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Women Alchemists and the Paracelsian Context in France and England, 1560–1616

PENNY BAYER

Medicine and theology were accepted concerns of early modern noble and gentlewomen, and also arenas within which Paracelsian alchemy developed. It is therefore not surprising to find that some educated women engaged actively in Paracelsian alchemy in both its spiritual-philosophical and medicinal aspects, although the extent of this engagement is only beginning to be fully explored.¹ Debus first highlighted the Paracelsian debate in England and France, describing Paracelsianism as growing out of a fusion of medieval alchemical and neo-Platonic ideas into a renewed tradition in which nature became a vast chemical laboratory, investigable through an alchemy grounded in prayer, imagination, and faith.² Paracelsian ideas, in Paracelsus's own writings or the explications of others, were characterized by an occult interpretation of the universe, which newly emphasized chemistry in medicine, belief in observation of nature, reliance on hermetic, neo-Platonic, and neo-Pythagorean philosophy, and location of alchemy and chemistry within a wider universe of theology.³ Debus's research

¹ For context see Penny Bayer, "From Kitchen Hearth to Learned Paracelsianism," in *Mystical Metal of Gold*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (New York: AMS Press, 2007) 365–86. The Paracelsian dimension is not the primary focus of recent significant work on women alchemists in medical and scientific culture by Meredith Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), and Alisha Rankin, *Panacea's Daughters: Noblewomen as Healers in Early Modern Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

² Allen G. Debus, *The English Paracelsians* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1966) and Debus *The French Paracelsians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³ Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, 21, 22, 29.

focused on male public figures, mostly physicians who wrote or translated books.⁴ Subsequent scholars have identified a wide diffusion of Paracelsian ideas: for example, Charles Webster described adherents of alchemical medicine who commented on and popularized Paracelsian ideas across Protestant northern Europe, as evidenced through vernacular literature. Webster further demonstrated that in England by 1585 the works of Paracelsus and his followers were widely disseminated and studied by lay and medical practitioners.⁵ Educated women in France and England were part of that diffusion.

The evidence for women's involvement in alchemy with Paracelsian influences is found in two ways: first, alchemical manuscripts associated with women contain references to Paracelsus and books attributed to Paracelsus and Paracelsians; second, there is evidence of friendships and relationships between women alchemists and men previously identified as key professional Paracelsians in France and England. These case studies show the influence of Joseph du Chesne, whom Oswald Croll regarded as an honored friend and distinguished hermetic physician.⁶ They also indicate that in England and France some educated women moved in circles of men and women who read, wrote, and experimented with alchemy; accessed Paracelsian knowledge from other parts of Europe; knew about philosophical, technical, and metaphorical alchemy; and were considered expert practitioners. These case studies additionally show that intellectual professional Paracelsians were favorable to some educated women's participation, and gave some women access to alchemical knowledge and writings derived from other parts of Europe, including Italy, Prague, France, England, Denmark, and the Swiss cantons.

⁴ Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, 36, references continental Paracelsian physicians Petrus Severinus (1542–1602), Adam of Bodenstein (1528–1577), Gerard Dorn (fl. 1560–1580), Michael Toxites (1514–1581), Leonhard Thurneisser (1531–1596), Joseph Du Chesne (1544–1609), and Michael Neander (1529–1581).

⁵ Charles Webster, "Alchemical and Paracelsian Medicine," in *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Charles Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 301–33, 317, 330. See also William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶ Oswald Croll, *Philosophy Reformed and Improved in Four Profound Tractates*, trans. H. Pinnell (London: Lodowick Lloyd, 1657), 75.

