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From Medieval Alchemy to the Quest for the Absolute: The Evolution of Knowledge in the Figure of Faust

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Abstract:

This article examines the transformation of medieval alchemy from a spiritual and symbolic practice into one of the most powerful cultural matrices of the modern age, culminating in the myth of Faust. In its medieval form, alchemy was not limited to the pursuit of material transmutation but also embodied a path of inner perfection, where the laboratory mirrored the soul and the *magnum opus* represented a spiritual ascent. Through the rediscovery of Hermetic writings, the reception of Arabic manuscripts, and the philosophical re-elaborations of figures such as Arnaldus of Villanova and Paracelsus, alchemy progressively shifted from a sacred science to an operative, anthropocentric and experimental knowledge. This transition laid the foundations for Renaissance magic and for the complex intertwining of theology, astrology and natural philosophy in the works of Marsilio Ficino and other humanists. The Faustian myth emerges in this context as the emblem of a new conception of knowledge: no longer oriented toward redemption and inner transformation, but toward mastery of nature, infinite aspiration and the promise of power. From Marlowe to Goethe, the figure of Faust embodies the passage from the alchemist-priest to the modern philosopher, reflecting both the fascination and the dangers of an unbounded pursuit of truth. In this sense, the myth continues to resonate today as an inexhaustible allegory of the modern condition.

Keywords:

Medieval alchemy, Hermeticism, Renaissance magic, Faust, Knowledge and power.

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1. Introduction¹

The relationship between medieval alchemy and the modern Faustian myth represents one of the most fascinating trajectories in the history of Western culture. Alchemy, long relegated to the margins of 'true' science, has been reinterpreted in the twentieth century not merely as a pre-scientific discipline but as a symbolic and spiritual practice, capable of integrating empirical experimentation, cosmological speculation, and

¹ This article does not aim to cover all aspects of the Faustian myth but focuses on the evolution of the concept of knowledge from the medieval alchemical *Opus* to the Promethean dimension of the modern Faust. For Goethe's work, see the extensive existing bibliography.

the quest for inner regeneration. In this light, the transformation of metals was never solely a technical operation but also the reflection of a profound inner transmutation, in which the laboratory became a mirror of the soul.

The historiographical debate on alchemy, ranging from the pioneering interpretations of Mircea Eliade (1951) and Carl Gustav Jung (1944) to the cultural analyses of Frances A. Yates (1979) and Michela Pereira (2019), has emphasized its complex structure, capable of integrating practical knowledge, cosmological reflections, and spiritual tensions. It is precisely in this space between matter and spirit, between sacred science and modern science, that the legend of Faust took shape.

The objective of this article is to retrace this passage, highlighting both the continuities and the ruptures that link the medieval alchemical imagination with the Renaissance magus and, finally, with Goethe's Romantic hero. By analyzing the circulation of texts and practices between England and Germany, the innovations introduced by Paracelsus, and the literary re-elaborations from Marlowe to Goethe, the study aims to show how Faust condenses in his figure the cultural transformations of the West: from *scientia sacra* to Promethean ambition, from cosmic wisdom to rational obsession. The legend of Faust thus becomes a privileged vantage point for interrogating not only the past but also the present, insofar as it continues to reflect the dilemmas of contemporary knowledge, caught between ethics and power, aspiration and limit, redemption and damnation.

2. *Medieval Alchemy: Between Sacred Science, Symbol and Transformation*

In the Latin Middle Ages, alchemy was introduced into Europe through a twofold mediation: on the one hand, the reception of late antique Greco-Egyptian texts (such as those attributed to the Egyptian alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis); on the other, the intermediation of the Arab-Islamic tradition, which re-elaborated and systematized the Hellenistic tradition, integrating it with Aristotelian philosophy, Galenic medicine and a strongly spiritualized vision of the cosmos (Principe, 2011). Beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, through the translations carried out in the schools of Toledo and Palermo, texts such as the *Summa perfectionis*, attributed to pseudo-Geber, today identified with Paul of Taranto (Newman, 1995: 80-85 e 1984), the *Turba philosophorum* (Lucarelli,

1997), the *Tabula Smaragdina* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (Kahn, 1994), and the *Liber de compositione alchemiae*² began to circulate in the Christian West.

In medieval thought, alchemy was understood as an *ars magna*, an intermediate knowledge between natural science and theology, capable of unveiling the deepest truths of the universe. Its principal aim was the creation of the *lapis philosophorum*, a miraculous substance believed to possess extraordinary powers: transmuting base metals into gold (*chrysopoeia*), bestowing perfect health upon the human body, and, in some accounts, ensuring immortality through the elixir of life. Beyond these material objectives, however, alchemy sought a radical inner transformation of the practitioner. What unifies these aims is the conviction that matter is not inert but animated by spiritual forces reflecting the divine order.

