

Fairy Tale alchemy

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 02 Nov 1999

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Alice Turner — 02 Nov 1999, 10:04

Mantis remarked, in discussion of fantasy v. SF:

"Magical," yes, but most specifically it is "alchemical."

If you pick up a modern book on alchemy, chances are it will have some of those great old woodcuts regarding the stages of The Great Work: which is "turning lead into gold" for the laity. Red Lion, Green Dragon, Black Raven, Virgin Milk--all sorts of wild stuff. Anyway, in the midst of all this Chemical Wedding, there appears a potent symbol: a two-headed being, usually a big muscular creature with a king's head and a queen's head (both crowned, iirc). Mind you, this is an =allegorical= representation of some funky chemical process --it isn't meant to be some sort of Frankenstein's monster that literally appears.

But this double-header is =not= the end-product: it is not the philosopher's stone. It is only a stage along the way. So, true to form, it must be "killed" so that the next mode can emerge--this woodcut shows the critter being put to bed in a tomb.

THUS, in addition to the Satan's Temptation of Christ elements in the scenes with Typhon and Severian, I have reason to believe that there is an even stronger thread of alchemical thought and tradition represented: one that links up with other keystones of the text to form an adamantine chain.

I strongly suspect that Damien Broderick knows exactly what I'm talking about. (I also know that alga is rolling her eyes at all this!)

Well, no. Actually I agree---how not. The Gothic elements refer directly back to alchemy, most specifically in Baldanders's castle by the lake with his "experiments" aided by "elementals" from the air and his great familiar/catamite/clone (and the whole parody, almost Pythoneque, in which Baldanders is both Frankenstein and creature, with Dr. Talos as a "beard"). Also much later when we find the homunculus/mandragora at the Citadel. But, as I have said before, these are almost certainly filtered from the direct Gothic tradition (mostly English) by Wolfe's reading of Goethe's Faust, Part II (the one people don't read so much), which is a weirdly hallucinogenic "take" on the Gothic/alchemical novel with its castles and laboratories and "philosopher's stones" and transmutations.

Typhon too appears in this general air of the Gothic.

And mantis, I don't roll my eyes at your allusions, they start to roll when you seize them (the allusions, not the eyes) with your mandibles and brutally worry them into virtuality.

-alga

Daniel Fusch — 02 Nov 1999, 19:14 · follows Alice Turner

alga and mantis,

I concede the point. You're right--I hadn't looked that carefully at the sequence at Baldanders' castle. The connection to Faust is definitely there--with the Homunculus, after all.

I suppose I hadn't really connected alchemy with the Gothic tradition before--maybe "Frankenstein" is the meeting point, then.

So...if Typhon is--in one sense--an alchemical allusion, what is the significance of the allusion? Is Typhon representative of a desire to perfect the human form (by defeating death)?