Testing the New Historiography of Alchemy: the Case of Kenelm Digby

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Abstract

In the last two decades, a new framework for the study of alchemy, challenging the older Jungian views, has been taking shape by the efforts of two American historians of science, Lawrence Principe and William Newman. The present paper intends to test this new framework through a case study of a 17th century English natural philosopher named Kenelm Digby. In the light of my results, the new metanarrative of alchemy draws a false picture of the discipline, as alchemy was a complex philosophical system with its own religious and cultural connotations.

Keywords: Alchemy, Kenelm Digby, Scientific Revolution, New Historiography of Alchemy, Natural Philosophy

Introduction

By looking at the contemporary literature of the history of science, there now seems to be a revival of scholarly interest towards alchemy (e.g. Moran 2005; Newman 2004). One may ask why this newfound attention towards this long neglected field of study? Science, after all, is rational and ordered in contrast to alchemy which is irrational and disorderly.

There are numerous possible answers for this question. From the perspective of popular culture, the fashionable nature of the topic is obvious. From the perspective of the historian of science, the reason is practical: a meticulous

study of the social and cultural environment will yield a more detailed picture on science of earlier periods. But a more plausible reason for the revival of interest can be found in the successful linkage of some of the most prominent figures of early modern science to alchemy. The works of Dobbs and Westfall on Newton's alchemical experiments took the question of alchemy into serious consideration and did not sweep it aside as the youthful folly of the natural philosopher (cf.: Dobbs 1975; Dobbs 1991; Westfall 1983). In fact Dobbs even suggested that Newton might have used alchemy as a scientific explanatory tool, a way to understand nature better. Dobbs' work shed light on the importance of alchemy and as a result, scholars slowly started to reveal the alchemical dimensions of other great natural philosophers including Robert Boyle and John Locke (On the alchemy of Boyle see: Principe 1998).

The result of these new biographical studies showed that the study of the history of alchemy is not an option but a must as it is deeply intertwined with the formation of new scientific ideas. Finally, alchemy received the necessary scholarly recognition and the reinterpretation of early modern science has begun.

This shift in the scholarly approach, however, was not enough, as the study of alchemy still lacked a standardized research method, and a proper metanarrative. To solve this problem, Professors William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe started to form the theory that Principe has called the "New Historiography of Alchemy" (Principe 2004). This programme originally intended to provide a complex framework for the future case studies of alchemical authors (Principe & Newman 2001). Although they have received positive critiques from some leading authorities on the study of alchemy, such as Allen G. Debus or Nicholas Clulee, and their articles were published in important journals like *Isis* and *Ambix*, there were also some objections against certain aspects of their model, namely that it downplays the religious, spiritual and occult dimensions of alchemy. These will be meticulously described and discussed in the next chapter, as the very objective of this paper is to test the model presented by Principe and Newman.

To put the "new historiography of alchemy" to the test I intend to carry out a case study of a 17th century English natural philosopher/courtier/alchemist named Kenelm Digby (1603-1665), within the framework provided by Newman and Principe. With the contextualization of Digby in the intellectual environment of the 17th century and with the analysis of some of his alchemical works I have a twofold objective: to reconstruct Digby's worldview that could yield some insight into the shifting values in the era of the Scientific Revolution; and to illustrate the deficiencies of the Principe-Newman model of alchemy.

Choosing Digby as the subject of the case study is justified by numerous factors. First, he was a natural philosopher of major importance in his time. Secondly, he was an alchemist who made use of his alchemical readings in his scientific theories. Thirdly, he was a devout Catholic who tried to prove the tenets of his faith with the aforementioned explanatory tools. Religiosity, natural science and alchemical tradition created an organic unity in Digby's mind. The points I have mentioned above make Digby the ideal subject of my case study, as through his wide range of interests I can test the Newman-Principe model of alchemy.

After this brief overview, and justification of my research subject, my paper will start with the delineation of the main tenets of the Newman-Principe model of alchemy and its deficiencies.

