Foreword

By Joscelyn Godwin

There is surely no subject as disconcerting to the rational mind as alchemy. Not only is the supposed transmutation of metals an insult to the empirical intelligence, but the writings of the alchemists seem calculated to tease and confuse, while their secretive arrogance does not inspire confidence in their pretended wisdom. More than any of the so-called occult sciences (astrology, Cabala, ceremonial magic, divination, etc.), alchemy evades definition. Being the science of correspondences between the different levels of being, it cannot be pinned down on any one level, least of all that of empirical experience and logical explanation. Like a serpent, or like the element of Mercury, alchemy slithers from the spiritual to the astral, from the etheric to the physical, and back again. Few indeed are those able to follow it in its peregrinations. In the most heroic attempt of modern times, C. G. Jung did his best to anchor it at the psychic level, but only at the expense of ignoring what most alchemists have been doing for two millenia and more: working in laboratories. Yet today's laboratory chemists are bound by a world view that has no room for intercourse between the levels of being—of which they acknowledge but one; thus, they can only regard alchemy as the distant, cranky ancestor of their own science.

If we are to understand why so many people have thought fit to spend their time and resources on the pursuit of alchemy—assuming that they were not much more foolish than ourselves—then there is a formidable amount of research to be done. Compared with subjects like the history of art, or of religion, that of alchemy has scarcely begun. What studies there have been tend to treat the influence of alchemy on something else, which is interesting and often surprising, but which does not bring one much closer to the Royal Art itself.

On first sight, Antoine Faivre's book on the Golden Fleece appears to be a scholarly study of one alchemical theme, treated historically.

This appearance is deceptive, however. Certainly his laboratory is that of the scholar, equipped with all the necessary apparatus: he is a Germanist by training, a veteran of the Eranos Conferences, and a Professor at the Sorbonne. But more than that, this is an example of someone actually working alchemically. Faivre takes as his First Matter the image of the Golden Fleece, and works on it with all the resources of erudition. The book itself is a voyage—an Argosy—through the Western imagination, led by a guide who points out the curious landmarks that betray the imprint of this particular myth. These tend to involve a link between the physical world and another level of being. For example, the collar of the fifteenth-century Order of the Golden Fleece consists of golden links joined by flintstones: the mineral in which the spark of fire lies latent. Can one imagine the frame of mind of whoever designed and approved such a curious and evidently magical combination? Elsewhere we learn of the power of sheep's wool to attract gold, filtering it out of aurific streams; but the German writer Fictuld suggests that it is rather a case of "astral gold," which in the springtime sign of the Ram enters the earth out of *Spiritus Mundi.* Others state that the fleece in question was a sheepskin parchment, containing the secrets of alchemy written in golden letters; or that the whole apparatus of Greek mythology existed solely to encode the secrets of the Royal Art.

Again, the sacrifice of the Ram or Lamb brings up a wealth of mythical imagery. In the "criobolium" ceremony of Antiquity, the initiate was literally bathed in its blood. whereas Christians are only figuratively "washed in the blood of the Lamb." There is a pervasive feeling that the blood, or, less repulsively to our taste, the hides of animals have some magical efficacy, varying according to the nature of the beast. The parchment that covers a shaman's drum is believed to incorporate the spirit of the sacrificed creature. Yogis are instructed to meditate seated on deer- or tiger-skins. Sufis wear only clothes of sheep's wool. And shamans, yogis, and Sufis all flourished in that region of Central Asia to which Colchis, on the Black Sea, is a doorway.

The myth of the Golden Fleece is the thread on which these and innumerable other images are strung. Erudition and scholarship are the controlling elements that prevent such a stringing from getting out of hand, as all too often occurs in the work of occultists. Yet the string is real enough, at least to the host of authors to which Faivre introduces us, who have been moved to fashion their works around this mythic image. Who sould ever have suspected that it was so much alive—that alchemy itself was so vigorous—in early eighteenth-century Germany? Only those who appreciate that *The Magic Flute, The Disciples of Sais,* or the second part of *Faust* are not adventitious growths, but rooted

firmly in the soil of the Germanic imagination. Again, how many Romance scholars realize the influence of alchemy on French culture? Only those who have happened to read the elegant but exasperating Fulcanelli and his disciple (or alter ego) Canseliet, whose wordplay and pseudoetymologies are central to the French tradition of esoteric entertainments, from Rabelais to Derrida.

