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“An art/That Nature makes”: The Alchemical Conception of Art and Nature in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*

Abstract I: Questo saggio si propone di discutere il ruolo di arte e natura in uno degli ultimi drammi di Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, alla luce della simbologia alchemica rinascimentale. Partendo dal celebre dibattito tra Perdita e Polissene, dal quale sembra emergere una visione del rapporto tra arte e natura riconducibile alle teorie alchemiche note all’epoca, la discussione includerà anche il significato del tempo e dell’acqua. Presentando un mondo in cui “cose che muoiono” sono la fonte di “cose appena nate”, il *romance* shakespeariano sembra seguire le tappe dell’*opus alchymicum*, noto come *solve et coagula*, ovvero ‘distruggere’ per ‘ricreare’.

Abstract II: The aim of this paper is to discuss the conception of art and nature expounded by Shakespeare in *The Winter’s Tale* in the light of Renaissance alchemical imagery and language. Moving from the debate between Perdita and Polixenes – a dialogue in which the two characters present a vision of the relationship of art and nature that is highly evocative of the alchemical notions widespread at the time – the discussion will also include the significance of time and water. Displaying a world in which “things dying” are the source of “things newborn”, *The Winter’s Tale* seems to follow the alchemical pattern known as *solve et coagula*, i.e. ‘destroy’ in order to ‘re-create’.

“Good goddess Nature”

It has been argued that “the grand Shakespearean theme”, particularly developed in the so-called ‘last plays’, or ‘romances’, is “the sanctification of Nature and the natural” (Power & Loughnane 2013: 243). Given that this is a key topic that recurs throughout Shakespeare’s canon, *The Winter’s Tale* is the drama that most significantly celebrates the role of “good goddess nature” (2.3.102). In the age in which the romances were composed and performed, there existed a specific kind of cultural mindset that conveyed a reverential attitude towards nature: the approach typical of alchemical and Hermetic philosophy. In the Prolegomena to the anthology of alchemical treatises entitled *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, Elias Ashmole, antiquarian and, later, alchemist under King Charles II, announces that he will disclose “the Language in which they [our Hermetique Philosophers] woo’d and courted Dame Nature” (Ashmole 1652). In view of the fact that in the late sixteenth century alchemical beliefs reached their utmost dissemination in both England and Europe, one is prompted to wonder whether the conception of art and nature expounded by Perdita and Polixenes in the fourth act of the play might have been influenced by the notions deriving from alchemical literature.

Although “it has not generally been considered in this context, alchemy was an important manifestation of the Renaissance debate on the relative powers of ‘art’ versus ‘nature’” (Linden 1996: 19). As a case in point, Roger Bacon’s *The Mirror of Alchemy*, whose first English translation from Latin was published in London in 1597, devotes a large section precisely to “a most excellent and learned discourse of the admirable force and efficacie of Art and Nature”. Taking into account that *The Mirror of Alchemy* was “an Elizabethan digest of basic alchemical theories” (Nicholl 1980: 25), the concepts developed in that treatise were undoubtedly familiar to Shakespeare and his public. In particular, alchemy fell within the discussions concerning the boundaries between the artistic and the natural spheres since it was conceived of by its adepts as a *ministra naturae*, a nurse, and a handmaid of nature (Tymme 1605), helping the latter in its effort to reach “a gradual attainment of perfection, and [...] approximation to the highest standard of purity and excellence” (Waite 1893: 8). The Swiss physician and alchemist known as Paracelsus, whose writings were widely circulating in late sixteenth-century England, amplified the significance of the ancillary role played by alchemy in bringing the products of nature to perfection: “She [nature] brings nothing to the light that is at once perfect in itself, but leaves it to be perfected by man. This method of perfection is called Alchemy” (Paracelsus 1894: 148). That Shakespeare and his audience were acquainted with Paracelsian beliefs is attested by the comedy *All’s Well That Ends Well*, in which the Swiss-born alchemist is explicitly mentioned, along with Galen, thus alluding to the ongoing dispute between Paracelsians and Galenists. The ideas fostered by Paracelsus on both alchemy and medicine “were widely disseminated in single-text and collected editions and translations that began to appear about 1570” (Linden 2003: 151). Shakespeare, in particular, might have been in contact with the theories of Paracelsus also via his son-in-law, doctor John Hall, a renowned physician in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Hall was among the “most successful practitioners” who, despite the disapproval of the Royal College of Physicians, employed the new Paracelsian chemical remedies (Iyengar 2011: 247).