Within the Christian tradition, alchemy assumed a distinctly soteriological dimension. The stages of the alchemical process, *nigredo*, *albedo*, *rubedo*, did not merely denote states of matter but were interpreted as symbolic phases of the soul's regeneration. In this perspective, alchemical gold became a metaphor for the redeemed soul, the *lapis philosophorum* an image of Christ himself, and the alchemical work a path toward salvation (Sheppard, 1986).

Medieval alchemy unfolds across three levels: operative (based on concrete procedures), theoretical (sustained by an analogical cosmology), and mystical (grounded in inner purification). The medieval alchemist is never merely a technician but a *homo religiosus*, whose task is to collaborate in the divine work of perfecting creation. The laboratory itself is conceived as a sacred space.

In Europe, numerous Christian authors integrated alchemy into the framework of speculative and spiritual sciences. Among them were Roger Bacon, with his theories of *prolongatio vitae*, Ramon Llull, Arnald of Villanova, and John of Rupescissa, who wrote about the creation of a *lapis* capable of curing a wide range of illnesses. In Bacon, alchemy is part of the project of a *scientia experimentalis*, capable of revealing the hidden forces of nature and producing, under divine guidance, miraculous medicines and perfect materials (Bridges, 1898). Arnald of Villanova, physician and theologian, understood alchemy as a therapeutic knowledge directed toward the healing of both body and soul. Yet it is above all in Ramon Llull that alchemy merges with a universal missionary aspiration. His *Ars Magna*,

² It is regarded as the first alchemical work translated from Arabic into the Latin West, carried out by Robert of Chester in 1144 (Manget, 1702).

based on logical combinations of theological concepts, was conceived as a tool to demonstrate the truths of the faith and to draw all religions closer to Christian truth (Rossi, 1983: 48).

The language of alchemy is eminently symbolic. Terms such as *materia prima*, *vas hermeticum*, *solve et coagula*, *coniunctio oppositorum*, *rubedo* do not refer solely to substances or chemical actions but also to inner states and stages of spiritual life. Every step of the *opus* is simultaneously physical and allegorical: the disintegration of matter corresponds to the dissolution of the ego, sublimation to the elevation of the spirit. Medieval alchemists believed that in the creation of the philosopher's stone they discovered a symbol of the religious and moral fulfillment to which they aspired (Bentick, 2022: 144ff).

Carl Gustav Jung demonstrated how these processes, on the psychological level, describe a path of individuation and archetypal integration, in which the soul confronts the shadow, is purified, and is reconstituted in unity (Jung, 1944: 254-260; Jantz, 1962). Yet alongside this psychological reading, the theological dimension of Christian alchemy remains central. The *coniunctio oppositorum*, the union of opposites, male and female, sulfur and mercury, Sun and Moon, reflects the divine *coincidentia oppositorum*, the perfect unity that transcends the multiplicity of creation. The alchemist's work thus becomes an imitation of the divine act: just as God brought order out of chaos, the alchemist restores unity to the formless.

From the first half of the fourteenth century onward, works appear in which the mystical and spiritual meaning of alchemy is made explicit. This contrasts with the predominantly 'technical' orientation of earlier treatises, which were based on an explicit correlation between the theoretical foundations of alchemy and the doctrine of Holy Scripture. In many cases, these treatises circulated under authoritative pseudonyms, for example attributed to Lull or to Thomas Aquinas, as a guarantee of their intellectual respectability.

Medieval alchemical iconography, too, is imbued with sacred symbolism. Works such as the *Rosarius Philosophorum*³ and the *Aurora Consurgens*⁴ employ Christological,

³ This work, attributed to Arnaldus of Villanova, offers a theoretical description of the stages leading to the realization of the Philosopher's Stone, accompanied by a series of illustrations, including the *Fons Mercurialis*, the fountain of life, the royal couple Sun and Moon, and the figure of the androgynous, symbolizing the fusion of the elements (Zetzner, 1622; Pereira, 1995).

⁴ In this text attributed to Pseudo-Thomas Aquinas, the symbolic structure of the *Opus* is reformulated through apocalyptic visions and a prophetic language rich in biblical and Marian references. The work includes allegorical depictions of the Philosopher's Stone, where mercury appears as a serpent, gold as the Sun, and silver as the Moon (De Leo, 2002).

nuptial and apocalyptic imagery to represent the stages of the *opus*. Dragons, androgynes, Kings and Queens, the ouroboros serpent and the green lion are complex figures that intertwine cosmology, mythology and spirituality (Obrist, 2003).

The medieval reflection on transcendence, which located God beyond reason, yet immanent within the cosmic order, thus finds an echo in alchemy, conceived as an intermediate knowledge between natural philosophy and theology, in which the transformation of matter becomes a symbolic path of the soul toward God. The *Aurora Consurgens* represents one of the most emblematic examples of this process of integration, syncretism, and reinterpretation of the Hermetic tradition within the theological and spiritual framework of Christianity.