1. The Principe Newman Thesis of Alchemy

Before we enter into the fields of Digby's alchemical interests, it would be necessary first to clarify what alchemy is. As it will be seen from my approach, 17th century alchemy – in my view – was a complex and always changing system of laboratory practice, philosophy and religion that among its various goals aimed at improving nature, perfecting the adept itself and also meant to provide explanations for natural phenomena.

After the scholarly recognition of Newton's alchemical pursuits, the research of alchemy received a strong impetus. Despite the renewed efforts in the research into alchemy, the terminology of the field was a bit hazy and the study of alchemy lacked a good theoretical framework. With the intention of solving this problem, William Newman and Lawrence Principe have made attempts in the last 20 years to standardize the study of alchemy. Their programme began when Newman in the 1980s discovered that the *Summa Perfectionis* written by pseudo-Geber in the 14th century already contained the germs of the corpuscular philosophy (cf.: Newman 2006). With his newfound discovery, he insisted on proving direct continuity between alchemy and chemistry.

In a joint article Principe and Newman revisited the theory of continuity from a different angle (Principe & Newman 1998). In the "Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographical Mistake" the American authors claimed that prior to the last two decades of the 17th century, efforts to differentiate alchemy from chemistry are wrong and presentist. "The eventual distancing" –they argue—"of alchemy from chemistry arose from an

etymological mistake" committed by some Paracelsian alchemists (Principe & Newman 1998, 64). The study of Principe and Newman has demonstrated with examples that it was only in the 18th century that transmutational alchemy was differentiated from chemistry.

Instead of making a distinction, Principe and Newman proposed the use of the archaically spelt "chymistry" to emphasize that the two disciplines were in fact one before the 1680s. It is true that 17th century authors of "chemical" texts used the traditional "alchemical" names to denominate different substances. The subject of my case study was no exception. Alchemists were not exclusively aiming at transmuting gold, some of them made their living by creating dyes or other practical chemicals.

But if someone thinks of Newton's letter of April 26th 1676 to Oldenburg, things are seen from a different perspective. In this letter Newton comments on Boyle's frivolity of giving away details of an important alchemical process and scorns him because it was "possibly an inlet of something more noble and not to be communicated without immense damage to the world if there be any verity in the hermetic writers" (Turnbull 1960, 515 in Rattansi 1972, 168). Taking into consideration that the *Philosophical Transactions* since its first volume (1661) published articles on biology, metallurgy and chemical experiments using the traditional alchemical notions, it is clear that there existed a huge difference between a secretive kind of chymistry and vulgar chymistry.

It will be shown later that the rise of mechanical philosophy irrefutably brought simpler methods of argumentation into chemical explanations, which soon became a distinctive factor between alchemy and chemistry. Thus the origin of the alchemy/chemistry dichotomy is not just an etymological problem but also a historical one.

By applying the term "chymistry" and by representing it as the direct ancestor of chemistry Principe and Newman aimed at showing that alchemy was mainly a technical activity at that time. By doing that they are presenting only one side of alchemy and they are trying to downplay its links with both the spiritual and occult traditions. They argue that alchemy received its strong spiritual dimension in the 19th century during the Victorian occultist revival, and that the alchemy of the 16th-17th century was much more practical. They criticised the Jungian understanding of alchemy, in which the alchemists were less concerned with the chemical reactions than with psychic states taking place within the practitioner (Principe & Newman 1998, 402). Jung's interpretation gives the definition for spiritual alchemy whose original goal is to better the alchemist itself. Newman and Principe are very right to dismiss those who see alchemy as solely spiritual discipline whose exclusive goal was to perfect the adept itself (Principe & Newman 2004, x.). It would be next to

useless to refute this statement as alchemy truly was not a monolithic entity. Even so it is hard to believe that any professional scholar of alchemy in 1998, the time of the study's publication, believed that alchemy was solely a spiritual endeavour. Therefore their statement seems somewhat unnecessary. And if the intention of Newman and Principe was to prove that spiritual alchemy as such was a marginal phenomenon, however, then they were mistaken.

