“Alchemy is based on the Hermetic view that man had become divided within himself, separated into two sexes, at the fall in the garden of Eden and could only regain his integral Adamic state when the opposing forces within him were reconciled” (Abraham 36-37).
As Knapp explains, “The alchemists, in their quest for philosophical gold, considered the world to be influenced and manipulated by a multitude of paired forces: wet and dry, cold and hot, sun and moon, male and female, proton and neutron, etc. When these opposing forces are harmonized and balanced through synthesis, creation is commenced. The Great Hermaphrodite is an amalgam of this union.”

“The Great Hermaphrodite” by Aaron Stewart Lewis Knapp

Recently, I wrote to Aaron Stewart Lewis Knapp regarding the alchemical artwork on the website Chemical Marriage and my intention to write a blog entry about the Rebis (or Alchemical Hermaphrodite). I received a timely and gracious response including the generous offer to “use any content I’ve made.” Thus, I have chosen to feature two of Knapp’s original pieces—“The Great Hermaphrodite” and “The
Engagement of the Rebis“—to begin my exploration of this ancient alchemical concept.

“The Rebis..., representing the union of opposites, is one of the most famous symbols in alchemy” (De Pascalis 56).

In various medieval and early modern alchemical texts, conjunction is one step on the varied and lengthy path of the Great Work. As explained by Gareth Roberts in *The Mirror of Alchemy*, conjunction may result in an androgyne (an alternative term for the Rebis).

**CONJUNCTION**

“[The] mixture or union of elements or substances figured as marriage, copulation, uniting of male and female or brother and sister or king and queen sometimes to form an androgyne” (Roberts 105).
Described as “the much coveted goal” of alchemy, the Rebis has repeatedly been “identified with the philosophers’ stone” and its sacred coincidence of opposites (Fabricius 90; DeVun 199). To many alchemists, alchemy is integrally connected with their understanding of divinity. To give one example, English alchemist Thomas Norton calls the practice “blessid & holye” in his 15th-century Ordinal of Alchemy (line 144). This and other such statements have led scholars to explore the complex connections among the Philosopher’s Stone, the Rebis, and the figure of Christ.

For example, in an article focused on alchemy and the “Jesus Hermaphrodite,” Leah DeVun argues, “Like Christ, the philosophers’ stone was a combination of nature and divinity, of corporeality and incorporeality, of opposites united in one subject” (203). Mark J. Bruhn likewise explores a sacred or religious connection with alchemy noting that “[t]hrough the Middle Ages the elusive Philosopher’s Stone came to be seen as a metaphor for Truth, or Christ, the Logos” (293).

(For readers interested in examining these concepts further, I’ve included a list of full citations near the end of this post. Also, please note that I have replicated DeVun’s plural possessive form of “philosophers’ stone” when quoting from her article.)

Having explored such connections among mysticism, alchemy, and the
Rebis in my own academic work, my intention when transmuting alchemical concepts to fiction was to ensure that conjunction and the Rebis were central features in *The Alchemists’ Council*. The following images from the *Rosarium Philosophorum* (University of Glasgow, MS Ferguson 210) provide an example of the traditional alchemical processes on which I based my fictional Sacrament of Conjunction:

Within the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, opposites conjoin to symbolize perfection.
Within The Alchemists’ Council, conjunction is not used to create the Philosopher’s Stone. Instead, the Council’s Sacrament of Conjunction maintains the Stone’s power. Without conjunction, the Stone (or Lapis) would gradually lose its Quintessence and, eventually, cease to exist. Since their existence depends upon the Lapis, both Council and Flaw dimensions would likewise cease to exist. Additionally, the elemental balance of the outside world is ensured by (and therefore dependent on) the Alchemists’ access to the Lapis. Thus,
Council alchemists must participate in the Sacrament of Conjunction in order to maintain all three dimensions and the millions of people residing therein.

Council Conjunction involves a complex ritual performed by the Elders. If the ritual succeeds, two alchemists conjoin into one body. Unlike images of the Rebis as depicted in real-world alchemical manuscripts, the conjoined alchemists of Council dimension appear as a single body with one head. Generally, only one of the two participants survives; the other is dissolved. Understandably, new Initiates to Council tend to find the sacrament appalling; they see it as a form of ritual sacrifice.

In this excerpt from Book One, Novillian Scribe Cedar explains an aspect of the conjunction to Initiate Jaden, who expresses her dismay in reply:

“We are conjoined as one — alchemically. The Rebis — every hermaphroditic image in the manuscripts — is merely a figurative representation of an alchemical process. In conjunction, the stronger essence dissolves the weaker essence and, in the process, becomes even stronger. To put it in terms of a simple analogy, if you were to eat an apple, you would, on some level, conjoin with that apple; but when the process ends, you would remain you, and the apple would have dissolved.”

“Saule wasn’t an apple. She was a human being!”

“Conjunction is a sacrament. Do not forget that, Jaden.”

“One person dies. It’s barbaric. Why haven’t I learned this before today?”

Despite her early objections, Jaden later bears witness to the process:
The Flaw in the Stone (Book Two of The Alchemists’ Council) focuses in part on the mutually conjoined couple Ilex and Melia. Unlike most conjoined pairs throughout Council history, both of these alchemists survive the Sacrament of Conjunction and must learn to cooperate as two people within one body. Though I will refrain from spoilers at this point, I will acknowledge that Ilex and Melia, like the Lapis itself, are flawed. But as readers of Book One already know, the flaw in the Stone is the feature that allows for free will. Alongside other characters in Book Two, Ilex and Melia illustrate that despite sacred tradition, rules of Council dimension can be broken and protocols must be renegotiated in the pursuit of a more equitable world.
The preceding engraving from the *Rosarium Philosophorum* has been coloured by Adam McLean. His images of the Rebis are available to view and purchase here: [Esoteric Prints–Alchemical Hermaphrodite](#).

To conclude this post, I call again upon Leah DeVun. As she reminds us, “The hermaphrodite in alchemy was of course a purely intellectual conceit. . . . Nevertheless, there was something transgressive about them. The fluidity of sexes in the alchemical hermaphrodite hinted at the fluidity of boundaries between metals, which alchemy argued could be
changed through the art of the alchemist. Whether the boundaries in question divided the sexes or the categories of humanity and divinity, the hermaphrodite of alchemical literature indicated that such boundaries were crossable” (DeVun 217).

WORKS CITED