French/Swiss Women Alchemists

The French/Swiss female alchemists considered here knew Joseph du Chesne (pseudonym Quercitanus or Oak Tree), the foremost proponent of chemical medicine and a key contributor to the Paracelsian debate in France. His protégé and friend, Theodore de Mayerne (1573–1655), who in 1618 was largely responsible for publication of the first chemical pharmacopoeia for the London College of Physicians, collected manuscripts by and about these women's alchemical practice.⁷ Both du Chesne and de Mayerne were Huguenots who experienced exile from France in the Swiss cantons and Germany, and both subsequently became royal physicians to Henri IV of France. De Mayerne also became chief physician to James I of England.⁸ Du Chesne's works include poetic cosmologies as well as advocacy for chemical medicines.⁹

Du Chesne's daughter, Jeanne du Port, married Pierre du Port, a Genevan magistrate, pre-1604,¹⁰ and an English manuscript translation of verses from German to English in the *Rosarium Philosophorum* is annotated "Mr de Chenis Quercitan's daughter."¹¹ Manuscripts now in Copenhagen, Oxford, Paris, Glasgow, and London are variously associated with Joseph du Chesne and Quercitan's daughter, Madame de la Martinville, la Docte Demoiselle de France and Neptis (meaning granddaughter or female descendant). Elsewhere I have argued that Quercitan's daughter (probably Jeanne du Port) and Madame de la Martinville (b.1555) knew each other; Didier Khan has determined the latter to be Louise Robot, wife of Charles le Fort. Khan considers her to be du Chesne's pupil and spiritual daughter.¹²

⁷ Debus, *The French Paracelsians*, 50, 51, 15.

⁸ Debus, *The French Paracelsians*, 8.

⁹ For his poetic account of creation see *Le Grand Miroir du Monde* (Lyon: B. Honorat, 1587). Other works include *Ad Iacobi Auberti Vindonis de ortu et causis metallorum contra chymicos explicationem* (Lyon: Apud Ioannem Lertotium, 1575); *De Priscorum Philosophorum verae medicinae* (S. Gervasii, 1603); *Ad Veritatem Hermeticae medicinae ex Hippocratis* (France: Abrahamum Saugrain, 1604).

¹⁰ Didier Khan, "Inceste, Assassinat, Persécutions et Alchimie en France et à Genève (1576–1596): Joseph du Chesne et Madame de Martinville," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 62 (2001): 227–59, here 256; Khan, *Towards a History of Joseph du Chesne's Manuscripts*, Ambix 60, no. 1, 25–30, here 26.

¹¹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS. 1459, Item III (1), 464–65.

¹² Bayer, "Madame de la Martinville, Quercitan's Daughter and the Philosopher's Stone: Manuscript Representations of Women Alchemists," in *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early*

Madame de la Martinville's personal alchemical practice (documented by manuscript references 1589–1610) is evidenced in two unpublished letters she wrote to Quercitanus which survive in manuscript: the *Epistola Nobilissime* (1609) and the *Discours Philosophical* (1610). She described a philosopher's craft of making a holy philosophical tincture, apparently enabling creation of both twenty-four carat gold and a healing tincture, in the tradition of the philosopher's stone. Typically, in terms of the Paracelsian diffusion, she explicitly referenced Paracelsus's use of antimony and his books *Archidoxes* and *De Vita Longa* alongside medieval sources such as Arnold Villa Nova's *Specule oculito* and extensive allegory.¹³ Theodore de Mayerne recorded methods from and approved by "M. Mlle," and the woman Neptis, whom his papers credit with technical medical receipts for illnesses in adults and children, where in a most down-to-earth manner, far from ideas of a holy philosophical tincture, she suggests that when children do not want to drink, one should give the medicine in their food, and if they do not want to eat, put it in syrup.¹⁴

Different versions of Quercitan's daughter's letters survive from circa 1600 to the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁵ All versions have two parts — theory and practice — and comprise an account of a woman alchemist carrying out experiments with the aim of creating the secret stone of the philosophers and changing other materials into philosophical *luna* and *sol* (gold and silver). This discourse uses ideas of a trinity of body, soul, and spirit and the scholastic notion of a vegetable soul, and does not include Paracelsian references; rather, it alludes to older sources such as the *Book of Morienus* and the *Turba Philosophorum*.¹⁶

Modern Culture, ed. Kathleen Long (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 165–90. Khan argues that Louise Robot, Madame de la Martinville, was also Neptis and Quercitan's spiritual daughter, and that du Chesne's grandson may have been the transcriber.

