INTRODUCTION

Few areas in the history of science stand to gain more by examination of laboratory notebooks than alchemy. The luxuriant imagery permeating early modern alchemical texts that were intended for manuscript circulation or publication is often absent from the dry recipes and processes described in the working notebooks kept by alchemists for their own personal use. In practical terms, this means that the notebooks, when they can be found, provide important tools of interpretation that allow us to penetrate the complex maze of symbolism often found in the “public” texts prepared for the eyes of others. More than this, the very existence of such notebooks belies the common opinion that alchemy was concerned more with visionary experiences and otherworldly speculation than it was with the facts of the laboratory. In the present paper, we shall compare the printed texts and laboratory notebooks written by one of the most famous alchemical authors of the seventeenth century in order to illustrate these points.

In 1667, a curious text filled with the extended conceits typical of early modern alchemy was published by the Dutch printing firm Janson and Weyerstraet of Amsterdam. The work, called *Introitus apertus ad occlusum regis palatium (An Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King)*, and attributed to one “Eirenaeus Philalethes” (A Peaceful Lover of Truth) went on to become one of the most celebrated texts in the history of early modern alchemy: it was extensively commented upon by Isaac Newton, favorably received by John Locke, and diligently read by Robert Boyle. Its author employs the full panoply of traditional alchemical cover-names – Decknamen – to describe the veiled processes that he employs. The author tells us that in order to make the Philosophers’ Stone, the agent of metallic transmutation, it is necessary to begin with a “chaos,” a primordial matter rather like Aristotle’s prote hyle from which one must make a special “sophic mercury.” The latter, when sealed up with gold and heated, is supposed to mature, eventually, into the Philosophers’ Stone. In order to capture the peculiar flavor of this text, let us consider the following passage:

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Let four parts of our fiery dragon be taken, which hides the magical Chalybs [steel] in its belly, and nine parts of our magnet. Mix [them] by means of torrid Vulcan, in the form of a mineral water, on which a scum will float which must be rejected. Throw out the shell and retain the kernel, purge thrice with fire and sun, which will be easy if Saturn has seen his own form in the mirror of Mars. Thus our chameleon or chaos will come to be, in which all secrets lie in potentia. This is the infant hermaphrodite, who was infected in his cradle by the rabid Corascene dog, whence he raves with perpetual hydrophobia, although water lies closer to him than any other natural thing. But he fears and flees it, Oh [horrid] fate! But there are in Diana’s woods two doves, which pacify his insane rabies.²

Philalethes goes on to say that the rabid hermaphrodite must be assuaged with Diana’s doves and then drowned in water. He will then re-emerge as a “blackening dog.” After having turned into an eagle, the former dog must finally fly away from the dead doves seven times. The result will be a brilliant, solvent substance, the sophic mercury.

Some of these themes were in turn illustrated in the 1695 collection of Philalethes’ Opera omnia, published in Modena (Fig. 1).

Beneath the coiled snake to the left, one can make out two dogs, one of them picking at a reclining figure. This is probably a reference to the above passage, where the rabid Corascene dog bites the hermaphrodite, who is then drowned by the doves of Diana, only to resurface as a blackening dog.

The rococo imagery of the Introitus apertus, with its language of venomous monsters, murderous gods, and ravening hermaphrodites was enough to make

Figure 1. From [Eirenaeus] Philalethes Opera omnia (Modena: Fortunianus Rosatus, 1695).