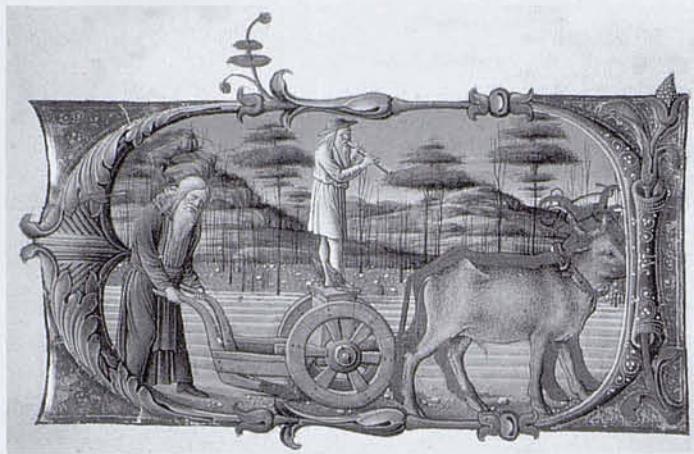
sophy, whose main purpose is to explain in philosophical terms (i.e. using the Aristotelian language of medieval natural philosophy) the production of an agent of material perfection named elixir. The peculiar character of the elixir consists in the fact that it can pass its perfection on to every being with which it is put in touch (projected, as the alchemists say), developing a virtue that grows to an infinite degree by means of consecutive solutions and "circulations" in the alchemical vessel. So the elixir, also called "philosophers' stone" (*lapis philosophorum*) or "our gold" (*aurum nostrum*), is not merely an amount of inert precious metal resulting from the transmutation of a baser one, but a material thing endowed with energy through the cooperation of human being (*artifex*) and nature. It unites in itself incorruptibility, that is the highest perfection of inanimate bodies (and, indeed, in its preparation the most perfect of them, gold and silver, are used as "seeds" of perfection), and the virtue to reproduce this same perfection (a dynamic power akin to what life is to living bodies). In its most philosophical definition, the elixir is "true complexion" (*verum temperamentum*) produced by means of manual operations: this artificial character prevented it from being encompassed within the categories of the Scholastic philosophy of nature, as the English philosopher Roger Bacon suggested when he defined alchemy (theoretical and practical) as the

most universal doctrine revealing the truth concealed or only partially expressed in the languages of medicine and natural philosophy. The author of the *Testamentum* –who is likely to have been a physician trained in Montpellier– defined alchemy as "an occult part of philosophy, the most necessary, a basic art which cannot be learned by just anyone. Alchemy teaches how to change all precious stones until they achieve the true balancing of qualities; how to bring human bodies to their healthiest condition; and how to transmute all metals into the true Sun (gold) and true Moon (silver), by means of a unique body, universal medicine, to which all particular medicines are reduced."

The above quotation comes from the bilingual (Catalan and Latin) *Testamentum*, preserved only in one manuscript (Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 244). Although the priority of the Catalan versus the Latin text does not seem today as sure as Pere Bohigas suggested several years ago, the two versions are practically contemporaneous and point to a Catalan origin or early diffusion of this important writing. Further research is needed, yet two elements at least are clear: first, there is a link between the idea of elixir as universal medicine (*mater medicinarum*), developed in the *Testamentum*, and the medical teaching of Arnau de Vilanova, whose *Aphorismi de gradibus* were included in 1309 in the curriculum of the medical faculty at Montpe-

ller; second, our alchemist travelled around Catalonia, France and England and his book represented a seminal work in the development of medical (or better pharmacological) alchemy, which John of Rupescissa was to accomplish a few decades later. This medical trend of alchemy characterized much of the following pseudo-Lullian production, and especially –as we have already seen– the *Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia*, which eventually happened to supersede the book of John of Rupescissa: it was the refashioning attributed to Llull, not Rupescissa's original elaboration, the main vehicle for the advocacy of the alchemical use of the fifth essence of wine. So the name of Llull played a significant part in this important chapter in the history of medieval and early Renaissance science, paving the way for Paracelsus' research.