¹³ *Discours philosophal de Mademoiselle de la Martinville*, Paris, Bibliotheque Mazarine MS 3691 (2679), 77–81. Paracelsus's *Archidoxes* was first published in Krakow, 1569, with numerous subsequent editions. *De Vita Longa* was included in *Archidoxorum* (Basle, 1570). A version of Villa Nova's *Speculum* was published in Frankfurt in 1602.

¹⁴ *Epistola Neptis*, London, British Library MS Sloane 693, 194–96, with textual references to dates 1580–1625. The word "receipt" is used in this paper to mean a medicine, or formula for gold-making, made according to a recipe.

¹⁵ Bayer, "Madame de la Martinville," 166–89.

¹⁶ *Quercitan's Daughter's Letters*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1440, 62, 65. The *Book of Morienus*, was translated from Arabic to Latin in 1182, and it was published in Latin in 1559. The *Turba Philosophorum*, estimated to date from ca. 900, was published in Latin in 1572.

Theodore de Mayerne's papers include a version of Quercitan's daughter's letters, from circa 1608, where the name Neptis is substituted for Quercitan's daughter, and the name Quercitanus is substituted with the Druid (another word for Oak Tree). This and other recipes attributed to Neptis and collected by de Mayerne sit alongside explicit Paracelsian references: an "[o]e[u]vre excellent pour la triade de Paracelse" and elsewhere a marginal note "[o]pus Guilielmi patris paracelsi,"¹⁷ as well as reference to the Druid's book *de Priscorum Philosophorum*.¹⁸ De Mayerne's papers refer to Neptis's letter, observations, and procedures.¹⁹ Other elements in these papers suggest a circle of women (Neptis, Druida, and Haligraphia) and men (The Old Genevan, Trogny, M de la Vallee, and Camilles) in France and Geneva taking on pseudonyms as part of their mutual endeavors in alchemy and exchanging information.²⁰

The copying of these manuscripts indicates a willingness to record these women's names, although this changed by the later seventeenth century when annotations attempted to discredit female authorship. Joseph du Chesne did the opposite, seeking to clear Madame de la Martinville's name during a court case where she was accused of incest.²¹ His relationships with women were marked by humanism: his wife, Anne Trye (fl. 1566), was granddaughter of the preeminent humanist Guillaume Budé, who worked collaboratively with his wife Roberte le Lyeur (1488–1540) on classical authors, mathematics, natural sciences, and philosophy.²² It is noteworthy that the idea of alchemical cooperation, friendship, and sympathy between male and female is found in Du Chesne's writings. There is a suggestion of a happily married man when he describes the hermaphroditical nature as a conjunction of male and female in terms of "mutual friendship and sympathetic joined in one."²³ A similar sentiment is found in Quercitan's daughter's letters where the soul is described entering the body by means of the spirit "uniting them so kindly and friendly together" in one body.²⁴

¹⁷ *Epistola Neptis*, London, British Library, MS Sloane 693, 145, 147, 149.

¹⁸ Joseph du Chesne, *Liber de Priscorum Philosophorum verae medicinae materia* (S. Gervasii, 1603).

¹⁹ *Epistola Neptis*, 150, 151, 152, 156, 194, 22, 134.

²⁰ *Epistola Neptis*, 134, 156–71.

²¹ Khan, "Inceste."

²² Family tree at <https://gw.geneanet.org/pierfit?lang=fr&p=anne&n=trie>

²³ Quercitanus, *The Practise of Chymicall and Hermeticall Physicke*, trans. Thomas Tymme (London: Thomas Creede, 1605; rpt. London: Theatrum Orbis, 1975), 2; sig. C.

