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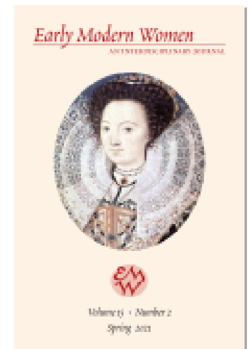

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Alchemical Bodies: Discursive and Material Visions

Tara Nummedal

In the past decade or so, we have come to understand more and more about women involved in alchemy in early modern Europe. Thanks to a number of published and ongoing research projects, we now know that women were patrons, authors, and practitioners, as well as laboratory assistants and managers. We also know that they read, excerpted, and collected alchemical knowledge in household collections of recipes, known as receipt books.[1] This important research has con-

[1] On historical women who practiced alchemy, see the essays in *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Kathleen P. Long (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010); Susanna Åkerman, *Queen Christina of Sweden and Her Circle: The Transformation of a Seventeenth-Century Philosophical Libertine* (Leiden: Brill, 1991); Jayne Archer, "Women and Alchemy in Early Modern England" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1999); Penny 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) and "From Kitchen Hearth to Learned Paracelsianism: Women and Alchemy in the Renaissance," in *Mystical Metal of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (New York: AMS Press, 2007), 365–86; Michelle Marie DiMeo, *Lady Ranelagh: The Incomparable Life of Robert Boyle's Sister* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Tara Nummedal, *Anna Zieglerin and the Lion's Blood: Alchemy and End Times in Reformation Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Lucia Tosi, "Marie Meurdrac: Paracelsian Chemist and Feminist," *Ambix* 48, no. 2, 69–82, doi: 10.1179/amb.2001.48.2.69. Studies of the gendered nature of alchemical texts and images include Allison Kavey, "Mercury Falling: Gender Malleability and Sexual Fluidity in Early Modern Popular Alchemy," in *Chymists and Chymistry: Studies in the History of Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry*, ed. Lawrence M. Principe (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2007), 125–35; Evelyn Fox Keller, "Spirit and Reason at the Birth of Modern Science," in *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 43–65; Lawrence M. Principe, "Revealing Analogies: The Descriptive and Deceptive Roles of Sexuality and Gender in Latin Alchemy," in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality In the History of Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 209–

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tributed to the history of alchemy in general, particularly the project of recovering early modern alchemical activity in all of its variety, ranging from the vernacular to the Latinate, and from the artisanal to the most natural philosophical.[2] For scholars interested especially in the history of women and gender, all of this new research has raised an important question: why did women take up alchemy? This is, of course, a question that we should ask of any alchemist, male or female, but somehow the lingering perception of early modern science as a male preserve makes women alchemists seem more surprising and their alchemical activities in need of explanation. As a less institutionalized and less formally regulated knowledge practice, alchemy certainly offered space for women to participate. But was there something about alchemy in particular that resonated with women's lives and that drew them to the art?

In this essay, I want to interrogate whether there was something about alchemy's distinctly expansive, even transgressive, gendered discourse that may have drawn women (and perhaps some men as well) to it. I will begin by surveying some of the ways that scholars have framed the relationship between the discursive and social history of early modern alchemy, sometimes suggesting that the feminist, queer, or trans aspects of early modern alchemical discourse somehow made it more appealing or more accessible to women. I will then turn briefly to my own research on the sixteenth-century German alchemist Anna Zieglerin (ca. 1545-1575) to highlight some problems with this argument and to suggest an alternative. As I will argue, alchemy's gendered discourse *did* resonate with Anna Zieglerin, but not as the existing scholarship has implied, because it offered her a vision of equality and cooperation between the sexes. Rather, alchemy appealed to Zieglerin because it offered her something else entirely: namely, a way to materially transform (and improve) the female body.

29; and M.E. Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems," *Glasgow Emblem Studies* 3 (Winter 1998): 25–47.

[2] On the move to recover a broad social range of practitioners of alchemy, see Tara Nummedal, "Words and Works in the History of Alchemy," *Isis* 102, no. 2 (June 2011): 330–37, doi:10.1086/660142.

