



# THE ROSICRUCIANS

THE HISTORY, MYTHOLOGY AND RITUALS OF AN OCCULT ORDER

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## THE ESOTERIC TRADITION IN GERMANY

Europe is with child and will bring forth a strong child, who shall stand in need of a great godfather's gift.' So reads one of the prophetic utterances in the Fama Fraternitatis. And if Europe was to bring forth a child there was no doubt that Germany was to be the womb, for in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Germany was the great focal point in Europe of messianic and **millenialist** ideas. German thinkers had taken up the esoteric tradition revived by Italian scholars and had created a German esotericism of special force, building on German mystical roots that had existed before the Italian influence was felt.

If we look at Wolfram von Eschenbach's great Arthurian poem *Parzival*, written in the 1190s, we find a number of

features that are startlingly reminiscent of the story presented in the Rosicrucian manifestos over 400 years later. The brotherhood of knights described in the story, who guard the Holy Grail, live in a castle called Munsalvaesche, whose whereabouts are secret. This Grail brotherhood trains men and women for the service of mankind. The men go forth incognito, the women openly. The knights themselves are celibate, apart from the Grail King, who has the right to marry a woman chosen by God. The Grail which they guard is described by Wolfram as a 'tone' left on earth by a host of angels, whose wondrous properties include the capacity to heal and rejuvenate.

Here the altruistic and idealistic brotherhood, with its celibate knights, its secret abode and its incognito male emissaries, is paralleled by the Rosicrucian brotherhood described in the *Fama* and *Confessio*. And the description of the Grail as a stone reminds us of the passage in the *Chemical Wedding* which says: 'At that time the Virgin declared to us that we were Knights of the Golden Stone.'

Another point of similarity is in the many astrological references that exist in *Parzival* and in *the Chemical Wedding*. Flegetanis, the original author of the Grail story according to Wolfram, is said to have 'seen with his own eyes in the constellations things he was shy to talk about, hidden mysteries. He said there was a thing called the Grail whose name he had read clearly in the constellations.' Later Cundrie, the sorceress, says to Parzival: 'Whatever the planets' orbits bound, upon whatever their light is shed, that is destined as your goal to reach and achieve.' Similarly, in the *Chemical Wedding* there are many references to planets and signs of the Zodiac.

There is also a further striking parallel. Wolfram relates how, after the Grail had been taken away by maidens, Parzival gazed after them and saw, before they closed the door behind them, on a couch in an outer room, the most beautiful old man he had ever beheld. I say it and do not exaggerate - he was greyer even than mist.' This is Titirel, the founder of the brotherhood, who remains in a kind of eternal mystical state between life and death, but able to communicate with the knights. In a similar way, the body of Christian Rosenkreuz, when found by his followers in the vault, was 'whole and unconsumed'. This idea of a monarch or leader who is not dead but asleep and will one day awake is a familiar one. It was applied not only to King Arthur but also to such historical figures as Charlemagne and Frederick Barbarossa. In Rosicrucian legend it is the Brotherhood which reawakes, while its founder, although ostensibly dead, remains undecayed as a symbol of his undecaying influence through his followers.

Another ingredient in the fertile German soil from which Rosicrucianism sprang was the work of a number of great contemplative mystics. One of the most outstanding of these was Meister (Johannes) Eckhart (c.1260-1327), a member of the Dominican order who, in his writings and sermons, taught a mystical pantheism which caused him to be arraigned for heresy. Two years after his death his works were condemned by Pope John XXII, but they continued to exercise an influence on later religious mysticism and speculative philosophy.

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The sailors are shown a scroll signed with a stamp of cherubim's wings, not spread, but hanging downwards, and by them a cross' - like the seal which appears at the end of the *Fama* with the motto 'Under the Shadow of Jehova's Wings'. They are also visited by an official wearing a white turban 'with a small red cross at the top'. Puzzled by the New Atlanteans' knowledge of the outside world, they are told that travellers are periodically sent out from New Atlantis to mingle incognito with the inhabitants of the countries they visited - another echo from the *Fama*.