²⁴ *Quercitan's Daughter's Letters*, 81

The women around du Chesne benefited from education including knowledge of Paracelsus's writings, and from sympathetic, protective attitudes to their inclusion in alchemy. Certainly these women's alchemical work was recorded and collected, and the diffusion of manuscript copies of their letters (now in Copenhagen, Paris, Oxford, Glasgow, and London) suggests that records of their alchemical experiments were passed around northern Europe.

English Women Alchemists

Turning to the English context, Lady Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland (1560–1616), grew up amidst Protestants with continental connections. Her much loved father, Lord Francis Russell, was one of four leading English Protestant Marian exiles who travelled extensively in Italy and the Swiss cantons, where he met Protestant theologians and other exiles. Immediately on his return to England under Queen Elizabeth in 1558 he was the dedicatee of the English translation of the popular *Secrets of Alessio Piemontese*, which includes a section on alchemy and metallurgy.²⁵ His youngest daughter, Margaret, was educated to read widely in the English language: her daughter, Lady Anne Clifford, recorded that her mother knew no other languages. As J. P. Gilson notes, “[T]here were few books of worth translated in the English language but she read them.”²⁶

As an adult, Lady Margaret knew Paracelsians, and part of the alchemical manuscript named after her (*The Margaret Manuscript*) has many Paracelsian references. The evidence for her alchemical practice comes from several sources. The Clifford Great Picture, painted for Margaret's daughter Lady Anne, shows Lady Margaret with her family: this much studied picture has “a hand written book of alchumiste abstractions of distillation and excellent medicines” behind Lady Margaret along with the Psalms and a book of Stoic philosophy — and in her hand the Bible.²⁷ Lady Anne wrote a separate account referring to her mother's love of practical and studious alchemy, and a letter from Lord Willoughby

²⁵ Franklin B. Williams, *Index of Dedications and Commendatory Verses* (London: The Bibliographic Society, 1962), 161; see also Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 146.

²⁶ J. P. Gilson, *Lives of Lady Anne Clifford Countess of Dorset, Pembroke and Montgomery (1590–1676) and her Parents Summarised by Herself* (London: The Roxburghe Club, 1916), 19–20.

²⁷ *Inscriptions on the Great Picture at Appleby Castle*, Kendal, Cumbria Record Office: Hoth. MS JAC 332.

described her expertise in alchemical experiments.²⁸ Finally, an alchemical manuscript, *The Margaret Manuscript*, was attributed to her in the nineteenth century when it was discovered at Skipton Castle where she had lived.²⁹ In the wider context of alchemy, she both invested in mining and received numerous literary dedications using alchemical metaphors that endorsed her spiritual purity and virtue.³⁰ Edmund Spenser, for example, dedicated the *Fowre Hymns* to her, using the imagery of the infusion of the Holy Spirit as celestial dew falling from heaven to earth, and the image of female Sapience in her secret heavenly treasury of riches within her chaste bower.³¹

The English translator of Joseph du Chesne's *The Practice of Chymicall & Hermeticall Physicke* (1605) was not a doctor, but a vicar, who also translated John Dee's *Monas* (1620). While previous Paracelsian works in England had offered receipts, Tymme made the important step of introducing the Paracelsian cosmology into England by translating one of Du Chesne's most important theoretical works.³² He was also Lady Margaret's friend. When in July 1590 she chose Thomas Tymme to translate a devotional work — Dudley Fenner's *Sacred Divinitie* — he inscribed the manuscript "Your lovinge friend T.T.," suggesting a relationship beyond that purely of professional to patron. Tymme wrote that "Halchymie should have concurrence and antiquitie with Theologie," and Bruce Janacek argues that Tymme believed alchemy combined with theology were ways to prevent religious schism through unity.³³ Lady Margaret, well known for her piety and devotions, was a Protestant living among Catholics whose favorite aunt knew the Puritan separatist Robert Brown, who had to leave England for the Netherlands and whose followers later, from England and Leiden, were on the Mayflower to America in 1620.