In his dialogue with Perdita, the legitimate daughter of the king of Sicily, Leontes, the king of Bohemia Polixenes discusses the ‘perfecting’ of nature by means of human art and exclaims that “Nature is made better by no mean / But Nature makes that mean” (4.4.89-90), thus enigmatically suggesting that this kind of art that improves nature is itself ‘natural’. It should be recalled that when *The Winter’s Tale* was staged, alchemy was usually defined as “the true and sublime Art of Nature herself” (Paracelsus 1894: vol. 2, 167). To best illustrate the conflation of the artistic and of the natural dimensions at the core of alchemical theory, it is worth recalling the treatise *Splendor Solis*, published in 1582 and attributed to Solomon Trismosin, an adept of Paracelsus:

Nature serves Art with matter, and Art serves Nature with suitable Instruments and method convenient for Nature to produce such new forms; and although the before mentioned Stone can only be brought to its proper form by Art, yet the form is from Nature (Trismosin 1582: 18).

The above-quoted words seem to bear a certain relevance to the lines spoken by Polixenes in his endeavour to persuade Perdita, who refuses every form of artistic intrusion

into the realm of “great creating Nature” (4.4.88). According to the king of Bohemia, there exists an art that does not violate or surpass nature but, rather, mends it, by reproducing its mechanisms: “This is an art / Which does mend nature – change it rather – but / The Art itself is Nature” (4.4.95-97). If alchemy is “a method of perfection”, an art that has been created to lead nature to its “highest standard of purity and excellence”, then one can read Polixenes’s lines as an allusion to the alchemical conception of the relationship between the artistic and the natural world, alchemy being precisely “Nature co-operating in a wonderful manner by a witty Art” (Philalethes 1669: 4).

Focusing on the mutual correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, the world of man and the world of nature, Polixenes concludes that “over that art, / Which you say adds to Nature, is *an art / That Nature makes*” (4.4.90-92, my italics). Again, I believe that the conceptual apparatus related to alchemical philosophy might be useful to throw light on the words pronounced by the king of Bohemia. An excerpt from the celebrated treatise *Pretiosa margarita novella*, by the Italian alchemist and physician Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, illustrates the widespread notion that alchemy is a perfect synthesis of art and nature:

The substance of Alchemy – though called by a perplexing variety of names – is the substance of Nature, and the first substance of metals, from which Nature herself evolves them. Were it otherwise, it would be impossible for Art to imitate Nature (Bonus 1963: 117).

Arguing that “the substance of Alchemy [...] is the substance of Nature” Bonus clearly equates alchemical art with nature. And indeed alchemical authors maintain that their art is a microcosmic reproduction of the metamorphoses performed by nature, i.e., the transmutation of metals occurring within the womb of Mother Earth and the constant alternation of the seasons, in a never-ending cycle of death and rebirth: in Polixenes’s words, alchemy is “an art / That Nature makes” (4.4.91-92). The Elizabethan alchemist Edward Kelly, among others, affirms that the *opus alchymicum* is a reflection of the marvellous palingenesis displayed in the natural world: “That the aspiration of our Art is no Utopian dream, is proved by the innumerable and stupendous metamorphoses which Nature daily exhibits on every side” (Kelly 1893: 60). Shakespeare himself, in Sonnet 33, praises the alchemical virtues of the sun that, “Kissing with golden face the meadows green” and “Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy” (33: 3-4), accomplishes daily transmutations. Taking into consideration that the *opus alchymicum* is a process “in which Art assists Nature and Nature assists Art” (Kelly 1893: 127), Polixenes’s lines about an art that cooperates with nature might have been highly reminiscent of alchemical concepts. A plate belonging to a sixteenth-century manuscript collected in the Rylands University Library, in Manchester, showing a lady representing ‘Nature-Alchemy’, testifies to the close connection between art and nature that characterizes alchemical imagery: with her feet resting on some alchemical tools and her head made of thriving boughs, the lady symbolizes the perfect accord between nature’s and alchemy’s objectives.