From the late fifteenth century onward, the evolution of Western thought marked a decisive transition from transcendence to immanence, replacing the idea of knowledge oriented toward God with a conception in which knowledge aimed at understanding and transforming earthly reality. The decline of medieval alchemy is situated within this broader cultural transformation, inaugurated by Humanism and developed during the Renaissance, in which attention progressively shifted from divine order to the human subject. Man, no longer conceived solely as a creature subject to a theological design, was now placed at the center of the cosmos as the measure of all things, capable of interpreting and acting upon reality. In this new horizon, the human being emerged as an artificer, a shaper, and knowledge ceased to be directed toward divine contemplation, becoming instead an instrument for the transformation of the world.

The affirmation of Humanism, the birth of modern science, the separation between faith and knowledge, and the growing confidence in the experimental and quantitative method all contributed to the decline of the symbolic and sacred vision of nature. Knowledge tended increasingly toward technical mastery rather than redemption, and a new outlook emerged that, while maintaining an interest in the occult and the mysterious, shifted attention from the transcendent realm to the earthly world. In this context, thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola played a decisive role.

The rediscovery of Plato and the Hermetic texts by Marsilio Ficino led to the conception of the universe as a system of correspondences governed by cosmic forces into which man could insert himself through practices harmonizing body and spirit (Vitale, 2011; Garin, 1988: 72; Gentile, 2002: 201ff.). Giovanni Pico della Mirandola also occupied a prominent place in the history of Renaissance magic. Alongside the Ficinian tradition of

natural magic, he introduced practical Kabbalah as a complementary element (Greive, 1975). This form of magic, founded on the invocation of higher spiritual powers and Kabbalistic practices, differs from Ficino's natural magic in that it is not limited to the action of the *spiritus mundi* but is oriented toward a transcendent dimension. In Pico's programmatic work, the *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486), man is described as occupying a privileged position: he has no fixed nature but can elevate himself to the divine or degrade himself to the bestial, depending on his will and his knowledge (Garin, 1994). This revolutionary idea of *dignitas hominis* sanctioned the birth of a new anthropological paradigm, in which human freedom and cognitive power constituted the foundation of knowledge.

Like Ficino, Pico sought to unite Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Christianity in a harmonious synthesis centered on man and his faculty to affirm and exercise his freedom in determining his destiny. By embracing the idea of a *magia naturalis*, both humanists revalued the connection between nature and magic, viewing the latter as a means of restoring the perfection of creation (Garin, 1942). They emphasized the dignity of man as the center of the cosmos, thus paving the way for an interpretation of alchemy increasingly detached from transcendence and closer to naturalistic inquiry.

Alchemy, traditionally considered the Hermetic discipline par excellence and symbolically linked to the *Tabula Smaragdina* attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus (Kahn, 1994), assumed a new face, intertwining with Magic and Kabbalah. The theoretical reflections of Marsilio Ficino marked the beginning of a renewed era of natural magic and occultism, which reached its most significant development in the German context, influencing prominent Renaissance figures such as Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus (Merkel and Debus, 1988). The Hermetic worldview and the impulse to harness and reshape nature, once taken up by natural philosophy, helped lay the early groundwork for the Scientific Revolution of the next century. On this reading, modern science grows out of natural magic, just as chemistry grows out of alchemy (Yates, 1964; Rossi, 1997).

3. *Alchemy between England and Germany: Circulation of Texts, Practices and Symbolisms*

The development of alchemy in the Middle Ages was not a localized phenomenon but a transnational current that traversed the whole of Europe, fostering exchanges of manuscripts, knowledge, and iconographies among monastic, academic, and courtly centers. While England contributed significantly to the formalization of Christian alchemy, particularly through figures such as Roger Bacon and the pseudo-Lullian corpus, medieval Germany constituted another crossroads for the reception and reinterpretation of the *ars transmutationis*.

As early as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the German area distinguished itself through a lively alchemical production in both Latin and the vernacular⁵. Flourishing within Cistercian monastic contexts, cathedral schools, and the urban centers of the Rhineland, alchemy gradually assumed an increasingly experimental character, blending empirical knowledge (such as metallurgy and monastic medicine) with theological elaborations on spiritual transformation. Medieval German alchemical production can be grouped into two main categories: translations into German of specialized Latin texts and alchemical works in the vernacular, either lacking direct models or more often produced as compilations of Latin writings. The *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* and the *Splendor Solis* are highly representative of the late medieval German alchemical milieu, illustrating the connections between spirituality, symbolism and operative practices. The former, attributed to the monk Ulmannus, is a strongly Christian alchemical treatise that describes the process of transmutation through the parallel of Christ's Passion, death, and resurrection⁶. The latter, dated between 1532 and 1535, is an illustrated work in Middle Low German that collects and visualizes earlier alchemical treatises, attributed to Ulrich Poyssel under the pseudonym Salomon Trismosin⁷.