Alchemy teaches us that the world is deeper than the daylight knowledge of reductionist thinking would like to make it. A scholarship limited to that kind of thinking is impotent when faced with the dusky ramifications of alchemical myth. Antoine Faivre shows that the road to mythical understanding lies through the Imagination. It must be emphasized that this Imagination (deliberately capitalized) is not the same as the "phantasy," a mental function often loosely identified with it. The Imagination is an organ of the mind that gives access, as the sense organs do, to a particular world of events and entities that take the form of images. These may or may not correspond to things seen in the external world; for instance, the Unicorn does not, nor does the Angel, unless we are Blake or Swedenborg. But they are real, not merely "imaginary." Those whose reality resides only in the external, physical world are welcome to the burden of explaining why people have lived or died for the sake of such images, and why Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe have given their best efforts to describing events in the world of the mythic Imagination. The extraordinary claim of alchemy is that the internal, mythic image and the external substance are in some way linked, so that transmutation may occur on both levels.

Faivre's exploration of the mythic images and events gathered in the Golden Fleece legend is controlled by the intellect, but not limited by it, any more than the meaning of a piece of music is limited to the mathematical relationships that control the notes. His work also shows that the study of an alchemical myth leads not merely to information, nor even just to knowledge, but, if one dare say so, to wisdom. With the publication this year of three of his books in English translation (the others are a study of the mythic figure of Hermes Trismegistus [Phanes Press] and a survey of the Western esoteric tradition [SUNY Press]), English language readers have a further opportunity to explore this vein of scholarship, which has been represented up to now mainly by Faivre's great predecessor at the Sorbonne, Henry Corbin.

It may be helpful if this Foreword concludes with an informal retelling of the myth in question. The many variants, subplots, and sources can be found in collections such as Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960). Here I will select only the names and incidents essential to the present book.

THE MYTH OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE

Athamas was king of Boeotia in Greece, and his queen was Nephele, a phantom-woman created by Zeus in the form of the goddess Hera. Their sons were Phrixos and Leucon, their daughter Helle. In time, Athamas fell in love with another woman, Ino, whose parents were Cadmus and Harmonia. Out of jealousy against her predecessor, Ino contrived to persuade Athamas that he must placate the gods by sacrificing his son Phrixos. Athamas duly took his children up to a mountaintop, but just as he was about to kill his son, Heracles and the Olympian gods intervened. Hermes sent down a golden, winged ram called Chrysomellos, which carried off Phrixos and Helle on its back. Helle fell off into the sea at what is now called the "Hellespont," but Phrixos survived to reach Colchis, on the eastern shores of the Black Sea. Obedient to the gods, he sacrificed the miraculous ram and hung up its golden fleece on an oak tree in the sacred grove of Ares, guarded by a fearful dragon. There he lived, married, and died in exile; but no one performed the proper funeral rites for him.

The ghost of Phrixos came back to Greece to haunt Pelias, king of Iolchus, who had usurped the throne from his half-brother Aeson. Pelias had killed nearly all his rivals, but Aeson's son Jason, whom he thought stillborn, had escaped him. Jason was reared by Cheiron the wise centaur, and grew up to confront his wicked uncle and reclaim his rightful throne. Pelias consented, on condition that Jason would first go to Colchis, fetch the Golden Fleece, and lay the ghost of Phrixos to rest, thus restoring prosperity to Iolchus.

Jason accepted the quest, and assembled a distinguished host to man his ship, the *Argo:* it included the demigods Heracles and Orpheus, Castor and Polydeuces the Dioscuri, Calais and Zetes, sons of the North Wind, and many other famous heroes. Athena provided a piece of oak from the grove of Zeus at Dodona that could talk and prophesy, and this was set in the prow.