In order to exemplify the process by means of which art fosters the natural tendency to attain its highest degree of completion, Polixenes alludes to the practice of grafting, which was at the centre of lively debates at the time:

You see, sweet maid, we marry A gentler scion to the wildest stock, And make conceive a bark of baser kind By bud of nobler race (4.4.92-95).

It is worth pointing out that alchemists most frequently refer to grafting as a proper metaphor for their attempts to 'mend' nature, as attested by the following passage from Basilius Valentinus's *Twelve Keys*: "When a tree is found to bear sour and unwholesome fruit, its branches must be cut off, and scions of better trees grafted upon it. The new branches thereupon become organically united to the trunk" (Waite 1893: 160). Alchemy, as well as horticulture, represents a way to place art at the service of nature, providing the latter with suitable instruments to produce new forms. The alchemist, in fact, is like a gardener: "We [the alchemists] help the metals to arrive at maturity, just as a gardener may assist fruit, which by some accident is prevented from ripening, or as a seed or grain of corn may easily be multiplied by being sown in the ground" (Waite 1893: 56). Perdita, however, whose garden is devoid of any kind of "streaked gillyvors" (4.4.82), which she defines as "Nature's bastards" (4.4.83), protests about the existence of a kind of "art which in their piedness shares / With great creating Nature" (4.4.87-88). Although the girl's reference is primarily to grafting, it should be recalled that in the same years alchemy, regarded as "The Art of Arts, the science of sciences" (Bonus 1894: 138-139), was conceived of as the discipline that, more than others, attempted to rival nature. In this respect, it should be recalled that in the masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (1616), Ben Jonson satirizes what he considers to be the alchemists' propensity to act "against the excellence of the sun and Nature" (l. 139).

Perdita's and Polixenes's use of horticultural metaphors can equally be related to alchemical beliefs. Since "the Garden is the Vessell or Glasse" (Ashmole 1652: 467) where transmutation occurs, the 'philosopher's stone' is often described as a 'flower' that blossoms thanks to the cares of the alchemist-gardener. Paracelsus actually remarks that "the matter of the stone shews most beautiful colours in the production of its flowers" (Paracelsus 1894: vol. 1, 18). Colours assume a peculiar significance in alchemical imagery because, by indicating the three main phases of the process, namely *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo*, they guide the alchemist throughout the *opus alchymicum*, as suggested, among others, by Kelly: "These colours the Sages have used as a kind of cynosure to steer their course throughout Nature, and especially in the investigation of the secret Medicine" (Kelly 1893: 68). To black, white, and red, a larger range of shades is added and the 'peacock's tail', or *cauda pavonis*, specifically represents the moment preceding the albedo. Considering the centrality of colours in alchemical language, Perdita's reference to a sort of art that "in their piedness" competes "With great creating Nature" (4.4.87-88, my italics), where "piedness" means "variety of colour", might be seen as another indirect allusion to alchemy, the art that aimed at imitating and, according to its detractors, surpassing nature. The considerations presented so far do not imply that the conception of art and nature developed in *The Winter's Tale* rests exclusively on alchemical notions but, rather, that Shakespeare's audience might have interpreted the debate *also* in the light of the alchemical background of the time. Acknowledging the relevance of alchemy to the dialogue between Perdita and the king of Bohemia, Linden observes that alchemists "might well have gone on to agree