Already in the 4th century Zosimos of Panoplis established a homology between the transformation of metals and the human operator (Newman 2004, 29-31). Among other proponents of the so called spiritual alchemy we can mention 14th century alchemist Petrus Bonus of Ferrara or the English John Dee from the 16th century (Szőnyi 1998, 207-217). Moreover, in the light of the newest findings it seems that Robert Boyle's alchemical quest was influenced by John Dee's spiritual alchemy and angelic magic (*Robert Boyle`s Dialogue on the Converse with Angels Aided by the Philosophers Stone* in Principe, 1998). Knowing these facts it seems fair to conclude that spiritual alchemy was anything but marginal throughout the last two millennia.

The last thing I want to touch upon is the religiosity of alchemy. Newman in his recent book titled *Promethean Ambitions* suggests that alchemy acquired its religious character only in the 14th century (Newman 2004, 83). In the 1320s Pope John XXII issued a condemnation of alchemy that labelled alchemists as simple counterfeiters. In Newman's opinion this was the main reason why the practitioners of the art started to cloak their discipline in religious language. There are three major problems with this concept. First we know several alchemists from the Middle Ages –the aforementioned Zosimos of Panoplis is one of them— who used overtly religious motifs in their writings. Secondly, Newman seriously underestimated the alchemists – it is hard to imagine that alchemists were stupid enough to risk the possibility of being labelled as heretic, by using religious phrases. And finally, the religious nature of alchemy was more than just a disguise, because, for instance, Digby's alchemical philosophical system was built around the fundaments of devout religiosity.

The initial criticism I unfolded in this part should serve to outline my approach in the next parts of my paper. After the necessary contextualization of Digby's life and his natural philosophy in the intellectual environment of the 17th century, I will move on to discuss Digby's alchemy in particular. In the subsequent parts will analyse Digby's works and will deliver my main criticism of the Principe-Newman thesis. Whereas I do not intend to reflect directly on their theory of continuity, I propose to carry out a more exhaustive analysis on their views concerning the dichotomy between alchemy and chemistry. In my view such dichotomy was already existent around the 1650s I will support my arguments with the analysis of Digby's work titled

Of the Sympathetic Powder. As Kenelm Digby was not a representative of spiritual alchemy in the strictest sense –although he seemed to understand the neoplatonic interpretation of alchemy (Szőnyi 1998, 265-273) – I wish to visit that issue only tangentially. On the other hand, I intend to discuss the question of alchemy's religious nature. My impression is that Digby's whole structure of scientific and alchemical endeavours was constructed around a solid fundament of Catholic faith. Therefore, in his case, religiosity as a disguise cannot come into mind as an option. To underpin my argument I will use Digby's work titled *The Vegetation of Plants*. The paper will conclude with the discussion of Digby's effect on posterity using a manuscript from the Ashmolean Collection in the Bodleian Library, which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been referred to before (Bodleian Library, Ashmolean Collection, 788, Fol. 185-7, "of the Powder of Sympathy" in a letter to "R.W. J.").

During my work I made extensive use of Betty Dobbs` articles on Kenelm Digby. Dobbs' three articles that were published in the *Ambix* journal give important information on Digby's natural philosophy and alchemy. Also these three will serve as the preliminary information upon which I will construct my own argument (Dobbs 1971; Dobbs 1973; Dobbs 1974). On Digby's alchemy and religiosity I consulted an article by Bruce Janacek (Janacek 2000). His findings helped me to develop my views concerning Digby's Catholicism.

2. Digby's Life and His Role in the Rise of Natural Sciences

Kenelm Digby was born in 1603. Son to Everard Digby, the executed catholic conspirator, he was raised to be a Catholic. Although he joined the Church of England in order to build his career, he remained loyal to his original Catholic faith. He studied at Gloucester Hall, Oxford under the guidance of Thomas Allen, a humanist with Roman Catholic sympathies (Foster 2004; on English Catholicism in Oxford see: Foster 1981). Digby was an exceptional student, Allen referred to him as the Mirandola of his Age (Dobbs 1973, 145).

After his university studies he made a grand tour around Europe. During his travels Digby developed a really colourful personality; he was equally welcome at courts, in laboratories and the meetings of learned societies on both sides of the English Channel (Dobbs 1971, 2). This sociability and excellent interpersonal skills were important qualities that previsioned the nature of his scientific career.