The first call of the Argonauts was at Lemnos, where they found the city populated only by women. Apparently the Lemnian men had complained that their wives stank, for which the women murdered them. The Argonauts were only too pleased to oblige the lonely widows and provide them with heirs: Jason himself took Hypsipyle, the Lemnian queen, and begot Euneus, who grew up to become their king. It took Hercules's club to rouse the heroes from their beds and send them back to their oars. But Hercules himself abandoned the quest when he lost his young friend Hylas in the woods.

Among their many adventures as they headed towards the Bosphorus was the encounter with Phineus, son of Agenor. King Phineus was being plagued by harpies that stole and fouled his food, so that he was at the point of starving to death. Calais and Zetes drove off the monsters and earned Phineus's gratitude, for which he told the Argonauts how to negotiate the coming peril. This was the Symplegades, clashing rocks that guarded the Bosphorus and crushed any ship that attempted to pass. On Phineus's advice, the Argonauts first let fly a bird, whose tail-feathers were clipped by the rocks as she passed; then, as the rocks withdrew, the Argo was rowed through at top speed, and lost only her stern ornament. Once outwitted, the magical Sympegades remained forever impotent, and the way to the Black Sea open.

At last they came to Colchis, at the opposite end of the Black Sea beneath the Caucasus Mountains. The ruler was King Aeëtes, whose daughter had married the exiled Phrixos. Naturally he did not want to surrender the Fleece, but Hera and Athena, Jason's Olympian patrons, contrived to have the king's other daughter, Medea, fall in love with the hero. Medea was a sorceress, and she promised to help Jason faithfully so long as he would make her his wife. He in turn swore by the ~~the~~ Olympian gods that he would remain faithful to her forever.

Aeëtes now agreed to surrender the Golden Fleece on the absurd condition that Jason could yoke his fire-breathing bulls, plow a field with them, and sow it with serpent's teeth. But with Medea's help the bulls were tamed, and, just as had happened to Cadmus, the teeth sprouted into a host of warriors. Jason provoked them into fighting each other to the death. and his task was done. But Aeëtes did not keep his part of the bargain. It took Medea's cunning and cold blood—for she connived at the murder and dismemberment of her own half brother, Aspyrtus—for the Argonauts to escape Colchis with their prize.

Defiled with murder, Jason and Medea could not continue with the ship, but went ashore at the island of Circe to be purified of their crime. After they had rejoined the Argonauts, many adventures befell them before they returned home to Iolchus. Here they learned that Pelias had killed Jason's parents and their little son. Rather than stage an attack on the city, however, Jason and Medea resorted to trickery. She visited the court of Pelias in the guise of an old crone, and promised the aged king that she could make him young again. For proof, she herself resumed her youthful form. "How was it to be done?" asked Pelias. To demonstrate, Medea had an old ram cut into thirteen pieces and boiled in a cauldron; then, by a conjuring trick, she produced a young lamb. The king consented to the same treatment, which was dutifully carried out by his own daughters; and that was the end of him.

Jason dedicated the Golden Fleece in the temple of Laphystian

Zeus, then went with Medea to rule Corinth, where she had inherited the throne. Later, believing that she had secured the succession through murder, he proposed to divorce her and marry another woman, Glauce. The vengeful Medea sent an inflammable robe as a wedding-gift, which resulted in a fire that killed Glauce and everyone present, including King Creon of Thebes; Jason alone escaped. Nevertheless, the gods continued to favor Medea, whose glamorous career took her to Athens and Colchis before she attained immortality in Elysium. But Jason had forfeited their support when he broke his oath of fidelity, and was left to the life of a penniless wanderer. In old age he returned to Corinth, where the *Argo* was still beached, and sat beneath the prow of his old flagship. Thereupon the piece of oracular oak fell on his head and killed him. The *Argo* itself took its place among the stars, where it can still be seen.