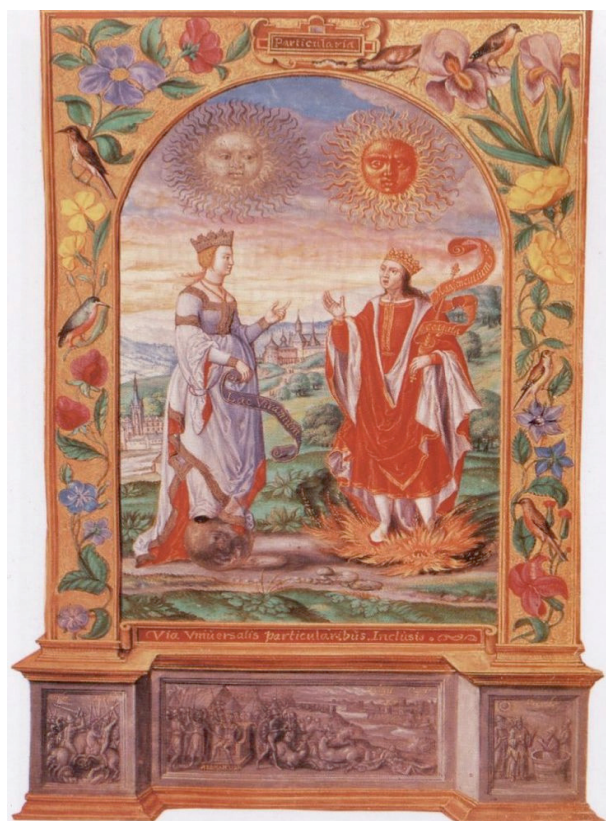


Fig. 1. *Splendor solis*. © British Library Board (Harley 3469)

with Polixenes that the very means by which man ‘improves’ Nature result from the operations of God and Nature” (Linden 2003: 12).

Wilson Knight defines the debate between Perdita and Polixenes as a “microcosm” of the entire play (Knight 1965: 105), since it presents some of the central issues of the drama. When discussing the union of a “bark of baser kind / By bud of nobler race” (4.4.94-95), for instance, Polixenes is metaphorically alluding to the reconciliation of contraries, a concept that is at the basis of the events in the romance and one of the most important principles of alchemical theory. The alchemist has to transcend the dualism of the Fallen world, by achieving the so-called *coniunctio oppositorum*, and “accomplish the miracles of one thing” (Linden 2003: 28), as one can read in the first principle of the *tabula smaragdina*, the sacred text of alchemists along with the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In alchemical treatises the conjunction of opposites, the crucial operation in the course of the *opus alchymicum*, is usually represented as a ‘chemical wedding’

between a king and a queen (Fig. 1), first separated and finally reunited, according to the phases of the *solue et coagula*. Interestingly enough, *The Winter’s Tale* is built upon a series of dichotomies such as art and nature, death and life, winter and spring, tragedy and comedy, male and female, youth and old age, Sicily and Bohemia, and it evidently longs for the fusion of contraries, both from a structural and thematic point of view. The romance is actually closed by the *coniunctio* between Leontes and Hermione, the king and the queen of Sicily, reconciled after a “wide gap of time” during which they were “dissevered” (5.3.154-155), thus recalling the allegory of the ‘chemical wedding’, a kind of imagery that was well known owing to the wide diffusion of alchemical iconography. Since the chemical marriage symbolizes the agreement of all divisions, one can infer that the conflation of art and nature coveted by Polixenes in the fourth act of the play is symbolically accomplished at the end of the drama, when life is restored thanks to Paulina’s healing art and harmony is recovered at all levels. As will be discussed below, *The Winter’s Tale* seems to be structured as an alchemical, circular, journey of death and rebirth, division and reunion, in which nature, as much as time and water, performs a key role.

Time and Water

The alchemical adept is constantly prompted to revere nature and follow her footsteps, since “upon such is based and founded the Art of the Philosopher’s Stone; for it originates

in Nature, thence follows a natural end in a just form, through just and natural means” (Trismosin 1582: 16). The *opus alchymicum* is usually associated with the work of the farmer, who organizes his activities following the natural cycle of decay and renewal, in the same way as alchemists describe the time of their operations in terms of the alternation of the seasons:

As to the (length of) time required for the preparation, you must begin it in the winter [...] and extract the moisture until the spring, when all things become green, and when our substance, too, should exhibit a variety of colors. In the summer the substance should be reduced to powder by means of a powerful fire. The autumn, the season of ripeness, should witness its maturity, or final redness (Waite 1893: 131).

Time is so important in alchemical imagery that in a Renaissance alchemical allegory entitled *Bloomfields Blossoms*, Father Tyme leads the adept into the “Campe of Philosophy”, another metaphor for the ‘garden’ in which the ‘stone’, or ‘flower’, grows: “I am, said he, Tyme, The Producer of all thing; / Awake and rise, prepaire thy selfe quickly / My intent is to bring thee to the Campe of Philosophy” (Ashmole 1652: 305).