We know very little about the diffusion of pseudo-Lullian alchemy in the fourteenth century, mainly because of the extreme poverty of alchemical manuscripts dating from this epoch: a problem shared by the whole category of alchemical texts written by (or attributed to) medieval authors. On the contrary, the growth of the pseudo-Lullian alchemical *corpus* was impressive throughout the whole fifteenth century, when newly written works were added to the *corpus* and the first manuscript collections began to appear. Several of them are lavishly illuminated, like some famous manuscripts



now in libraries of Florence, London, Oxford and Yale. So from the beginning of '400 we find traces of alchemy even in unexpected circumstances, like the presence of a copy of the *Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia* among the books owned by the hermit Mario de Passa, in Mallorca.

Alchemy had clearly become an interesting subject for fifteenth century physicians, perhaps searching for more efficacious remedies than the traditional Galenic ones; and often this interest actually focused on "Llull's" treatises. In Florence an illiterate goldsmith, Lorenzo da Bisticci, applied his craft knowledge to the use of medicinal waters, obtaining a wonderful medicine which he compared to Christ: he had just read the *Ars operativa medica*, whose author avers to be Ramon Llull and to have learnt the wonderful art of distillation from King Robert, who in his turn had been taught it by Arnau de Vilanova. In England, in 1456, a group of distinguished physicians signed a petition to the king in order to be allowed to make the elixir, *mater medicinarum*. Among the petitioners was John Kirkeby, chaplain to the King, who one year before had endorsed the execution of an important collection of pseudo-Lullian alchemy focusing on the *Testamentum* and the *Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia*: the bilingual Oxford manuscript already mentioned.

Given this medical interest in alchemy, it

is not surprising to find several alchemical works attributed to Llull in the manuscript collection once owned by Nicolaus Pol, the Lullist physician who lived in Tyrol at the end of the fifteenth century. And neither, perhaps, should we wonder at discovering that Bernard of Lavinheta included the *Ars operativa medica*, as well as abstracts from Rupescissa, in his Lullian encyclopaedia, which was to influence so many Renaissance thinkers from Giordano Bruno to Heinrich Alsted. When, however, we realise that Cusanus not only owned a manuscript of the *Testamentum*, but also had it specifically copied for himself, we may be at first genuinely bewildered. And we are similarly surprised to find that in Florence, about twenty years before Giovanni Pico della Mirandola introduced Lullian matters into the philosophical circles, a wonderfully illuminated manuscript with pseudo-Lullian alchemical treatises was manufactured for an unknown patron in 1475. The painter depicted Llull, with long white beard and Franciscan habit, in various alchemical scenes, giving him the status of a Hermetical alchemist and magus, which was to foster his fame in several Renaissance philosophical milieus. An important collection of alchemical manuscripts, gathered in the sixteenth century in France (now Caprara collection in the Biblioteca Universitaria of Bologna) shows a specific Lullian interest, confirming the extent of alchemical interest among

French Lullists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Such episodes could easily be multiplied; on the whole, they fully confirm what Anthony Bonner has recently written, that during the Renaissance the Lullian *Ars* was considered as a general introduction to the occult sciences. Moreover, the undisputed fame of Llull as alchemist in the Renaissance is clearly the background for the firm belief in the authenticity of "Llull's" alchemical books defended by Ivo Salzinger, who issued the monumental eighteenth century collection of *Raimundi Lulli Opera omnia* and advocated Lullian alchemy against the scholars Sollier and Custurer. However, they seem to have been eventually successful, as Salzinger never published the planned alchemical volumes.

On the other side, the fame of Llull in Hermetic circles was longlasting: all the most important printed collections of alchemical writings, since the 1540s to the *Bibliotheca chemica curiosa* issued by Jean Jacques Manget in 1702, contain a "Lullian" section, and Hermetic writers continued (and still continue) to extol Llull's name, following an unbroken tradition condensed by Dom Pernety in a single sentence of his *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique* (1787): "Ramon Llull, Hermetic philosopher of the most wise and subtle, whose reading is specially recommended, as he eminently penetrated all the secrets of Nature." ■