Many texts of a more popular character often adopt a dialogical or visionary structure, in which matter is personified and metals are given voice, anticipating the allegorical style

⁵ Beyond strictly alchemical production, several studies have highlighted the presence of alchemical references also in chivalric poetry and popular tales. After 1250, a significant increase in medico-scientific references can be observed in German poetry, usually attributed to the social transformations of the late Middle Ages. However, as studies on Wolfram's *Parzival* have shown, it is more likely that this shift stemmed from the cultural revival of the twelfth century and the translations of Arabic manuscripts, rather than from later social changes. On the possible alchemical influences on Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*, see Ober (1965) and Okken (1984: I, 239).

⁶ The text is preserved in at least four fifteenth-century manuscripts: the archetype Cod. 78 A 11 (Berlin), datable between 1410 and 1419, and three later witnesses, namely Heidelberg, Cpg 843 Fasc. 3 (15th c.), Munich, Staatsbibl., Cgm 598 (late 15th c., after 1467), and St. Gall, Kantonsbibl., VadSlg Ms. 428 (1488). See Junker (1986) and Ganzenmüller (1956: 231-272).

⁷ The work dates back to the sixteenth century and has come down in several versions and translations. On this, see Partini, 1994: 9-12.

of the German *Volksbücher*⁸. One of the distinctive features of late medieval German alchemy is its close connection with Rhineland mysticism and reformed monastic environments. Mystical authors, although not alchemists in the technical sense, shared with alchemy the idea of a *purificatio interior*, whereby the soul, like metal, must pass through the fire of trial in order to reach God. By contrast, medieval England had already developed a vision of alchemy as *scientia experimentalis*, deeply concerned with pharmacology, Christian cosmology and the salvation of the soul. These themes also crossed the Channel, spreading through continental Europe and reaching southern Germany, where many English manuscripts were copied or adapted in scholastic and conventual milieus (Principe, 2013: 85-92).

Between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Germany emerged as a new center of European occultism. The invention of printing, the flourishing of humanist academies, the Lutheran heresy and widespread eschatological fervor opened the way for a new generation of *philosophi naturae*. In this context stands the significant figure of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim. Physician, theologian and astrologer, Agrippa gave systematic form to this tradition in his *De occulta philosophia* (1533), a treatise that united elements of alchemy, Kabbalah, natural magic and Christian theurgy into a unified vision of knowledge. Man, according to Agrippa, is a microcosm reflecting the harmonies of creation and, through symbolic language and enlightened will, can ascend to total knowledge.

The continuity with alchemy is profound, yet its aim undergoes a shift: no longer merely spiritual regeneration, but active transformation of reality, control over the stars, illnesses, metals, and even life and death. The figure of the magus is ambivalent, both physician and sorcerer, sage and rebel, often suspended between salvation and damnation. This ambivalence emerges clearly in Agrippa, who was read both as an erudite defender of ancient wisdom and as a dangerous invoker of demonic forces. For Agrippa, knowledge was no longer pure contemplation but an instrument of power, a power which, if mismanaged, could lead to ruin (Perrone Compagni, 1992).

This perspective marks the definitive break with the monastic conception of alchemy, not redemption but potency; not inner transmutation but external mastery.

⁸ *Volksbuch* is a term used, starting from the Middle Ages, to designate popular prose texts ranging from tales and legends to practical manuals of medicine and astrology. Circulating from 1450 until the mid-nineteenth century, the *Volksbücher* were characterized by recurring linguistic, typographical, and iconographic features, as well as by their content. See, Rasch (1955: 34-67) and Giordano (2024: 2).

4. *Paracelsus: The Homunculus as a Bridge between Classical and German Alchemy*

In the sixteenth century, Theophrastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus (1493-1541), introduced a turning point in European alchemy, fusing medicine, Hermetic theory and spiritual aspiration into a new model: *chemical philosophy*, a precursor of modern chemistry. He rejected Galenic principles and promoted a therapeutic approach founded on *salt, sulfur, and mercury* (*tria prima* 'three primes') as mysterious and curative elements, both analogous to and constitutive of human nature⁹.

For Paracelsus, the notion of *materia prima* is rooted in the concept of the *Logos*, inherited from the *Corpus Hermeticum* and from Kabbalistic interpretations of the Word. His 'new alchemy' thus emerged from a Hermetic-Kabbalistic framework, though reworked in original and at times eccentric ways. The influence of Marsilio Ficino is recognizable: Paracelsus's *De vita longa* echoes Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda*, and his medical practice reflects the Ficinian vision of a cure acting not only on the body but also upon the imagination. In this perspective, defining his work as 'Hermetic-Kabbalistic' is legitimate, while acknowledging the profound innovations with which Paracelsus subverted tradition, positioning himself as a liminal figure between physician and magus.

With Paracelsus, alchemical practice assumed an experimental character. The transformation of matter was no longer merely an allegory of spiritual ascent, but a demonstration of humanity's power to know and master nature, in a cultural framework in which the sacred gradually yielded primacy to a new centrality of the human.