Alchemy's Feminist, Queer, and Trans Discursive Potential

To say that alchemical discourse, particularly texts on the transmutation of metals, is gendered and sexed is, on some level, to state the obvious. Gendered imagery is omnipresent in alchemical texts, particularly emblematic works concerned with the production of the philosophers' stone. Alchemical concepts often appear, both in word and image, as male and female human bodies who marry, copulate, merge into bicephalous "hermaphrodites," and procreate. As Lawrence M. Principe has argued, there is no need to produce "unnecessarily contrived readings" of such imagery, which often can be decoded in fairly straightforward ways as cover names, or *Decknamen*, for alchemical substances and processes.[3] The binary of "male/female" offered an easy way to express other kinds of opposite pairings in nature, such as alchemical sulfur and mercury, and the emphasis on the (re)productive nature of these couplings allowed alchemical authors to underscore the creative potential of their art. These gendered, sexed, and sexual images were, in short, analogies that allowed alchemists to communicate (or sometimes to conceal) fundamental ideas about the natural world and its transformation.

Importantly, not all of these gendered alchemical figures or pairings behaved according to early modern European norms concerning gender, sex, or sexuality. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars honed in on alchemy, and especially the imagery of the chemical wedding, as an egalitarian gender alternative to the more hierarchically mainstream discourse of (early) modern science. They identified a kind of gender equality or balance in alchemy, since alchemical theory required the presence of *both* male and female elements to be productive, that is, to produce the philosophers' stone. Evelyn Fox Keller, for instance, argued that in seventeenth-century England, Paracelsian alchemy and the natural philosophy of Francis Bacon, which would go on to inspire the "new science," offered "opposing sexual metaphors."[4] As Carolyn Merchant had already argued, Bacon's science figured nature as female and the natural philosopher as male, drawing on the early modern commonplace that men were superior to women to articulate the way in which the new natural philosopher should dominate nature in order to pry away

[3] Principe, "Revealing Analogies," 209.

[4] Evelyn Fox Keller, "Spirit and Reason at the Birth of Modern Science," in *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 48.

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her secrets through experiment.[5] Keller found a very different gender order at work in the image of the chemical wedding; she argued that "[b]y contrast, the root image of the alchemists was coition, the conjunction of mind and matter, the merging of male and female. As Bacon's metaphoric ideal was the virile superman, the alchemist asserted the necessity of allegorical, if not actual, cooperation between male and female."[6] Alchemical texts, Keller went on to note, "suggest a principle of symmetry (one might even say of equality) between male and female principles."[7] For scholars like Keller, then, alchemy appeared to offer a feminist alternative to the misogynist Baconianism later institutionalized in places like the Royal Society of London — the path not taken in the foundation of modern science.

More recently, scholars have followed Keller in viewing early modern alchemy as an alternative discourse that challenged and played with — or "queered" — early modern norms in other ways as well. As Kathleen P. Long has noted, alchemical imagery teems with "odd bodies," or at least a wide range of bodies.[8] Indeed, in a single (albeit extraordinary) alchemical text, Michael Maier's 1618 musical alchemical emblem book *Atalanta fugiens*, one can find diseased, hobbled, and dead bodies; old, young, and fetal bodies; and male and female bodies.[9] Some of the bodies in *Atalanta fugiens* are more transgressive, such as the surprising image of a man, Boreas, with a fetus in his belly in Emblem I, or the bicephalous "hermaphroditic" body Maier includes in Emblem XXXVIII. [Figures 1 and 2] The figure of Mercury, especially, could trans gender entirely.[10] Allison Kavey has pointed out that even the chemical marriage, which seemingly represents the conventional gender order where men and women marry and have children, was, as she puts it, "far from straight or straightforward" in English alchemical texts.[11]

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5 Carolyn Merchant, "Dominion over Nature," in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 164–90.