In *The Winter’s Tale* Time plays a central role: it appears on stage as a real character, as Father Time, at the beginning of the fourth act. In the same way as Time in *Bloomfields Blossoms* guides the reader to the “Campe of Philosophy”, where there are “Bloomes and Blossomes plentifully [...] flourishing [...] with Collour gay” (Ashmole 1652: 305), Time in *The Winter’s Tale* leads the audience to “th’ freshest things now reigning” (4.1.13), in “fair Bohemia” (4.1.21), after sixteen years have passed from when Perdita was abandoned by her father, King Leontes. Functioning as a Chorus, Time warns the audience that he will turn his hourglass, leaving the wintry and death-like world of Sicily and introducing the spring-like world of Bohemia:

It is in my power
To o’erthrow law, and in one self-born hour
To plant and o’erwhelm custom (4.1.7-9).
[...]
I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing
As you had slept between (4.1.16-17).

This inversion evidently corresponds to the passage from winter, in which the first half of the drama is set and that, in alchemical imagery, denotes the beginning of the *opus alchymicum*, to spring: it indicates a transition from death to new life. However, before allowing the coming regeneration, the wheel of Time, as the alchemical wheel, also known as *rota alchemica*, has first to be turned backwards. The alchemist George Ripley, in his *Compound of Alchymie*, tells his reader that: “Thys done, go backward, turnyng thy wheele again” (Ashmole 1652: 133). One of the epithets of the *opus alchymicum* is actually *opus contra naturam*, since alchemical rebirth occurs only if matter is dissolved and brought back to formless chaos or to the so-called *prima materia*, the original stuff of Creation. In *Bloomfields*



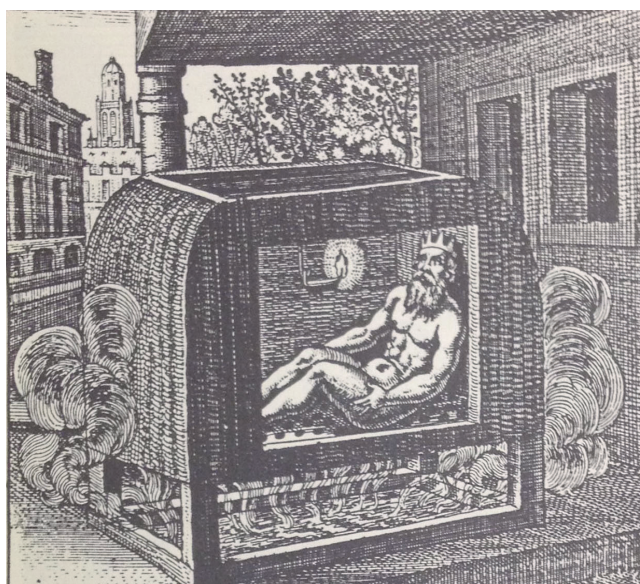
Fig. 2. *Splendor solis*. © British Library Board (Harley 3469)



Fig. 3. *Splendor solis*. © British Library Board (Harley 3469)

Blossoms the alchemist learns that “Chaos is all thing / That we begin of, the true way of working” (Ashmole 1652: 317). As a matter of fact, alchemists believe that it is necessary to destroy in order to re-create, following a paradoxical and retrograde movement, as clearly suggested by Paracelsus for whom: “dissolution is a kind of retrogression. Whatever things Nature has gradually formed by composition, those things you ought to be able to dissolve by a reverse process” (Paracelsus 1894: 154).

Somehow following the pattern of the *solve et coagula*, *The Winter's Tale* is organized as an alchemical journey of ‘re-creation’: the movement towards death and chaos at the end of the first half of the drama is followed by an ‘ascent’ or an “anastrophe”, that is to say a reversal and a counter-movement leading to the final regeneration (Frye 1965: 73). Leontes himself, the king of Sicily, employs the term “recreation”, that focuses on the idea which echoes the notion of ‘re-making’ and ‘creating anew’, when he acknowledges his faults and decides to repent, in the third act, thus paving the way to his imminent ‘rebirth’: “Tears shed there shall be my *recreation*” (3.3.236-237, my italics). Interestingly enough, numerous alchemical writings of the time employ precisely the trope of the ‘death’ and ‘rebirth’ of the ‘chemical king’, or *rex chymicus*, as a metaphor for the alchemical process of transmutation

Fig. 4. *Atalanta fugiens* (embl. 28)Fig. 5. *Atalanta fugiens* (embl. 31)

(Fig. 2). The parable of the king is intended as an allegory of “alchemical soteriology” (Gabriele 1986: 31): denoting the golden, ‘royal’, state hidden within physical matter and the divine nature of the human soul, the chemical king stands for a condition of inner and outer perfection that is released only when he is healed from his ‘sickness’, as much as metals are cleansed of their corruption.