²⁸ Gilson, "Lives of Lady Anne," Cumbria Record Office (Kendal) WD/Hoth/Box 44/4.

²⁹ *Receipts of Lady Margaret Clifford*, Kendal, Cumbrian Record Office, WD Hoth. MS 5.

³⁰ Bayer, "Women's Alchemical Literature 1560–1616 in Italy, France, the Swiss Cantons and England, and its Diffusion to 1660" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2003), 211–14, 219.

³¹ Enid Welsford, *Spenser, Four Hymns, Epithalamion: A Study of Edmund Spencer's Doctrine of Love* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 92.

³² Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, 87.

³³ Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, 88, cites the dedication of Tymme's translation of Du Chesne's *The Practice of Chymicall and Hermeticall Physicke, for the preservation of health*, (London: Thomas Creede, 1605). Bruce Janacek, "Thomas Tymme and Natural Philosophy," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 4, no. 30 (1999): 987–1007.

While the Great Picture shows the handwritten alchemical receipt book behind Lady Margaret, there is also extant a handwritten manuscript book of alchemical receipts catalogued as “Receipts of Lady Margaret, Countess of Cumberland” (referred to here as *The Margaret Manuscript*), which most probably belonged to Lady Margaret. Different sections were written or annotated in the 1590s or later, corresponding to the time when Lady Margaret practiced alchemy.³⁴ It has many Paracelsian references explicit or inferred — to work by Paracelsus and the Paracelsians Isaac Holland, Alexander Suchten, Blaise de Vignere, B.G. à Portu Aquitano, as well as a translation of Fioravanti. Christopher Taylour, whose initials and hand are evident on the two longer and more philosophical treatises, wrote in another manuscript addressed to an unnamed noble lady (and Lady Margaret is a good candidate) that his “Masters Master” was the Paracelsian Heinrich Khunrath, who lived in Germany and the Swiss Cantons. Furthermore, in this same work Taylour reassured the noble lady that alchemy is a spiritual practice, a sacrament and a form of consubstantiation.³⁵

The compiler of *The Margaret Manuscript* showed extensive knowledge of Paracelsian and medieval references, with frequent references to Paracelsus’s receipts, philosophy, books, and symbols by an author immersed in experimentation and familiar with many alchemical books. While the author has read Robert Tauladane’s “booke against Paracelsus” the latter’s books are strongly recommended: “his booke of vexations [will] helpe yo[u] well, observe him well, for he is very obscure,” “study and peruse well Paracelsus his Manuale And his Booke of the Compositione of metals,” and read “Paracelsus his Gradationes,” “his Cementis,” “his Archidoxis,” and “De Natura Rerum.”³⁶ The compiler has produced a “littell written booke w[hi]ch doth interpret and is a paraphrase philosophicall upon the said Book of Paracelsus his Vexationes the w[hi]ch will helpe you. . . well to the perfecte understanding of Paracelsus.”³⁷ The writer attempts to interpret Paracelsus for the reader: thus when Paracelsus refers to the “stomach of the

³⁴ Penny Bayer, “Lady Margaret Clifford’s Alchemical Receipt Book and the John Dee Circle,” *Ambix* 52, no. 3 (2005) 271–84.

³⁵ *To a Noble Lady*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1392 Item 1.

³⁶ *The Margaret Manuscript*, 51, 37, 44. Philippus Theophrastus Paracelsus, *The Coelum Philosophorum or Book of Vexationes: The Science and Nature of Alchemy*, trans. A. E. Waite, in *The Hermetical and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus* (London: James Elliott, 1894) 3–18. Tauladanus was published at Basle, 1561 in *Gratarolus, Alchemae, quam vocant*.

³⁷ *The Margaret Manuscript*, 43.