In 1633, after the death of his wife Venetia, Digby removed himself from social life, and as John Aubrey writes in his Brief Lives: "he retired into Gresham-colledge at London where he diverted himselfe with his Chymistry and the Professors` good conversation" (Foster 2004). While at Gresham College along with his alchemical experiments guided by the Hungarian alchemist János Bánfihunyadi, he looked at phenomena of lodestones, magnetism, reflection and refraction, also he made an enquiry into the circulatory system and he formed the basis for his later work, the *Two Treatises* (Foster 2004; on Bánfihunyadi see: Appleby 2004).

Although Gresham College was a good place to start his quest for knowledge, Paris was the capital of northern European culture and soon it became Digby's destination. There Gallican Roman Catholicism allowed scientist and natural philosophers to exchange ideas in freedom. Digby by this time had serious doubts about the validity of Anglican doctrines, and decided to convert to Catholicism. In 1635 he arrived in Paris and took up his residence near the University of Sorbonne and the royal chemistry laboratory.

During his time in Paris, Digby became associated with the so-called Newcastle Circle, a group of English mechanical philosophers composed of Thomas Hobbes, Charles Cavendish, William Cavendish and John Pell. The group hoped that by using the principles of natural philosophy, some universal truths on the nature of God could be clarified (Janacek 2000, 97).

At the same time along with the English exiles, Digby met virtually all of the most important proponents of the new mechanical philosophy like René Descartes (1596-1650), Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) and Marin Mersenne (1588-1648) and discussed its subtleties with them. Later, when he returned to England he remained in active correspondence with the French philosophers, an act that was to become highly profitable for the later Royal Society. Digby adopted the atomist and mechanical ideas of the aforementioned philosophers, but instead of using them to create a completely new philosophical system, he tried to integrate them into the Aristotelian framework.

In this sense Digby was a bit of an ancient-modern go-between: he always viewed mechanical philosophy as inferior to theology. This outlook is reflected in all of his works.

His diverse fields of study included astronomy, matter theory and biology. While he reflected on almost all problems that were current in his time, not many have ever suggested that he was an important thinker of the Scientific Revolution and it is not the intent here either. He was rather the man "who knew everyone and who took an interest in every advance" (Dobbs 1971, 2). The huge number of his acquaintances and correspondents served the Royal Society very well when Digby joined in 1660. This mediator role granted Digby the scholarly recognition. What he lacked in the study of natural sciences, he

made up for with extremely good reputation. His social recognition and of course his new views granted him that his works were widely read, even at the end of the 17th century by as prominent thinkers as Isaac Newton himself.

In the light of this account it can be concluded that Digby – although his works were not significant contributions to natural science - was as an important character of the Scientific Revolution who played an important role in shaping the intellectual life of the early 17th century. This argument legitimizes my research, as at that time Digby's works were considered as mainstream natural philosophy and not just a marginal anomaly.

3. Alchemy and Chemistry in the 17th Century and Digby's Alchemy

In the 17th century alchemy was a truly heterogeneous discipline. Although it is almost impossible to logically classify its different traditions, we should try to differentiate at least two different threads in alchemy. The original tradition, although it had its spiritual ramifications, was not the huge philosophical system as it was to become later. Pseudo-Roger Bacon's *Breve Breviarium* points out that all metals are made of the same elements, namely mercury and sulphur. The aim of the alchemist is mainly the transmutation of metals (Newman 2004, 67).

The overall picture of alchemy has changed, however, with the totalizing model of Paracelsus (1493-1541). He suggested that not just the metals, but the whole world was made of three principles: mercury, sulphur and salt (the *tria prima*). Paracelsus' theory was aiming at providing a total explanation for the world, and alchemy transformed into an entire philosophical system. He also emphasized the iatrochemical or medicine making dimension of alchemy. Under the influence of the paracelsian doctrine of the *tria prima*, whole chemical philosophies were formed, and alchemy started to gradually become an explanation for natural phenomena.