6 Keller, "Spirit and Reason," 48.

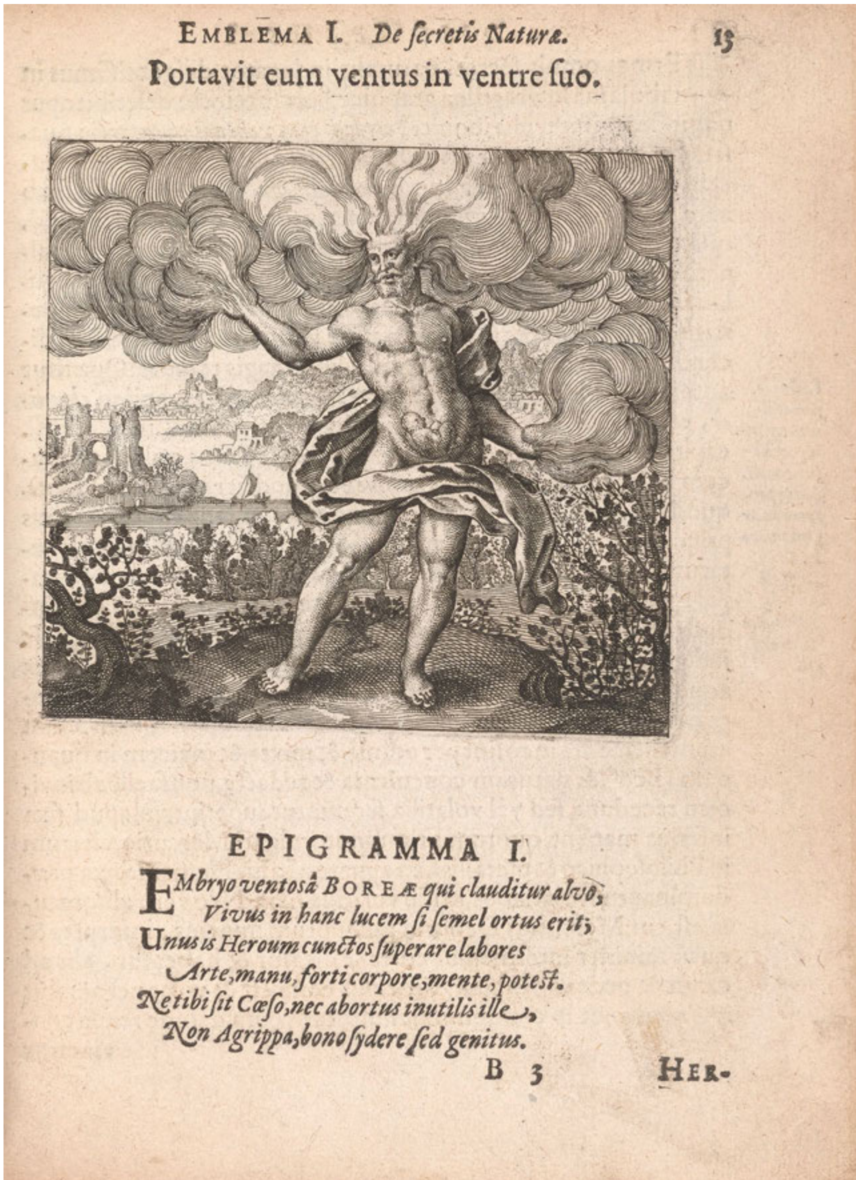
7 Keller, "Spirit and Reason," 49.

8 Long, "Odd Bodies," in *Gender and Scientific Discourse*, 65.

9 Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (Oppenheim: Johann Theodor de Bry, 1618). To get a sense of the range of bodies in Maier's masterpiece, see "Images," in Tara Nummedal and Donna Bilak, eds., *Furnace and Fugue: A Digital Edition of Michael Maier's* Atalanta fugiens *with Scholarly Commentary* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020).

10 On the usage "transing," see the discussion in Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 11.

11 Kavey, "Mercury Falling," 127.


EMBLEMA I. *De ſecretis Naturæ.* 15

Portavit eum ventus in ventre ſuo.

EPIGRAMMA I.

EMbryo ventosâ BOREÆ *qui clauditur alvo,*
Vivus in hanc lucem ſi ſemel ortus erit;
Unus is Heroum cunctos ſuperare labores
Arte, manu, forti corpore, mente, poteſt.
Ne tibi ſit Cæſo, nec abortus inutilis ille,
Non Agrippa, bono ſydere ſed genitus.