The healing process the ‘chemical king’ experiences is usually depicted as a passage through water: as an immersion into a cleansing bath or in the sea (Figg. 3, 4, and 5) or as a *regressus ad uterum*, an image that further dwells on the idea of going back to the origins:

Into his Virgin-Mothers Wombe,
 Againe he enter must;
 Soe shall the King by his new-byrth,
 Be ten times stronger just (Ashmole 1652: 343).

Water is fundamental in the alchemical journey of transformation, since, alchemists argue, “unless there be a dissolution into water, our work cannot be brought to a successful issue” (Waite 1893: 129). The purifying power of water is usually represented in the shape of tears, rain, dew, sea or flood, and signals the phase of ‘ablution’, when “the blackness of the nigredo is washed and purified into the whiteness of the albedo” (Abraham 1998: 1). Leontes’s ‘tears’ are a harbinger of his purgatorial journey, that will last sixteen years and that begins only after the king acknowledges his inner ‘blackness’. Referring to lord Camillo, Leontes exclaims: “How he glisters / Through my rust! And how his piety / Does my deeds make the blacker!” (3.2.167-169). The king of Sicily realizes that Camillo’s goodness glistens to his ‘black’ self as gold does if compared to a rusty metal, “rust” being a term employed

by alchemists to indicate the infection of the metal before purification (Abraham 1998: 175). Rather than being a negative sign, the appearance of the colour black during the *opus alchymicum* is regarded by alchemical philosophers as the key of the work and as a prelude to the phase of *albedo*. In a paradoxical way, alchemical writers argue that it is only “by the Gate of Blacknes thou must cum in / To lyght of Paradyce” (Ashmole 1652: 150). As far as the symbolical cleansing of the *rex chymicus* is concerned, it is worth mentioning the parable of King Duenech, a text of Arabic origin that is the source of emblem XXVIII in Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens* (Fig. 4). The parable recounts the story of a king who suffers from melancholy, or “black bile”, of which he is cured by the physician Pharut: “The latter [Pharut] promises him [Duenech] health and has a steam-bath prepared, / Herein he bathes and bathes again, under the glass arch, / Till, by the wet dew, he is freed from all bile” (De Jong 1969: 206). As King Duenech is healed from his ‘blackness’ by means of dew, tears usually function as the alchemical water that cleanses ‘black’ matter of its corruption, thus regenerating and reviving it: “‘Tears’ are literally the drops of moisture that condense at the top of the still and rain down upon the blackened body lying at the bottom of the alembic, cleansing it of its impurities” (Healy 2011: 76).

In the light of the alchemical belief in the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, the healing process the chemical king undergoes is usually reflected in the restoration of his own realm, as expected from the first principle of the *tabula smaragdina*: “That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above” (Linden 2003: 28). In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes’s inner re-creation is mirrored in the re-creation of the outer world: immediately after the king announces his ‘dissolution’ into tears and, therefore, the beginning of his cleansing journey, the scene shifts to the coast of Bohemia, where Perdita is abandoned by Lord Antigonus at Leontes’ behest. When the ship arrives to Bohemia, one of the mariners exclaims, “We have landed in ill time. The skies look grimly / And threaten present blusters” (3.2.3-4), thus prompting the audience to see that Leontes’s disease is reflected in the illness of the cosmos. In fact, a storm hits the ship on which lord Antigonus has arrived with the newborn girl, later called Perdita. The death of the lord, devoured by a bear in a “savage clamour” (3.3.55), precedes that of the mariners, who die in the shipwreck, so that the ‘old’ world is destroyed by the “birth-and-death-bringing sea storm” (Sokol 1994: 118) that, conversely, saves Perdita, symbol of renewed life. That the scene of the shipwreck might have appeared to Shakespeare’s audiences as a clear image of primordial chaos is suggested by the emblem “Sine iustitia, confusio”, collected in Geoffrey Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes*. The emblem, based on the one by the French Barthélemy Aneau, represents order out of chaos. In the epigram accompanying Aneau’s illustration, chaos is described in the following terms: “If with earth heaven should mingle and the sea with heaven, / Into ancient chaos at last all things would be confounded” (Green 1870: 449). These words recall the lines pronounced by the Clown, after witnessing the dreadful death of the mariners: “I have seen two such sights, by sea and by land! But I am not to say it is a sea, for it is now the sky; betwixt the firmament and it you cannot thrust a bodkin’s point” (3.3.81-84). *The Winter’s Tale* clearly displays “a world dissolving into chaos” (Frye 2011: 8) before being regenerated, in the same way as, in the course of the *opus alchymicum*, the retrograde movement towards total dissolution