Almost a century before the establishment of the Royal Society, alchemical circles were formed around Europe with the intention of propagating alchemical knowledge. In England the so called Hartlib Circle was the most prominent, The Hartlib Circle worked almost like a scientific institution at that time, in a way it can be viewed as one of the forerunners of the Royal Society (Sheffield, HROnline, 2002). They collected everything that was in connection with alchemy and chemistry, clear and practical recipes for dyes or obscure descriptions for Philosopher's Stone were equally present

among the hand-copied archives of the group. The existence of groups such as Hartlib's was crucial as chemistry as a discipline was not taught officially at universities. In fact chemistry was not considered a science at all in the Aristotelian framework of sciences.

Although it was not part of the university curriculum it is very likely that Digby's alchemical endeavours can be attributed to some extent to his most favoured tutor Thomas Allen. Allen was a curious figure: he was known for his occult interests, and among his former pupils we can find Philip Sydney and Robert Fludd. Although there is not much known on his particular views on alchemy (unfortunately only a commentary on Ptolemaius survived), his paracelsian outlook could be deduced from his books that he bequeathed to Digby.

The true beginning of Digby's alchemical work, can be dated back to his stay at Gresham College. There Digby worked with the Transylvanian János Bánfihunyadi (Dobbs 1973, 148). It is fairly well known from Digby's letters and writings that Digby and Bánfihunyadi were mainly concerned with the paracelsian model of alchemy. As it was mentioned before, the alchemy of Paracelsus also tried to describe the world in its alchemical terms. Digby's oeuvre spectacularly exemplifies this.

Digby's self imposed exile in France was a serious turning point in his natural philosophy and alchemy alike. The mechanical philosophy he adapted from the French philosophers transformed his views fundamentally. Although he preserved the Catholic Aristotelian framework of his knowledge, he started to give mechanical explanations for natural and supernatural phenomena. Accordingly, Digby's alchemy became different from the original paracelsian one: it started to become a science. In the next two sections I will elucidate this through the example of Digby's *On the Sympathetic Powder,* and *On The Vegetation of Plant*s.

4. The Sympathetic Powder

Digby's sympathetic powder was just a variation of the popular paracelsian 16th-17th century weapon salve treatment for wounds. The weapon salve was a perfect example of the use of alchemy in the realm of pharmacy. In all treatments of the weapon-salve type, the medication was placed on the weapon or on an old bandage and the wound itself was simply washed. Considering the nature of other sixteenth and seventeenth century medications, cleaning the wound might have been more effective.

Digby's account of the use of the powder was almost similar, when he told his story to an assembly of doctors in Montpellier in 1658 (Digby 1669). Digby began with stating that he was a propagator of this medicine as far as the Western world was concerned. The powder became famous when it was used by Digby to cure the wound of James Howell by soaking an old bandage in a solution of this powder (op. cit., 150). Digby's powder met almost unanimous popularity and he was no less celebrated for it than William Harvey had been for his study on blood circulation (Gilman 1999, 265).

Digby's powder might be curious from the view of the contemporary reader to say the least, but it would not be fair to connect Digby entirely with the remnants of Renaissance natural magic: one has to see the huge stride Digby made to remove it from the realm of the occult.

Much of the received natural philosophy in the early seventeenth century, either Aristotelian or Renaissance Hermetic, discussed relationships, the causes of which were unknown. After the fact of the relationship between two things were established, the Aristotelian view provided casual explanation with "occult qualities", and the hermetic view with "hidden sympathies" –the two were practically the same (Dobbs 1971, 10). The reason for the relationship was not sought at all, as it was provided on experimental basis. Digby did not reject the fact of such relationships; he was just opposed to the explanatory strategies of Aristotelianism and Hermeticism. He vehemently objected to the use of the principles of sympathetic magic or occult qualities:

> They would have us take for ready mony some terms, which we understand not, nor know what they signifie. They would pay us with conveniences, with resemblances, with Sympathies, with Magnetical virtues, and such terms, without explicating what these terms mean (Digby 1669, 152).

Instead of resorting to occult qualities or hidden sympathies, Digby used the mechanical philosophy he acquired in France, to explain causal relationships. This was something that never had happened before, and in my view, transformed alchemy into something else.