B 3 HER-

Figure 1. Maier, Michael, "Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, emblemata nova de secretis naturæ, chymica, accomodata partim oculis & intellectui, figuris cupro incisi, adiectisque sententiis, epigrammatis & notis, partim auribus & recreationi animi plus minus 50 rugis musicalibus trium vocum" (1618). *Brown Olio.* Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library. https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:760149/

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EMBLEMA XXXVIII. *De secretis Naturæ.* 161

Rebis, ut Hermaphroditus, nascitur ex duobus montibus, Mercurii & Veneris.

EPIGRAMMA XXXVIII.

REm geminam REBIS *veteres dixère, quod uno*
Corpore sit mas hæc fœmináque, Androgyna.
Natus enim binis in montibus HERMAPHRODITUS
Dicitur, Hermeti quem tulit alma Venus.
Ancipitem sexum ne spernas, nam tibi Regem
Mas idem, muliérque una eadémque dabit.

X So-

Figure 2. Maier, Michael, "Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, emblemata nova de secretis naturæ, chymica, accomodata partim oculis & intellectui, figuris cupro incisi, adiectisque sententiis, epigrammatis & notis, partim auribus & recreationi animi plus minus 50 rugis musicalibus trium vocum" (1618). *Brown Olio.* Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library. https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:760286/

It is mercury, Kavey observes, that intrudes in the chemical marriage, for mercury could switch genders during an alchemical process, or even represent both the male and female principles at once by operating as the alchemical hermaphrodite.[12] In fact, mercury's gender fluidity is what made it so central to alchemical work. "Rather than avoiding mercury, or assigning it to the ranks of the freakish and the powerless," Kavey argues, alchemical discourse "elevates and assigns it the starring role in the creation of the Stone."[13]

In their pairings, these alchemical bodies often transgress normative sexuality as well as gender. Their unions could be incestuous, for example, as in the tale of the siblings Beya and Gabricus, who transgress (or possibly carve out an alchemical exemption to) "[t]he divine and political laws" that otherwise prohibited unions of close relatives in early modern Europe.[14] Even so, they cannot overcome these prohibitions without alchemical assistance; as Maier explains, they "do not become fruitful, nor persist long in love, except a Philothesium, or cup of love be administered to them like an amorous potion."[15] This alchemical openness to incestual transgressions, as Kavey adds, did not easily extend to same-sex pairings, since these partnerships could not be productive in the way that alchemists desired.[16] Nevertheless, mercury's gender fluidity could help here as well because of "its potential to change its sex and gender," which destabilized (or provoked transformations in) its multiple chymical partners along the way; as Kavey concludes, "[m]ercury is a bit of a slut."[17]

In short, the early modern alchemical corpus is an important and powerful site of feminist, queer, and trans potential, as well as transgressive sexualities. As literary scholar Kathleen Long noted nearly a decade ago, it "provides a language and a set of images that play with established gender roles."[18] This is in part why many *modern* people today see early modern alchemy (as well as modern forms of magic, witchcraft, and other "occult" traditions) as presenting either a more

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[12] Kavey, "Mercury Falling," 131–32.

[13] Kavey, "Mercury Falling," 127.

[14] Discourse in Emblem 4, in Nummedal and Bilak, eds., *Furnace and Fugue,* https://doi.org/10.26300/bdp.ff.maier.

[15] Discourse in Emblem 4, in Nummedal and Bilak, eds., *Furnace and Fugue,* https://doi.org/10.26300/bdp.ff.maier. For more on the alchemical tale of Beya and Gabricus, see Thomas Willard, "Beya and Gabricus: Erotic Imagery in German Alchemy," *Mediaevistik* 28 (2015): 269-81.

[16] Kavey, "Mercury Falling," 130.

[17] Kavey, "Mercury Falling," 131.

[18] Long, "Introduction," in *Gender and Scientific Discourse*, 7.

