

MICHAEL MAIER'S MARIA PROPHETISSA

Peter Bindon, FRC

Peter Bindon is a professional anthropologist and botanist. He has served on the Editorial Board of the Rose+Croix Journal (www.rosecroixjournal.org) for many years and is a frequent contributor to the Rosicrucian Digest. He was a presenter at the "Hidden in Plain Sight" Esoteric conference held at Rosicrucian Park, where he presented a paper on "Ancient Alchemical Diagrams: Are they Mirrors of the Human Soul for the Modern World?" He recently retired as Grand Master of the English Grand Lodge for Australia, Asia, and New Zealand after many years of service in that position.

*In this article Frater Bindon introduces us to Maria Prophetissa and the symbolism of this image from the frontispiece of Michael Maier's *Symbola Aerae Mensae*, published in 1617.*



Some modern writers who comment on ancient alchemical texts have divided the existing works into two groups. On one side, they place the books written by the symbolical alchemists who were natural philosophers interested in and moved by the wonders of the natural world. In the other group are placed the works of the delightfully named "puffers" who labored without success to turn base metals into gold. The latter group was interested only in the acquisition of material wealth, while the former were

content with acquiring an understanding of their place within creation. This is still the case today. There are those seeking to understand the complexity of living in a material world while continuing to advance their spiritual and mystical growth. They see sufficiency and contentment as their primary goals. Others see prosperity and satisfaction solely in terms of material wealth alone. This interpretation has the same deficiency as that used to categorize the alchemists of former times, for there are many groups between the



two extremes. It is too simplistic to divide all the possibilities within the human condition into only two categories, just as it is almost impossible to classify accurately all the varied approaches made to alchemical practices that have occurred throughout history. Is this why it is so difficult to make sense of alchemical writings, which should be the foundation of what we now call chemistry, which after all, is a very precise science? The answer lies in the complexity of the subject.

For each element depicted in alchemical mandalas and mentioned in formulas, there are numerous pictorial synonyms. Making a list of these is relatively elementary, but then the inquisitive searcher discovers that each symbol has not just one, but numerous meanings. The problem becomes one of attaching the appropriate meaning to each symbol on our list. Classifying the way in which individuals interpret symbols has always been difficult, as those of you who have read the works of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell will have found. Happily, each alchemist of former times generally chose to use just one or two of the combinations of symbol and meaning, making our task of classifying them and unraveling their symbolism somewhat easier. Nevertheless there are numerous interpretations that can be made of alchemical diagrams.

Maria Prophetissa, is also known as the sister of Moses, and by other names, but is better understood by Rosicrucians as the Maria of the Gnostic tradition. She is reputed to have written a treatise titled *Practica Mariae Prophetessae in artem alchemicam* although this work may actually have an Arabic origin. It was consulted by a number of alchemists including Michael Maier. The illustration formed the frontispiece of his *Symbola Aerae Mensae*, published in 1617. In the illustration, Maria points towards the seedling that has fallen on the top of the Cosmic Mountain. The effort required to ascend the mountain perhaps gave the

ancients the inspiration to equate this feature with the furnace in which was confined the energy required to complete the alchemical process of transformation. The summit of the mountain is the location of the Philosopher's Stone. On the Cosmic Mountain, the seed has sprung into life and produced five flowers, symbolic of the renewal of life in the appropriate season of the year. We will examine the flower itself later in this article when we extend the allegory of these symbols. For the moment, let us consider why there are five flowers. Five is the number of humanity, and this diagram symbolizes an activity of renewal recommended by the original author. Why is five the number of humanity? You will understand why if you can recall a remarkable sketch by Leonardo da Vinci in which a human figure is inscribed inside a circle that is touched in five places by the head, the hands, and the feet. The five digits of the hands and feet emphasize this symbolic attribution of the number five, as do the five senses. The five-petaled rose placed in the center of the four-armed cross was for the Hermeticists, the symbol of quintessence, something that was above the four primal elements on the arms of the cross. For some mystical philosophers, the number five had a sinister or even evil meaning, although this interpretation is not necessarily that of the alchemists. This notion has generally derived from a Kabbalistic interpretation, which can be shown to relate to the five days of emptiness needed by the ancient Egyptians to synchronize their year of 360 days with the solar year of closer to 365 days. Rosicrucian interpretations of this illustration see the two urns as symbolic of air and earth respectively, two of the primal elements in which all that is created has its origins. As the two elements mingle and unite, illustrating the principle of "as above, so below," Maria intones one of the alchemical principles regarding unity and duality: "One becomes two, two becomes

three, and out of the third comes the One that is the fourth.” In the magical-religious terms of alchemy, this saying can be interpreted in a number of ways reiterating Biblical creation.

I will leave this interpretation up to each individual reader to produce simply observing that in the Rosicrucian systems of number symbolism, the even numbers are considered feminine and the odd numbers masculine. In the arcane language of alchemy, there is another level of meaning that we will now pursue. Maria Prophetissa is concerned with the combination of two aspects of the one special substance. She says: “Take gum from Spain, white gum and red gum, and join them in true marriage, gum with gum.” What can this mean? There is a hint to how we might interpret her words in the colors of the substance she mentions. These refer to the alchemical White Queen and Red King. In addition, the alchemical symbol for gum is a strange combination of two small letters formed like the modern letter “g” in our alphabet, written side-by-side and joined by a small cross from which is suspended a tiny triangle. This symbol emphasizes the alchemical process that we must become involved with if we are going to decode the illustration. The allegorical meaning hidden in the drawing is further reinforced by the shape formed by the clouds of vapor emerging from the two vases. This can be interpreted as the union of the two equilateral triangles, one with its apex pointing heavenwards, the other apex pointing towards Earth. The upper triangle represents fire, the masculine active element, while the lower one refers to water, the feminine and nurturing aspect. When the alchemist is able to achieve the correct conjunction of these two primal elements, they give rise to the color red, symbolized by the alchemical rose, which is revealed to us as the two streams of white vapor part in their double triangular

shape. In some illustrations of this process, the rose that is produced has an outer row of red petals and an inner row of white ones, but in this case, the white aspect is symbolized by the vapors that stream out of each urn towards its opposite. The red rose was the alchemical symbol of successful completion of the “great work” which ultimately produced the Stone of the Philosophers, and it is partly because of this symbol of completion that the rose that adorns the Rosicrucian trifoiliate cross is red and not some other symbolic color.

What can we conclude from this array of symbols that could be useful to our Rosicrucian practice? The whole of the right hand side of the illustration thus revolves around symbols relating to the red cloaked man and the woman veiled in white.

Symbolically, the red rose of completion can only be achieved when the white veil is drawn aside. The two urns, representing the vases of Hermes, have completed their task of containing the necessary elements of creation. These represent the dual nature contained within each of us. Once parted, because the sublimation of the contents is complete, they reveal the penultimate stage of the transformative process. Maria, personifying the wisdom of times past, points to what is now evident, that in each human, regardless of their gender, there exists an aspect of the opposite. These two must be brought into harmonious balance when they can then complement each other forming a complete and harmonious whole. Once in this state, each individual can accomplish all that they desire. Achieving this blissful state is symbolic of having the Stone of the Philosophers in one’s grasp. This was the aim of the symbolical alchemists of times past and it is the aim of Rosicrucians today.