Among his most audacious innovations was the explicit introduction of the *homunculus*, an artificial being generated in the laboratory, later exalted by Goethe in *Faust* (Snow, 1980: 67-69). For Paracelsus, *homunculi*, obtained from semen outside the womb, were more spiritual but fragile creatures, short-lived and precarious; their very creation was the central problem¹⁰. In the pseudo-Paracelsian *De Natura Rerum* (1537), we find an alchemical procedure for creating a small man (*homuncius*) by fermenting human seed in a

⁹ According to this theory, which can be traced back to *De natura rerum*, a work whose attribution to Paracelsus remains uncertain, Salt, Sulphur and Mercury would correspond in the human organism to what Hermes Trismegistus defined as body, soul (that is, the vital principle), and spirit. On this, see Lehning, 2002 and Webster, 2008.

¹⁰ In fact, even today we lack a precise understanding of the concept of the homunculus in Paracelsus, since he himself attributed to it different meanings. On the difficulty of grasping its true significance and on its exact description, see Newman (2004: 195-227).

sealed vessel for forty days, producing a living and mobile creature, like the human being but translucent (Huser, 1589-1591: IX, Lib. I).

This concept was absent from classical medieval alchemy, which was oriented instead toward the philosopher's stone and inner purification. Paracelsus redirected alchemy toward a more provocative aim: the artificial generation of life, a symbol of knowledge and dominion. This shift was received in Germany as a continuation of the experimental and magical-humanist tradition. The concept of the *homunculus* became an emblem of humanity's possibility of surpassing natural limits and, within the substratum of the collective imagination, laid the groundwork for the Faustian figure as one who aspires to know and shape reality according to his will.

In sum, Paracelsus represents a crucial link: between the English experimental approach to *scientia alchemica* (from Roger Bacon to Renaissance currents), the German reinterpretation, shaped by Agrippa and other humanists, towards an operative and anthropocentric magic, and finally the Faustian myth, dominated by the pursuit of absolute knowledge embodied in the creation of artificial humanity.

The concept of self-determination advanced by the new humanist and Renaissance philosophical thought also generated a new vision of alchemy as an astrological and magical-spiritual art, capable of connecting the human microcosm with the celestial macrocosm. In this context, the mediation of spiritual entities, angels or intermediate forces, was no longer viewed as a dangerous deviation, but rather as part of the natural order that enabled man to draw upon subtle energies and to elevate himself (Yates, 1964: 138-156).

5. *Humanism, Natural Magic and the Birth of the Faust Legend*

The magical and philosophical humanism developed by Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa embodies this new vision of humanity and spirituality. It seeks to unify Plato, Hermes Trismegistus, Kabbalah and natural science into a single worldview in which man is the microcosm of the macrocosm, a bridge between heaven and earth (Gentile and Gilly, 1999; Gilly and van Heertum, 2002). Within this framework, knowledge is no longer subordinated to a transcendent order but takes shape as an unlimited aspiration to comprehend and master

every level of reality, being physical, celestial, and spiritual. Man no longer interprets nature as a sacred book but a field of forces that can be manipulated through signs, symbols and correspondences.

It is in this climate that the figure of the Renaissance magus emerges, distinct yet continuous with that of the medieval alchemist. The humanist magus no longer seeks the spiritual gold of the medieval alchemist but a form of absolute, operative knowledge, capable of acting upon reality. Natural magic, occult medicine and occult philosophy became the new avenues through which humanity affirmed its ontological centrality. Man was conceived simultaneously as the center and the bond of all things.

This perspective, founded on the transformative power of human knowledge, marks a turning point: knowledge is no longer merely a path to truth but becomes power, manipulation and domination. Ficino's natural magic, Pico's Christian Kabbalah, Agrippa's Neoplatonic theurgy and Paracelsus's chemical philosophy are all expressions of this ambition for knowledge, in which learning is transformed into an instrument of power, elevation, and, potentially, damnation (Walker, 1958; Brann, 1985).

It is from this root that the tragic figure of Faust takes shape, pushing Renaissance aspiration to its extreme: to know everything, to master everything, even at the price of the soul. Humanists such as Paracelsus and Agrippa inherited medieval alchemy with its symbolic and therapeutic framework but reformulated it in a Promethean and anthropocentric key, anticipating the tensions that would culminate in the Faust figure. It is in this fracture between *scientia sacra* and *scientia dominativa* that the Faustian myth emerges. Germany, once the cradle of alchemical mysticism, became a laboratory of modern knowledge, fertile ground for the tragic ambivalence of this new conception of humanity.

Faust symbolically represents the passage from the alchemist-priest to the modern magus, from sacred scientist to Promethean philosopher. He no longer seeks spiritual regeneration but absolute knowledge; not cosmic reintegration but the transcendence of the limits imposed upon man. With him, alchemy gives way to the boundless ambition of modern reason, and science separates definitively from the sacred.

6. *From Popular Faust to Literary Faust: Marlowe, Goethe, and the Modernity of Knowledge*

The Faust myth first surfaced in Germany with the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, a popular chapbook that moralized the stories attributed to the itinerant alchemist Johann Georg Faust (late fifteenth-early sixteenth century).