As Frances Yates points out in her chapter on Bacon in *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, it is clear from these similarities that Bacon knew and made use of *the Fama* and *Confessio*. But Bacon's connection with the Rosicrucians has been exaggerated to extraordinary proportions by certain people. F.W.C. Wigston, for example, in his *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians* (1888) and other works, claims not only that Bacon was the author of Shakespeare's plays but that the plays themselves are full of coded Rosicrucian messages and hints that Bacon was the real author. The words 'Banged hog', for example, are interpreted by Wigston as a code for 'Bacon'. It has even been suggested by Bacon enthusiasts that Bacon and Andreae, the author of the *Chemical Wedding*, were one and the same person. Bacon, it is held, did not die when catching cold on Highgate Hill, but subsequently went to Germany and began to write under the name of Andreae. Although engravings of Bacon and Andreae show a certain similarity it is difficult to square this theory with the fact that if it were true Bacon would have been 133 years old when he died - a remarkable

age, even if he had possessed the Rosicrucian elixir of life.

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The processes for making the elixir from blood and urine are lengthy and complex. The instructions for using sweat, however, are simpler, the essence of them being as follows:

*"Take some sweat and pound it with some gold leaf in a mortar until it turns black. Put it in a glass vessel and leave it to settle. It will turn a variety of colours ending a blood-red. Leave it for a month to putrefy, then distill in a retort. When you have distilled five grams you will have a substance with which you can perform great wonders."*

The Golden and Rosy Cross must be seen against the background of the general resurgence of alchemy in the eighteenth century, which presents a very interesting phenomenon. Many of the nobility practiced or patronized alchemy.

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Another alchemist active at this period was the mysterious Comte de Saint Germain, who became so much of a legend that it is difficult to disentangle fact from fiction in the reports of his life. After travelling around Europe under a number of pseudonyms including the Marquis de Montferrat, Chevalier Schoening, Comte Soltikoff and Graf Tzarogy - he ended up as a permanent guest at the castle of the Landgraf Karl von Hessen-Kassel, where he died in about 1780. He was reputed to have possessed an elixir which had kept him alive for 400 years, and when he was in Dresden his coachman was asked if this were true. The coachman replied that he did not know exactly, but in the 130 years he had been in his master's service the count always looked as he did now. Not surprisingly, the Comte has been claimed as a Rosicrucian adept. In Austria the craze for alchemy became a positive epidemic, and at one time there are said to have been 10,000 alchemists in Vienna who carried out their activities regardless of a policy of persecution against them approved by Maria Theresa. Ironically, the empress's husband Francis (made emperor in 1745) was himself a zealous alchemist and had a laboratory installed in the royal palace. Some interesting information about alchemy in Vienna is given in Gustav Brabbe's *Sub Rosa* - (Vienna, 1879), based on manuscripts in his grandfather's legacy. Writing from a hostile point of view, he states:

*During the years 1782 and 1783 there existed an alchemical society in Vienna which gave itself the pompous name of the Bigh, wise, noble and excellent Knights of the Shooting Star'. Their assemblies took place two or three times a week, especially on cold, clear nights in late autumn, in the extensive grounds of an estate near Vienna belonging to a count, and were always surrounded by secrecy. The Grand Master of this society is said to have been a much renowned and brave general of his time, who stood in high favour with the Emperor. Armed servants guarded the entrances and exits during the sessions, and allowed no one to pass who could not give the password. Well mounted brethren often went off separately for entire nights, covering a wide area looking for the fallen shooting star. They would bring their booty back to their impatient companions who would place it in a round vessel and keep it there until it turned to gold. (quoted by Frick, p. 353.)*

This 'fallen shooting star' referred to the morning dew which was believed to come from the perspiration of the stars and was thought to contain the 'vital fluid' which was also present in bodily secretions.

The question we must now ask is: what were the alchemists, and in particular the Rosicrucian alchemists, trying to do? To answer this we must first understand what alchemy is.

Of all the ancient sciences, alchemy has perhaps been the most abused and misunderstood. The popular conception of the alchemist is someone preoccupied with vain attempts to turn lead or other base metals into gold. But behind the

metallurgical strivings of the alchemist lay a highly complex view of man and the universe which is still valid today, though it stems from a tradition foreign to orthodox science.