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expansive or a more feminist gender order than other forms of science or religion — an alternative (and perhaps better) path, lost in the march to modernity.[19] Scholars of the early modern period, too, may be drawn to study the history of alchemy for similar reasons, as we seek to complicate older, triumphalist narratives about what is still often naturalized as "the rise of modern science" and its attendant gender orders. But is it also the case that alchemy's discursive expansiveness around gender made it appealing or inclusive for *early modern* Europeans? If alchemical discourses and imagery incorporated either a more capacious or a more feminist gender order than other forms of early modern European science or religion, might that help explain why women took it up? Were the men who were drawn to early modern alchemy more inclined than other natural philosophers, physicians, or naturalists to be feminists, in the early modern sense — that is, to recognize and to foster women's intellectual abilities? Did alchemical texts also translate into social spaces where "the feminine," queer genders, or same-sex partnerships were accepted, or even valued?

In 1985 Evelyn Keller's comment that "the alchemist asserted the necessity of *allegorical, if not actual,* cooperation between male and female" suggested that alchemy's discursive openness may indeed have had social implications.[20] Over a decade later, art historian M. E. Warlick offered perhaps the most extended analysis of the relationship between alchemical images depicting women or "women's work" and the "real lives of women."[21] Warlick's comparison of images of female domestic work in Maier's *Atalanta fugiens* with images of women in other kinds of emblem books convincingly demonstrates that Maier's images were unusually positive for his day, centering "women's work" as fundamental to alchemical processes, even while the social world of early modern Europe increasingly pushed women to the margins. Warlick, however, cautioned that "it is risky" to use *images* of women to come to any "conclusions" about women's social lives.[22] Leah DeVun's work on the literary and visual figure of the alchemical hermaphrodite underscores the point as well: "alchemy was not concerned with any actual case of intersex birth; the alchemical hermaphrodite was merely a metaphor used

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[19] See, for example, http://www.alchemylab.com.

[20] Keller, "Spirit and Reason," 48; emphasis added.

[21] Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist," 26.

[22] Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist," 26.

to represent a chemical substance."[23] In fact, DeVun suggests, the alchemical hermaphrodite could only operate as a positive and powerful representation of the philosophers' stone *because* it was a symbol, safely distant from real intersex people, whom medieval and early modern Europeans viewed as curious at best, and monstrous at worst.

While many scholars have noted early modern alchemy's feminist or queer *discursive* potential, therefore, identifying it as an important "alternative" tradition "that perceived gender in a range of ways,"[24] it has been difficult to link this aspect of alchemy to arguments for women's *social* equality or empowerment, or to acceptance of (not to mention appreciation for) same-sex partnerships, non-normative gender, or intersex people. Perhaps additional research will uncover evidence of an alchemist's feminist awakening or new toleration of same-sex partnerships as a result of reading alchemical texts, but until then, we should be cautious about simply assuming that early modern alchemy was a feminist tradition, or one with a particularly inclusive take on sex or sexuality. Rather, I would like to argue for another line of inquiry that I view as more productive. If we want to understand why alchemy appealed to early modern women, or why they were even able to participate in it at all, then we need to focus on alchemy as the art of producing life.

Anna Ziegerlin's Alchemical Body

One path forward is to focus on alchemical techniques, particularly the ways in which particular skills flowed organically from other kinds of practices commonly associated with women, namely what we might think of as "household chymistry" or the domestic production of distilled waters and other medicaments, inks, dyes, and cosmetics. Producing these items was a normal part of housewifery in the early modern period; it was the skill set expected of noblewomen and gentlewomen so that they might properly run their household. Distilling medicines and making cosmetics, moreover, could easily flow into an interest in and experimentation with making precious metals, such as gold or silver, leading women

[23] Leah DeVun, "The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 95.

[24] Long, "Introduction," 12.

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into chrysopoeia and agyropoeia.[25] As Jayne Archer has suggested, for example, the key point of contact between housewifery and chymistry — the thing that made alchemy or chymistry especially accessible and relevant to women — is the technology of distilling, or the stillroom, which she sees as a "female preserve."[26] Although it is important to point out that the stillroom was never solely a female space, studies like Archer's make it clear that, alchemy, even practical goldmaking, could be part of early modern women's daily lives. We may well have underestimated the number of women who engaged in alchemy in this social context.