In its original context the sympathetic powder acted through occult qualities and hidden sympathies, Digby on the other hand employed mechanical causes of matter and motion to explain its function. Digby's explanation was a carefully built logical construction based on the Cartesian Vortex theory that postulated that space was filled with matter and everything whirled around the Sun.

Digby constructed the following argument: first the Sun attracts and removes the blood atoms from the blood covered bandage, and the atoms

of the powder being incorporated in the blood are also leaving the bandage. Secondly, the heat of the inflamed wound attracts the blood atoms forcefully because the blood in the wound and the blood previously on the bandage are of the same nature. Thirdly the blood atoms mingled with the healing powder enters into the wound and the powder takes effect. The powder is working better at a distance because the blood atoms with the medicament are re-entering their natural beds (Digby 1669, 154).

From the preceding example it can be easily seen that Digby was attempting to explain a causal relationship in a way that was consonant with his mechanical universe. With this he managed to remove the paracelsian weapon-salve from the realm of the occult (Dobbs 1971, 13). Although Digby's theory was based on a non-existing phenomenon, no one could argue against the fact that with his explanation he was trying to rationalize alchemy. With the emergence of mechanistic philosophy in the realm of alchemy, a fundamental change started to take shape, which eventually transformed alchemy –or chymistry— into chemistry. Following this line of reasoning it seems fair to conclude that well before 1680, as Newman and Principe suggested, a large chasm started to open between alchemy and chemistry.

5. The Vegetation of Plants

Digby's paper, titled *A Discourse Concerning the Vegetation of Plants* was the first formal publication authorized by the Royal Society (Foster 2004). It described detailed observations and experiments on vegetation. In a similar manner to the Sympathetic Powder, Digby resorted to alchemical language and the Cartesian mechanistic philosophy to describe a phenomenon which in this case was the vegetation of plants (Janacek 2000, 107).

In the age of Digby the processes of vegetation, germination in particular were cosmic events. The creation of life was exclusively attributed to God, therefore vegetation had important corollaries in religion. Still Digby believed that there was nothing mysterious about it, as it was comprehensible by natural means, with the use of alchemical notions. After describing the process of vegetation, however, Digby started to discuss a topic that had even stronger theological implications, namely the revivification of dead plants, practically the act resurrection.

Digby mentions an occasion on which he and Bánfihunyadi managed to resurrect dead plants with his process (Digby 1661, 77-78). Resurrection of

plants was one thing, but Digby had more grandiose aims in mind as the following quotation demonstrates:

> This Universall Spirit then being Homogeneall to all things, and being in effect the Spirit of Life, not onely to Plants, but to Animals also: were it not worth the labour to render it as usefull to mens bodyes, as to the reparations of Plants (Digby 1661, 71)?

It seems that Digby intended to use the method of Palingenesis to resurrect the dead. Drawing on the works of earlier alchemical authors such as pseudo-Albertus Magnus, he presumed the existence of a material that could grant life everlasting:

> *Albertus Magnus* purchased the reputation of a Magician, for making all sorts of Fruit grow plentifully and perfectly, in the depth of a hard Winter in *Germany,* by meanes of this aethereall balsome. If it were made proportionable to mens bodyes, there is no doubt, but it would work alike effect upon them (Janacek 2000, 108).

With this "aethereall balsome" Digby intended to resurrect the dead which was exclusively in God`s power. In Digby's case this could imply two things: either the meta-religious (redemptive) function of alchemy on several occasions, or the absolute faith in human ingenuity and science to imitate God. Nevertheless, it is absolutely evident that his religiosity was deeply intertwined with his alchemy.

To see universal implications of life and death in vegetation was not unusual in the 17th century, and Digby was certainly not alone in discussing this issue metaphorically, theologically and literally (Ibid.). The idea of the resurrection of the dead had preoccupied theologians for centuries. Digby, although he was a devout Catholic, was not a theologian, he was a natural philosopher who never truly understood the Baconian advice. He read the Book of Nature and also the Book of the Scripture, but he never separated the two from each other. Thus, the New Testament was not the only source for Digby in the quest for resurrection. He employed his natural philosophy which, in fact, was an amalgamation of mechanical philosophy and alchemy.