It was the broad popularity, numerical as much as cultural, of the *Volksbücher* that ensured the resonance and notoriety of the Faust figure. These cheaply printed, and often poorly edited books circulated widely, drawing on materials of diverse origin, almost always rooted in the medieval German and European tradition. The *Volksbücher* tradition thus represents a further element of cultural continuity between medieval alchemy and the genesis of the Faust figure.

The earliest example of a German *Volksbuch* is the *Lucidarius* (Gottschall and Steer, 1994), a text created in the Middle Ages through the reworking of the Latin *Elucidarium* by Honorius of Autun (Gottschall, 1991 and 1992). It addressed religious, cosmographic, and scientific themes through a dialogical structure between master and disciple. Its open and adaptable form guaranteed extraordinary editorial longevity, with continuous rewritings and updates that made it a reference text for centuries (Giordano, 2003). The *Faustbuch*, published in Frankfurt in 1587 by Johann Spies, constitutes the first written and structured version of the legend (Jantz, 1952). It drew heavily upon the *Lucidarius*, especially in cosmological and geographical sections, demonstrating the persistence and adaptability of the *Volksbücher*.

Set in an age marked by the Protestant Reformation, the *Faustbuch* reflects the cultural and religious anxieties of its time, opposing the thirst for knowledge to the threat of eternal damnation. Both texts, through their continuous reframing and reworking, testify to the role of the *Volksbücher* in rendering complex themes, from science to religion, accessible, while shaping the collective imagination across epochs and contexts. In this sense, they represent a crucial link between the symbolic-alchemical vision of the world and the new tragic figure of the modern intellectual embodied in Faust.

The historical figure to whom all these popular narratives refer is most likely Johann Georg Faust, a physician and charlatan active in early sixteenth-century Germany, notorious for his reputation as a necromancer, for his supposed pacts with the devil, and for his magical, astrological and alchemical practices (Füssel and Kreutzer, 1988). His name often appears in association with accusations of heresy, witchcraft, or fraud. Johannes Trithemius, abbot and occultist who counted among his students both Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus,

was the first to report the story concerning Doctor Faust (Brann, 1999; Theile and McCarthy, 2016: 65).

From the second half of the sixteenth century onward, the figure of Faust began to spread throughout German folklore in the form of popular tales, anecdotes, and moral legends, often transmitted orally. In these versions, Faust appears as an ambitious scholar, thirsty for knowledge and power, who strikes a pact with the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of worldly knowledge and pleasure. The devil frequently manifests himself under the guise of the servant Mephistopheles, embodiment of rational deception and spiritual corruption. The story was further enriched with religious comments and moral exhortations addressed to Christian readers. Although it initially enjoyed considerable success, the repetitiveness of the additions and the diminishing interest in theological polemics eventually reduced its popularity.

After its crystallization in the *Faustbuch* of 1587, the Faust legend enjoyed an extraordinary literary fortune. Its most celebrated reworkings are those of Christopher Marlowe and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who transformed the folkloric figure of the rebellious scholar into a universal symbol of modern humanity. In both cases, the story of the pact with the devil becomes an allegory of the tension between knowledge and limitation, between ambition and damnation.

From a Latin version of the *Historia* of Faust a German translation was made around 1572, left unpublished and preserved in the Wolfenbüttel manuscript, which also contains a series of tales and fables about magicians, rewritten and modified to be attributed to Doctor Faust. From this version an anonymous “P. F., Gentleman” produced an English translation under the title *The Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserved Death of Doctor Iohn Faustus*, of which an edition of 1592 survives. This version became the direct source for Christopher Marlowe’s tragedy *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (ca. 1592), which in turn inspired Goethe’s *Faust*.

In Marlowe’s Elizabethan drama, Faust appears as a theologian dissatisfied with scholastic knowledge and eager to access deeper truths through black magic. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* arose from the fusion of several versions of the German legend. The plot draws on European folklore motifs of diabolical pacts, combining them with the extraordinary aspects of Faust’s life. Marlowe had access to the story through the 1592 English translation of the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*. With some modifications, above all a heightened psychological complexity of the protagonist, his play nevertheless preserves

much of the original narrative. Written in blank verse, except for the comic scenes in prose, it exists in two principal versions (the A-text with 13 scenes; the B-text with 20 scenes), though modern editions divide it into five acts. The work emphasizes the contrast between divine (revealed) knowledge and human (forbidden) knowledge, and the tragic destiny of the man who dares to challenge God. Faust is not merely a sinner but also a tragic figure (Gardner, 1961: 322-323). Yet his thirst for knowledge remains central, leading him to be seduced by the advice of the two German necromancers Valdes and Cornelius, who draw him toward his self-destruction (Webb, 1999; Greg, 1946).