But what about other varieties of alchemy, particularly its more theoretical or emblematic articulations? There is growing evidence that women engaged with alchemical philosophy as well, both as readers and as authors, and that their participation increased as the early modern period progressed.[27] The sixteenth-century German alchemist Anna Zieglerin offers a good opportunity to examine one woman's response to some alchemical core theoretical ideas and gendered concepts. Zieglerin was largely self-taught, gaining expertise through interactions with other alchemists. Her alchemical writings on a powerful agent she called the lion's blood were semi-private, recorded for her patron and to advance her own very personal agendas, rather than as an engagement in a wider intellectual community. Nevertheless, Zieglerin was ambitious and pursued her alchemical vision at great risk. Moreover, she engaged alchemy's boldest claims: transmutation and the creation of human life. Zieglerin's idiosyncratic engagement with these lofty alchemical goals suggest that alchemy's central metaphors of marriage, copulation, and childbirth may have been a powerful draw for women as well.

As I have argued in my book, *Anna Zieglerin and the Lion's Blood: Alchemy and End Times in Reformation Germany* (2019), Zieglerin was drawn to alchemy in part because the two central themes of the chemical wedding — the generation of life and the purification of matter — resonated deeply with her own life. Although Zieglerin was married twice, she did not have any children, nor did she menstruate regularly, if at all. While these features of her body might otherwise have been understood as illness or a failure, alchemy allowed her to reframe them

[25] Archer, "Women and Chymistry in Early Modern England: The Manuscript Receipt Book (ca. 1616) of Sarah Wigges," in *Gender and Scientific Discourse,* 191–216, and Meredith K. Ray, "Caterina Sforza's Experiments with Alchemy," in *Daughters of Alchemy,* 14–45.

[26] Archer, "Women and Chymistry," 216.

[27] See Åckerman, *Queen Christina*; Bayer, "Women's Alchemical Literature" and "From Kitchen to Hearth"; DiMeo, *Lady Ranelagh*; and Tosi, "Marie Meudrac."

as evidence that she had a unique role to play in putting alchemical theory into practice. Alchemy's potential to elevate matter was central to Zieglerin's vision. Hardly a feminist, she seems to have viewed ordinary women's bodies as repositories of poison, in the form of menstrual blood, and sin, as represented by Eve's original sin. As a result, Zieglerin understood the absence of menstrual blood in her own body as a virtue. More importantly, she attributed this absence to alchemy, claiming that her body had been treated at birth with an alchemical tincture, which (among other things) purged it of the corruption and sin that most women's bodies harbored. Moreover, Zieglerin also came to understand the fact that she did not menstruate as evidence that she was to fulfill a Paracelsian prophesy by using the alchemical lion's blood to conceive, gestate, and bear human children in her own womb. The lion's blood, she claimed, promised to help her achieve extraordinary levels of fertility not seen since before the Flood; her children, moreover, also would possess unusually pure, long-lived, and healthy bodies, helping pave the way to restore nature at the end of time. Alchemy, in short, had prepared Zieglerin's body to serve as a worthy alchemical vessel. Purified by alchemy at birth, she could now use the lion's blood as an adult to host unparalleled and extraordinary generation of life. In articulating this vision, Zieglerin collapsed the metaphor of the chemical wedding into practice, transmuting alchemical imagery and analogy into a script in which she was to take a starring role.

To return to the question with which this essay began: was there something about alchemical ideas and imagery that drew women in particular to the art? In Anna Zieglerin's case the answer is yes, although not because she saw alchemy as a more inclusive tradition or because it offered a vision of gender equality or balance. She was not a feminist in that sense; to the contrary, she understood the generative capacity of the typical female body to be deeply intertwined with corruption and sin. In alchemy, however, Zieglerin identified a way to create a different kind of female body, one that was simultaneously more fertile and more pure, in both a spiritual and material sense. In short, alchemy allowed her to redefine what it meant to have a female body at all, and to materially create a far more transcendent, generative, and powerful kind of female body than the one that centuries of medical and theological tradition told her she ought to have. Ultimately, it was alchemy's material power to refashion her body, rather than its discursive openness on gender, that inspired Zieglerin to pursue the early modern art. Perhaps, Zieglerin's example suggests, we ought to look for the intersection of women and alchemy in early modern Europe not around the issues that animate

us today, but rather around the concerns that engaged early modern women: the spiritual and physical body, the household, faith, and practice.