Estrich" he means to activate mercury with the spirit of antimony and mars.³⁸ The "Lili" is the "mercury vive of Gold," and the "Electrum" is the "pure body of Sol."³⁹ The writer states that by "strengthening the stomach of the Estrich by the virtue of the Eagle" Paracelsus meant vulgar mercury is animated with a golden quintessence called by some the spirit of vitriol.⁴⁰ There is also reference to Alexander Suchten's Paracelsian compendium and to the Paracelsian Doctor Neander who wrote to the author's brother.⁴¹

The Margaret Manuscript includes references to alchemical recipes collected or witnessed by Edward Dyer, Edward Kelly, his brother Thomas, and Lord Peregrine Willoughby.⁴² In 1582 Willoughby travelled to Denmark with Thomas Muffet (credited with introducing Paracelsianism into England), where he met the royal physician and Paracelsian Petrus Severinus.⁴³ Queen Elizabeth sent Willoughby as an older man to Prague with Edward Dyer to check on transmutation claims.⁴⁴ Willoughby also appears to have watched Lady Margaret perform alchemical experiments as he described her admiringly as a "noble philosophising lady," able to bring back dead metals to life, in the tradition of Hermes, Solomon, Ripley, and Kelley — implying she was a female magus.⁴⁵

Another contemporaneous probable example of an Englishwoman interested in Paracelsian ideas was Lady Mary Herbert (1561–1621), who created an intellectual center at Wilton that included an alchemical laboratory where she encouraged her protégée, the Paracelsian Thomas Mouffet.⁴⁶ The similarity of the circles in which Lady Herbert and Lady Clifford moved is suggested as

³⁸ *The Margaret Manuscript*, 60–61.

³⁹ *The Margaret Manuscript*, 126–27.

⁴⁰ *The Margaret Manuscript*, 127.

⁴¹ Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, 36. *The Margaret Manuscript*, 67, 34, 22–23, 64–67. B. G. Penotus Londrada a Portu Aquitanus, *A hundred and fourteene experiments and cures of the famous Phisition Paracelsus*, trans. John Hester (London: H. Middleton, 1583), refers to "ye worthy and godly man Michael Neander professor of humanitie" (47).

⁴² Bayer, "Lady Margaret Clifford's Alchemical Receipt Book," 276–77.

⁴³ Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Court Physician and Paracelsianism," in *Medicine at the Courts of Europe, 1500–1837*, ed. Vivian Nutton (London: Routledge, 1990), 79–94, 91. Arthur Dee to Mr Aldrich, Norwich, 15 December 1649, Northamptonshire Record Office, Isham Papers, IC 272.

⁴⁴ Trevor-Roper, "The Court Physician and Paracelsianism," 91.

⁴⁵ Kendal, Cumbria Record Office, WD/Hoth/Box 44/4.

⁴⁶ Webster, "Alchemical and Paracelsian Medicine," 306.

Mouffet's brother Peter dedicated a religious work to Lady Margaret Clifford and her sister.⁴⁷

Conclusion

These case studies describe women in families whose members experienced exile in Geneva, where Paracelsian ideas flourished. The alchemical practice of Madame de la Martinville and Quercitan's daughter became part of the flow of alchemical papers diffused across Europe. Madame de la Martinville's work is explicitly Paracelsian. Lady Margaret Clifford's manuscript includes receipts and Paracelsian references which draw on sources in England, France, Holland, Germany, and central Europe.

These women actively used, collected, and explored Paracelsian ideas, as well as learned from or acted as patrons to Paracelsian practitioners. They carried out alchemical experiments with chemical and spiritual-philosophical aspects and knew about Paracelsian writings. The particular cases identified could be called Du Chesnian as much as Paracelsian, although the case of Mouffet and Lady Herbert suggests a wider Paracelsian context. These women have an important place in the history of both medical chemistry and spiritual alchemy.

⁴⁷ *The Excellencie of the Myserie of Christ Jesu* (London: Thomas Orwin for Raphe Iackson and William Young, 1590).