is followed by a rebirth. The water of the shipwreck destroys the old order of things and reinstates a regenerated dimension, namely the reborn world of Bohemia, where Perdita, seemingly 'lost', has "grown in grace / Equal with wondering" (4.1.24-25), thus allowing the regenerative part of the drama to begin.

Alchemical 'rebirth', or 're-creation', is always preceded by a return to the source of life, to original chaos, whence true creation occurs (Fabricius 1976: 17). Believing in the necessity to 'destroy' before 're-creating', alchemists describe their 'mercurial water' as 'the water which killeth and reviveth [...] the water which dissolveth and congealeth' (Abraham 1998: 126). The destroying and preserving power of alchemical water is explicitly highlighted by George Ripley: "Thys water ys lyke [...] Poyson most stronge [...] But no man shall be by hyt intoxycate, / After the tyme yt ys into Medycyne Elevate" (Ashmole 1652: 141). Since 'mercurial' water kills in order to revive, alchemists also employ the Biblical parable of Noah's flood: Ripley argues that matter should "passe the Waters of Noyes flud / [...] For in lykewyse shall follow the floryshyng of our Stone" (Ashmole 1652: 151). Noah's flood stands for the chaotic state of the *prima materia*, the so-called phase of *ablutio*, as shown in a plate from the seventeenth-century text *De Goude Leeuw*, or *The Golden Lion*, illustrating "the biblical waters of destruction and salvation inundating the alchemical laboratory" (Fabricius 1976: 19). In *The Winter's Tale*, water is equally deadly and healing at the same time, either as the tears that signal the death of Leontes's old self and the beginning of his regenerative journey or as the sea that kills the mariners and saves Perdita. Focusing on the connection between the loss of Antigonus and of the crew and the recovery of Perdita, between a world dying and a world that has been reborn, the Steward remarks that "all the / instruments which aided to expose the child were even / Then lost when it was found" (5.2.69-71, my italics). The dichotomous structure of *The Winter's Tale*, in which life and death, as much as tragedy and comedy, are conflated, recalls "the tragi-comic art of the *Magnum opus*" (Simonds 1998: 156), a process that is usually described as a descent into death and chaos and as an upward journey of renewal. As the alchemical *prima materia*, that represents the turning point of the opus alchymicum, so the scene that portrays the shipwreck in *The Winter's Tale*, occurring precisely in the middle of the play, is a "battle-ground of opposing forces" (Fabricius 1976: 17), a conflict that ends with the triumph of life over death: Perdita, whom everybody believes to be dead, is miraculously recovered and the play's journey of renewal begins. Considering that in alchemical imagery the retrieval of primal matter "denotes an act of creation and one of destruction, [...] a retrograde movement and a progressive movement" (Fabricius 1976: 23), one might read the scene of the storm in *The Winter's Tale*, in which "things dying" are the source of "things newborn" (3.3.110-111), in the light of the alchemical phase of *ablutio*, a stage of dissolution that, by means of water, leads to new life.