The name 'Cornelius', a magician or alchemist distinct from Cornelius Agrippa but clearly modeled on his reputation, becomes in Marlowe an archetype of forbidden knowledge, a liminal figure and a Renaissance residue of the medieval priest-magus. His name conveys the persistence of the *scientia occultorum* in moral narratives and in the *Volksbücher*, indicating a significant figure and a marker of the collective sedimentation of magical knowledge in European consciousness. His presence may be an important clue suggesting that Marlowe, beyond the English translation, also drew on popular sources in which this character appeared, likely evoking the occultist and necromantic side of Cornelius Agrippa (Brough, 1994). Disillusioned with academic learning, Faust accepts the teachings of magic and entrusts himself to Cornelius and Valdes, who introduce him to the forbidden art by exalting its promises and power. Under their guidance, study becomes invocation and operative practice, a prelude to the apparition of Mephistopheles.

The choice to embrace magic is rational and deliberate, typical of one who has carefully considered his decision, as can be seen in his words: «O what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, of omnipotence / Is promised to the studious artisan!» (1.53-55).

At the beginning Faust contemplates logic, but he soon renounces academic studies to devote himself to magic, forsaking the traditional methods of seeking truth. In so doing, he distorts his intellectual faculties, rationalizing his desires through a misuse of language and logic. He turns to magic not for knowledge but for trivial gain.

Marlowe's version is profoundly marked by Protestant theology and the sense of sin. Faust sells his soul for power and pleasure but finds neither peace nor salvation. He seems to seek freedom from religious constraints but ends up enslaved to Mephistopheles.

The spiritual and moral dimension remains central, yet the modern nucleus is already visible: knowledge as insatiable desire, as intellectual *hybris*.

7. *From the age of Enlightenment to Romanticism: The Modern Reinterpretation of Faust*

During the Enlightenment, the Faustian myth underwent a profound transformation. Rationalist and skeptical currents tended to interpret the legend less as a tale of diabolical pacts than as an allegory of human intellectual ambition and its inherent limits. Faust increasingly came to symbolize the conflict between unbounded curiosity and the moral, religious and social constraints imposed by reason and tradition. While chapbooks and popular theater continued to emphasize the moralistic dimension of punishment for hubris, a new horizon emerged in which Faust was viewed as a tragic emblem of humanity's insatiable desire for knowledge.

It was within the Romantic imagination, however, that the decisive turning point occurred. In the Romantic vision, Faust was no longer simply condemned for his pact with the devil but became a representative of the modern human condition, torn between infinite aspiration and the tragic awareness of finitude. The myth was reinterpreted as a drama of the soul, where the yearning for knowledge and the quest for absolute experience collided with imperfection, mortality and despair.

Viewed through the Romantic lens, where Faust becomes a drama of inward conflict, the myth aligns with Jung's account of alchemy as a symbolic grammar of psychic transformation aimed at the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the integrative telos of individuation (Jung, 1963: 104ff.). In this light, as Wilkerson argues, Faust's development enacts an *opus alchemicum*: operations of separation and refinement followed by recombination organize the work of the psyche, displacing alchemy from matter to subjectivity and orienting it toward a symbolic *coniunctio* capable of negotiating the tension between infinite striving and mortal finitude (Wilkerson, 2019: chs. V-VI)¹¹

With Goethe, the figure of Faust acquired an entirely new philosophical depth. *Faust. Der Tragödie erster Teil* (1808) and *Zweiter Teil* (1832) (Bohnenkamp, Henke and Jannidis, 2018)¹² condense the entire trajectory of modern thought. Faust becomes the symbol of restless, dissatisfied humanity, eternally aspiring to the infinite. His hunger for knowledge extends from magic to science, from love to politics, from contemplation to

¹¹ For an analysis of alchemy in Goethe and its influence on his works, see Gray, 2002.

¹² Open-access digital version available at faustedition.net. Last accessed 7 August 2025.

technology. In Goethe, Faust is not only damned but also redeemed, for his quest, though perilous, is driven by a creative and transcendent impulse (Kaufmann, 1949). Whereas in the philosophical outlook of the humanist period the magus resorted to angels or benevolent supernatural forces, here the protagonist turns instead to a diabolical being in order to pursue his aim.

The celebrated pact with Mephistopheles is no longer a purely juridical contract but a philosophical agreement:

*Werd ich zum Augenblicke sagen:
Verweile doch! du bist so schön!
Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen,
dann will ich gern zugrunde gehn.*

(If ever to the passing moment I say:
Stay a while, you are so fair!
Then you may bind me in chains,
then I will gladly perish.)

The decisive element is not sin but the instant in which Faust halts, in which he renounces the search. Only then can Mephistopheles triumph. Yet Faust never stops, for he is the man of becoming, of infinite desire, and it is precisely this that saves him.

In the transition from Marlowe to Goethe one perceives the evolution of the idea of knowledge: from Promethean sin to creative pursuit. The medieval alchemist sought redemption through matter; the modern Faust seeks truth through transgression. His figure embodies the birth of modern man, no longer submitting to the symbolic order of the cosmos but interrogating it, transforming it and forcing it. In *Faust I*, the revelation of the irrational that permeates language coincides with the surfacing of the irrational within the subject, undermining the ancient notion of a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. The crisis of the word that overwhelms Faust, believer and exceptional figure, is not merely individual. It destabilizes the entire architecture of knowledge founded on theodicy.