The basic premise of alchemy is embodied in the saying: 'As above, so below'. In other words, man and the natural world are reflections of a pattern in the divine world - 'God made man in his own image.' Man, it is held, belongs to both the material and the divine world since he contains a spark of the universal spirit which at his original fall became imprisoned in matter. He also has an individual soul and a material body. In alchemical terms the body, soul and spirit correspond to salt, sulphur and mercury which also represent three universal forces, the Trinity of Christian terminology and the three Gunas of the Hindus. By freeing his spirit from the bonds of matter man can once again glimpse his lost divine perfection. In this belief the alchemists belonged to an ancient Gnostic tradition, outlined in Chapter One, which was suppressed by the early Christian church but survived in the Hermetic currents which ran underground through European thought and occasionally, as in the Renaissance, flourished more openly.

This ability of man to be redeemed and perfected is shared by the world of nature, and the state of perfection is symbolized by gold. The striving of the alchemist to turn other metals into gold is therefore an attempt not at transformation but essentially at improvement.

God, according to the alchemist, has deliberately placed at man's disposal the spiritual and material means by which perfection can be achieved. These include not only the secret of transmuting metals but also ways of combating disease and mortality - evils which are, after all, only symptoms of man's state of fall. Hence there is an inner alchemy concerned with perfection of the soul and an outer, complementary, alchemy concerned with perfection of matter and the body.

The alchemist realizes that in order to overcome subservience to matter man must understand how matter works and master its processes. The three universal forces, he holds, operate through seven channels represented in the heavens by the seven planets and on earth by the seven basic metals. Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn correspond respectively to gold, silver, mercury, copper, iron, tin and lead. The world of matter itself is divided into four elements: Fire, Earth, Air and Water.

An essential ingredient in the alchemical process was the Philosopher's Stone, the substance without which the turning to gold could not take place. The Stone was also the elixir of life which could cure disease and ensure longevity. The alchemical texts mention this substance in veiled terms. It is said to be a stone and not a stone, to exist everywhere in nature but despised or ignored, to be unknown and yet known to everyone.

The process of transformation entailed reduction to a *matn'a prima*, or 'first matter', a basic substance freed of its inessential characteristics. This substance had the capacity to 'grow' into gold or other metals when 'impregnated' by a universal 'vital fluid' corresponding to the Hindu concept of Prana, the breath that animates the universe. This 'vital fluid' was attracted by certain salts in the body and elsewhere. These salts are present in the bodily secretions, and if the secretions are distilled the prana-bearing essence can be extracted. It was this thinking that lay behind the formulae for making the

The use by alchemists of semen and other bodily substances is confirmed by another passage in Gustav Brabbée's book where he describes in horrified terms a group who worked on the principle that the human body is the best retort for producing the elixir. One way in which the group attempted to produce the elixir was by hiring a number of men and women who, in return for a sum of money, were required to eat and drink their fill of the finest food and wine after which their bodily waste was treated for extraction of the elixir. In the procuring of semen for similar purposes they were aided by one of their members who was an army officer. In exchange for cash this man obtained the desired substance from the men under his command. This went on until the men became so weak that the regimental doctor was called in and the cause was revealed by one of the men. Farcical though these activities may seem, they were a perfectly logical extension of the premises on which the alchemists were operating.

It is clear that the Rosicrucians of the eighteenth century had a deep understanding of both the inner and the outer alchemy, as a scrutiny of their works shows. One of the most interesting of these is *Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer* (The Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians) published at Altona in 1785. One of the illustrations in this work is a circular medallion on which are three shields chained together and bearing an eagle, a star and a lion; there

are also two globes representing the earth and the heavens, an orb, two arms emerging from clouds at the sides of the medallion and symbols of the seven planets, the Sun and Moon pouring two streams of liquid into a cup. An accompanying poem explains that the eagle, the lion and the star represent respectively salt, sulphur and mercury, as well as body, soul and spirit; the orb is a symbol of the highest good, and the two hands represent reason and knowledge. The remaining symbols are self-explanatory. Part of the poem reads:

*This is the meaning Of the Art:*

*The body gives form and constancy.*

*The soul colours and tinges*

*The spirit gives fluidity and penetrates.*

*Therefore the Art cannot consist*

*Of one of these three things only.*

*Nor can the greatest secret exist*

*Unless it has body, soul and spirit.*

This image and the accompanying explanation express clearly the dual aspect of alchemy. But in addition to the inner and the outer alchemy which I have described there is also a third type of alchemy, which is still practised in the orient. Here the 'vital fluid' upon which the alchemist works is the sexual force itself as distinct from the physical secretions, and the descriptions of heating the furnace, distillation and so on symbolize ways of manipulating the generative current. This type of alchemy is clearly described in Lu K'uan Yu's book *Taoist Yoga* (Rider, 1970). One quotation, from Chapter Four, will summe to bring out the striking similarity between Taoist and European alchemy:

*The body, heart and thought are called 'three families'... The three elements (or factors) can be controlled and returned to the one source only in the condition of serene voidness. When the heart is empty of externals spirit and nature unite; and when the body is still, the generative force and passions are extinct. When thought is reduced to the state of serenity, the three factors mingle into one. When passion and nature unite this is called the union of the elements of metal (chin) and wood (mu). When the generative force and spirit unite this is called the mingling of the elements of water and fire. When thought is stabilised, this is the fulness of the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire and earth).*

The three factors referred to here seem to correspond to the salt, sulphur and mercury of Western alchemy, and the 'condition of serene voidness' is surely the reduction to *materia prima*. The reference to the mingling of water and fire is particularly striking as in European alchemical illustrations this union is sometimes shown in allegorical form. Given a sexual interpretation, many of the European alchemical texts seem to make sense. For example, in the *Secret Symbols* occurs the following passage:

*When I had left the little garden and had arrived at the place where I should assist the maidens, I noticed that instead of the walls there stood a low wattled fence, and a most beautiful maiden bedecked in white satin, with a most splendid youth, went past the rose-garden, one leading the other by the arm and carrying many fragrant roses in their hands. I spoke to them and asked them: How did they come over the fence? She said: My dearest bridegroom helped me over it, and we art now going out of this lovely garden into our chamber to enjoy our friendship.*

This could be interpreted as meaning that the rose of perfection can only be plucked when mastery of the sexual force has been attained.

Whether any Europeans practised anything akin to Taoist alchemy is difficult to establish, but it seems unlikely that the tradition of sexual alchemy was completely unknown in the West. If anything of the kind did exist in Europe it would

account for the extreme care with which alchemical secrets were guarded from the profane - for the use of sex in this way would have been regarded with almost universal abhorrence in Europe until very recent times.

Very often we find a sexual dimension to Rosicrucianism. The Comte de Gabalis speaks of 'marriage' with elemental spirits. Elias Ashmole and Thomas Vaughan appear to have used sex in a magical way, and later Paschal Beverly Randolph was to do the same. All this leads to the conclusion that there was a sexual strain in Rosicrucianism which was stumbled upon by some, though not all, of its practitioners. At what precise point this strain entered Rosicrucian tradition it is difficult to say, but it may have been there from the very beginning. I shall be returning to this theme later. Meanwhile we must look at the masonic phase of the Rosicrucian story.

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The legend of the Templar origins of Rosicrucians was dropped, and the Bible was given a more central place in the teachings. Furthermore the organization itself was tightened. Henceforth the individual branches were known as circles and were allowed to have not more than nine members, headed by a Director. A second constitutional reform of the order took place in 1777. The system of grades and rituals used by the order in the period is recorded in a document dating from 1767 and reproduced in Rosenkrantz, by I.A. Fessler. To qualify for admission, a candidate had to have passed through the first three grades of orthodox masonry, entered apprentice, fellow craft and master, which the Rosicrucians claimed were merely a preliminary to higher knowledge. The history of the order is described as follows by the author of the 1767 document:

*Although the ancient fathers and wise masters have met together ever since the beginning of the world and separated themselves from the profane masses, it was only in the time of Moses that the order laid down a rule of the highest secrecy in Egypt and in the wastes of Arabia. During and after the Babylonian captivity the brotherhood was established in Syria. And in the time of Solomon the classification or division was established. In the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries the whole brotherhood was reformed and finally given its present constitution. But, in order that the Chiefs might better conceal their aims and more easily ascertain men's eagerness for knowledge, the three lowest grades of freemasonry were established as a nursery to the higher sciences.*

There follows a description of the nine Rosicrucian grades, designated according to the following Cabalistic enumeration:

19 Junior 28 Theoreticus 37 Practificus 46 Philosophus 55 Minor 64 Major 73 Adeptus Exemptus 82 Magister 91 Majus.

This, to my knowledge, is the earliest published reference to these nine grades. They were later described in *The Rosicrucian Revealed* by Magister Pianco (i.e. Hans Heinrich von Ecker und Eckhoffen), published in 1781.