Initiatory rituals always presuppose the retrieving of the origins of Creation in order to reproduce, by means of a reversal of all values, the fusion of the contraries, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, and promote new life, thus recreating the primeval condition of the cosmos (Eliade 1989: 19). Eliade specifically refers to the Saturnalia, the ancient Roman celebrations organized in honour of the god Saturn and characterized by a suppression of

all sorts of rules and boundaries. In the light of Eliade's theories, the sheep-shearing festival in the fourth act of *The Winter's Tale* might appear as a sort of saturnalian rite, a phase in which everything is "preposterous" (5.2.145), reversed, with royal characters dressed like peasants and vice-versa, and with the younger generation attempting to supplant the old one, as in the case of Florizel's rebellion against the authority of his father, Polixenes. The Saturnalia rites were notoriously based on topsy-turviness, derived from the dualism inherent in the mythological figure of Saturn, the Roman version of the Greek Cronus, traditionally known as "the god of opposites" (Klibansky, Panofsky & Saxl 1964: 134). One of the elements on which the festivity rested was the contrast among generations, since, according to the myth, the Titan Saturn devoured all his children for fear that they would eventually dethrone him (Grimal 1990: 146-147). Besides being the god of harvest and seedtime, Saturn was also conceived of as a negative divinity, as suggested by the tools with which he is usually represented, the sickle and the scythe, instruments of both life and death. Moreover, since Plutarch's times at least Saturn came to be erroneously identified with the god of time, Chronos, thus inheriting the latter's negative features as the 'devourer of things', according to the ovidian formula *Tempus edax rerum*. Taking into account that the sheep-shearing scene immediately follows the speech of Father Time, who announces a 'reversal' and a movement towards rebirth, the identification of Perdita's festival with a saturnalian kind of ritual seems to be plausible. Time, until the fourth act a destroying and 'wintry' force, turns into a renewing one. Alchemists themselves employ the figure of Saturn to highlight the ambiguous features of the *opus alchymicum*, a cycle in which regeneration is achieved only by means of a retrograde movement of dissolution, in the same way as Father Time, or Saturn, destroys the 'old' to let the 'new' ripen (Abraham 1998: 178). In emblem XII from *Atalanta fugiens*, showing Saturn with a scythe, Maier observes that "He carries a scythe because, just as Time, he mows everything he produces" (De Jong 1969: 120). However, Maier also highlights the restorative virtues of Saturn-Time and employs the myth as a metaphor for the alchemical process of transmutation. As Saturn's children were finally restored to life, so the philosopher's stone, also known as 'philosophical child', is extracted from Saturn's belly, regeneration being inherent within the initial blackness of the *nigredo*: "For below the blackness the true whiteness is hidden and the latter is taken out, i.e. taken out of the small belly of Saturn" (De Jong 1969: 120). Perdita herself might be identified with 'the daughter of Time', reunited with her parents after "a wide gap of time" (5.3.154), and, at the same time, with the 'philosophical child', the product of the chemical wedding between the king and the queen, a stage that is achieved only at the end of the *opus alchymicum*, when the *rota alchemica*, as the wheel of time, has accomplished a complete rotation. Interestingly enough, Pernety lists the term "Saturnales" in his dictionary of alchemical and mythological imagery, noticing a relation between alchemical symbolism and the Saturnalia: "Ces fêtes étaient instituées en l'honneur de Saturne, d'où les Philosophes extraient leur mercure [...] pendant le temps du règne de Saturne, c'est-à-dire pendant le temps de la couleur noire où de la putréfaction" (Pernety 1972: 326). In the language of alchemists, Saturn represents the *prima materia* and, therefore, the deadly stage of *nigredo*, the state of dissolution and chaos that is paradoxically the source of the subsequent renewal.

Considering that “the prima materia appears as a clash between the progressive and regressive forces struggling in the *massa confusa* to build a new cosmos out of an old one” (Fabricius 1976: 23), *The Winter’s Tale*, by displaying a world “destroyed” and one “ransomed” (5.2.15), can be read as an alchemical, redemptive, journey of re-creation in which what is lost is finally recovered. Moreover, by presenting a world that can be mended thanks to the cooperation of nature and art, and by assigning such a prominent role to time and water, Shakespeare celebrates the natural, and obliquely alchemical, cycle of dissolution and renovation, in which life and death are closely connected. As the Shepherd tells the Clown in the third act, when the tragic half of the play ends and new life begins: “Thou met’st with things dying, I with things newborn” (3.3.110-111).

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