The fact that Digby's work on the vegetation of plants was the first formal publication of the Royal Society could also lead us to an interesting conclusion: there was no sudden rupture between the eclecticism of Digby and the scientific method that was later attributed to the Royal Society.

In the light of the preceding analysis it seems fair to conclude that in Digby's mind the idea of palingenesis was intimately linked to the Christian dogma

of the resurrection of the body. The connection between alchemy and religion was not just a superficial one as Principe and Newman suggested. Alchemy or "chymistry" acted as an important explanatory tool in science and religion alike. Moreover, it functioned as an indicator of the limits of human ingenuity in Digby's writings.

6. Digby's Reception

The history of science was not merciful to Kenelm Digby to say the least. Although he was among the eminent philosophers of his time, 300 years later he was referred to as an obscure alchemist by many historians like Marie Boas Hall. What are the decisive factors that in the end classify people rational or irrational? Digby, after all, eliminated occult qualities from alchemy. He was not alone with his alchemical pursuits, yet he became an archetype of the "obscure" pre-Enlightenment period in the eyes of positivist historians of science. It is most likely that his scientific notoriety was established by his use of the sympathetic powder. An item stored in the Ashmolean Collection in the Bodleian Library supports this theory. The letter can be found in Ashmole 788 and is titled "of the powder of sympathy." The sender is unknown and only the initials of the recipient's name are known (R.W.J). The letter was dated in 1660, five years before Digby's death. It begins with the writer's statement of his doubts about the validity of the sympathetic powder: "this distance of cure and quick dispatch, I take to be nothing, but an imitation of some poeticall faerie mythologia."(Bodleian Library, Ashmolean Collection, 788, "of the Powder of Sympathy" in a letter to "R.W. J." fol 185a.) The writer ridicules the sympathetic powder, his position is different from Digby's view, who in turn never doubted its validity. One might jump to the sudden conclusion that the writer was a young proponent of mechanistic philosophy who, unlike Digby, completely built his knowledge on the new system and discarded its beliefs on the imaginary relationships between the wound and bandage. However, this is not the case as the letter continues in the following manner:

> They paraphrase, they periphrase […],They discourse into us of […] magnetisme of emanations of effluxions, how that radical activitie streams in semi-immaterial threads of atomes conducted by a Mummial Efflux which is a mere metaphysical chanting, & a French philosophicall blazon (op. cit., fol 185b).

The writer also criticises the Cartesian mechanistic philosophy. What can be concluded from this? It seems that Kenelm Digby and the author of this letter represented different tracks of modernization. While Digby made logical efforts to explain a non-existing relationship between the wound and the blood covered bandage, the writer of this letter simply discarded the relationship. Digby's belief in the cure, and the fact that he made it known, labelled him as a product of the Renaissance, someone who has nothing to do with natural philosophy at all. He was seriously misinterpreted throughout the last 300 years. Although he was not an important thinker of the Scientific Revolution, his figure deserves more attention as his intermediary state between ancient and modern world views provides important cross-sectional views on the development of our science.

Conclusion

The twofold aim of my paper was to carry out a small case study of Kenelm Digby's alchemy and to revise the "New Historiography of Alchemy" proposed by professors Lawrence Principe and William Newman. I intended to point out that the nature of Digby's alchemy highlights some deficiencies in the Principe-Newman model of alchemy. On the one hand I illustrated that mechanical philosophy that filtered into all natural sciences made the distinction possible between alchemy and chemistry well before Principe and Newman had suggested. Digby used mechanical principles to eliminate the medieval hidden sympathies in causal relationships, and with that he removed part of his alchemy from the realm of the occult. On the other hand I demonstrated that the link between alchemy and religion was not a superficial one. Theology and alchemy were deeply intertwined in Digby's system of thought: he explained the theological notion of resurrection with alchemical principles. My analysis unfortunately supports the much earlier established argument that a successful metanarrative of alchemy is almost impossible. Alchemy was an idiosyncratic discipline and its pursuers cannot be interpreted within only one framework.

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