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The chief then reveals to him the sign and gesture of the grade and its word, which is 'Chaos', and explains the significance of the symbols on the carpet. The planets, he points out, were created as an instrument for the four elemental powers to send their influence to the earth and bring about the creation of the seven metals. The flaming star represents Nature, the breath of God, the Universal and Central Fire which enlivens, sustains and destroys all things. The two circles divided perpendicularly and horizontally signify respectively the active or male and the passive or female principles in the universe. The unhewn stone is the base matter of the philosophers. The square and compasses signify proportion, weight and mass in nature. The three candles represent the lights of reason, nature and revelation. The four corners of the carpet symbolizes the four elements. The seven-branched candlestick stands for the seven gifts of wisdom that every brother must ask from God. The globe in the middle denotes the true lodge, which the philosophers establish with diligence and work in the very centre.

This concludes the main part of the proceedings, and the lodge is then formally closed.

As the initiate rose upwards through the grades of the order he was required to make a diligent study of alchemy and to read the works of such authors as Basil Valentine, Arnold de Villanova and Raymond Lully. He was also given manuscripts containing alchemical formulas which he was obliged to carry out at his own expense and on the results of which he had to report. One of these manuscripts was *Thesaurus Thesaurorum a Fraternitate Rosae et Aureae Crucis*, which I mentioned in the previous chapter. When the member was sufficiently versed in the theory of alchemy he was allowed to take part in practical experiment, an activity that was not without its dangers, for two members of the Berlin circle were killed working with dangerous chemicals during laboratory work.

The aim of the society, according to this document, is, among other things: to make effective the hidden forces of nature, to release nature's light which has become deeply buried beneath the dress resulting from the curse, and thereby to light within every brother . . .

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. . . 5th I do hereby declare that I intend with the permission of God to commence the Great Work with mine own hands, as soon as circumstances, health, opportunity and time will permit - 1st that I may do good therewith as a faithful steward - 2nd that I may merit the continued confidence which the society has placed in me in quality of a member apprentice.

. . . 6th I do further most solemnly promise that (should I accomplish the Great Work) I will not abuse the great power entrusted to me by appearing great or exalted or seeking to appear in a public character in the world by hunting after vain titles of nobility and vain glory, which are all fleeting and vain; but will endeavour to live a sober and orderly life as becomes every Christian. Though not possessed of so great a temporal blessing I will devote a considerable part of my abundance ... to works of private charity, to aged and deeply afflicted people, to poor children and above all to such as love God and act uprightly and I will avoid encouraging laziness and the profession of public beggars.

7th I will communicate every new or useful discovery relating to our work to the nearest member of our society

8th I do moreover solemnly promise ... that I will not on the one hand assist, aid or support with gold or with silver any government, king or sovereign whatever except by paying taxes, nor on the other hand, any populace or particular set of men to enable them to revolt against the government...

9th I will neither build churches, chapels nor hospitals and such public charities as there are already a sufficient number of such public buildings and institutions if they were only properly applied ...

10th I hereby promise that I will never be ungrateful to the worthy friend and brother who initiated me ...

11th Should I . . . meet with any person that may call himself a Brother of the Rosy Cross I will examine him whether he can give me a **proper explanation of the Universal Fire of Nature and of our magnet for attracting and magnifying the same under the form of a salt** - and whether he is well acquainted with our work? and whether he knows **the universal dissolvent and its use?**

12th If it should please God to permit me to accomplish our great work with my own hands I will give praise and thanks to God in humble prayer and devote my time to the doing and promoting all the good that lies in my power and to the pursuit of true and useful knowledge.

13th I hereby solemnly promise that I will not encourage wickedness and debauchery thereby offending God by administering the medicine for the human body nor the **aurum potable** to a patient or patients infected with the venereal disease.

14th I do promise that I will never give the **fermented metallic medicine** for transmutation to any person living no not a single grain unless the person is an initiated and received member of the Rosy Cross.