This more intimate and personal stance expands into a broader and political vision in *Faust II*, where knowledge is no longer revelation but project. Faust's determination in the second part to create a free society can be interpreted both as the ambition of an enlightened

despot and as a moment of redemption, for it transforms the restless striving of the individual into a constructive, albeit ambiguous, endeavor for humanity (Robertson, 2022).

The Faust legend thus becomes the symbolic locus in which the West stages its own transition: from the hierarchical universe of *scientia sacra* to the modernity of the knowing subject. It is a parabola that begins with alchemy and culminates in science, yet continues to interrogate, even today, the relationship between ethics and knowledge, between limit and desire, between man and the world.

8. Conclusion

The trajectory from medieval alchemy to the modern figure of Faust represents one of the most emblematic parables of Western culture. Alchemy, in its medieval form, was not merely a proto-scientific practice but a symbolic and spiritual system directed toward the regeneration of the human being and the reconciliation of matter and spirit. The transmutation of metals was ultimately the reflection of a deeper inner transmutation, in which the laboratory became the mirror of the soul.

With the advent of Humanism and the new centrality of man in the Renaissance, this inner tension was transformed into an unlimited aspiration to knowledge. The human microcosm was no longer content to read the signs of the world. Man sought to decipher them, dominate them, and bend them to his own will. It is within this context that the ambivalent figure of the philosopher-magus emerged, and with it the legend of Faust, the expression of both the power and the danger inherent in knowledge.

The hermetic dimension undergoes a dual process. On the one hand, Hermeticism is demonized and reduced to a dangerous illusion: in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* the diabolical pact exemplifies the condemnation of the improper use of occult knowledge, presented as a deviation from true Christian wisdom. On the other hand, particularly with Goethe, Hermeticism is reinterpreted as a symbol of the inner tension of modern man.

The Western "Renaissance man" should thus be seen not only in figures like Luther, Erasmus, or More, but also in Faust, whose restless intellect, boundless curiosity, daring pursuit of knowledge, and rebellion against constraint still resonate as defining traits of the modern spirit (Baigent and Leigh, 1997: xxiv; Lyndy, 1990; Gilchrist, 1991: 108-112). The contemporary reception of Faust, especially in the Romantic era, thus inherits the language

and symbols of Hermeticism (transformation, *coniunctio oppositorum*, the pursuit of *veritas occulta*) and reconfigures them in aesthetic, philosophical, and political terms.

If Marlowe's Faust appears almost as a hero, a skilled yet morally compromised physician who descends into magic, Goethe's Faust is a *Mensch unserer Zeit*, compelled to reckon with guilt and modernity: a divided figure seeking reconciliation with his past. In Goethe, the critique of medico-alchemical practice follows from the recognition that such medicine is no longer legitimate. As a modern individual shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and a rejection of obscurantism, he is also haunted by the guilt of deaths he caused in his youth (Lovett, 2022).

The passage from Hermetic treatises to moralizing *exempla*, and from these to the great modern tragedies of Marlowe and Goethe, marks a decisive shift: knowledge was no longer a path to salvation but became a tragic choice, capable of redeeming or damning. Faust is not only the alchemist heir of a tradition but also the symbol of modern man, torn between the desire for the infinite and the finitude of the human condition.

Thus, the myth of Faust reflects the transformations of Western thought: from *scientia sacra* to Promethean ambition, from cosmic wisdom to rational obsession. It is a myth that does not exhaust itself but continues to interrogate our own age. In this sense, Faust's alchemy is still our alchemy, and his search for absolute knowledge continues to resonate in the dilemmas of contemporary thought.

In Goethe's reworking, the legend of Faust condenses the entire parabola of modern thought. *Faust I* and *Faust II* elevate the restless scholar into the archetype of humanity's infinite striving, embodying both the danger and the creative potential of knowledge. His pact with Mephistopheles is no longer a mere contract of sin but a philosophical allegory. The moment he ceases to strive is the moment he is lost. Yet Faust never stops, he is the man of becoming, of endless desire, and it is this very restlessness that saves him.

The Faustian myth thus encapsulates the passage from the hierarchical cosmos of *scientia sacra* to the modern horizon of the knowing subject. It is a progression that begins with the crucible of the alchemist, traverses the Renaissance magus and the Reformation polemics, and culminates in Goethe's Romantic vision of infinite striving. In Faust, Western modern culture recognizes both its aspiration to absolute knowledge and the tragic awareness of its limits. The drive for knowledge and power, grounded in the medieval temptation to attain the absolute and crystallized in the Faustian paradigm, persists into the present as a rearticulation within digital technologies, whose architectures of datafication

and algorithmic prediction renew the promise, and the peril, of control (Federici, 2022; Gill, 2013). For this reason, the myth continues to resonate today. As a mirror of the tension between ethics and knowledge, power and responsibility, desire and mortality, it remains an inexhaustible allegory of the modern condition.

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