

YUETHWORT—HERBAL ALCHEMY

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All that glitters is not gold; often have you heard that told.  
—William Shakespeare, the Merchant of Venice 1597

Introduction

Youthwort is an unfamiliar albeit quite old name for the sundew plant. There is an intriguing reason for how it must have gotten this curious name. Historically the sundew is associated with alchemy. The name “youthwort” is obviously derived directly thereof; and as you will see, “sundew” may possibly be as well. Rather surprising are the implications; they suggest that extract of sundew was apparently the fabled Philosopher’s Stone and Elixir of Life! During the Middle-Ages alchemists found a more practical application as well for which it continues to be used today. There is certainly far more to the history of the sundew than the average person would imagine.

Most people know at least a little about alchemy, which is the ancient study that led to modern chemistry and pharmacology. Paracelsus, 1493-1541, was an eminent Renaissance figure in alchemy at a time when the practice was becoming truly scientific. Paracelsus was the first to use the word “chemistry” which was then known as the “art of distillation” (Pachter, 1951). Paracelsus also coined the term spagyrics which is basically herbal alchemy.

Alchemy is not only an archaic practice, as you might expect—there are present day practitioners. So while I may sometimes write this article in the past tense, there are those who believe in its tenets even today! (And I have also read fanciful stories of immortal adepts, such as Count de Saint-Germain, from ancient times, purportedly living today!)

Philosopher’s Stone and the Elixir of Life

Most interesting is the alchemist’s *Magnum Opus* (Great Work, not a book) which treats (among other things) the manufacture of Philosopher’s Stone. What is Philosopher’s Stone composed of? This is alchemy’s greatest secret. It is not necessarily a stone—it might be a solid, liquid, or powder (Time, 1990). Philosopher’s Stone is used in the transmutation of cheaper metals into gold. (Gold has special significance in alchemy because, unlike many other metals, it does not tarnish. As such, it was viewed as incorruptible, and alchemists were certain it is related to immortality.) The liquid state of Philosopher’s Stone is the Elixir of Life, which of course is reputed to restore youth. This liquid is a gold tincture (medicinal solution in alcohol; for tinting) and, like the saying that “all that glitters is not gold,” the Elixir is not usually made out of gold, but is typically only golden in color (Time, 1990). The 13th century Dominican monk Albertus Magnus warned about “deceivers” tinting lesser metals gold (Time, 1990). As you will see, sundew extract at one time seems to have been such a tinting agent.

Sun and Dew

There are many books showing illustrations depicting the manufacture of Philosopher’s Stone and of the transmutation of base metals into gold. These give intriguing clues to the symbolic alchemical significance of sundews. Alchemical illustrations are allegorical, in order to be intentionally cryptic so the alchemist’s secrets could be kept hidden. For example, one such arcane book important in alchemy is named the *Mutus Liber* (Mute Book, first published in 1677), since it has few words. Only an adept alchemist could fully interpret these enigmatic texts.

Two important symbols which were common and are now well understood were the Sun, and

oddly enough, dew. The Sun corresponds with gold among the seven “Hermetic Metals”. Dew was considered a divine fluid and constituted the *prima materia* of the alchemical process (Time, 1990). Alchemists were frequently depicted as collecting dew as part of their essential activities, as shown in the *Mutus Liber*. A cloth was drawn over the ground and the dew was then wrung out into suitable containers.

The *Mutus Liber* demonstrates the perceived importance of dew in giving reference to certain Bible passages. These are Genesis 27:28, 39 and Deuteronomy 33:13, 28. Briefly stated, dew was thought to be Heaven-sent. Making use of dew and other substances was an alchemical tradition of attempting to recreate the essence of the biblical Tree of Life. This is elaborated in the Ripley scroll, which is attributed to fifteenth century English monk George Ripley (Time, 1990). A golden tree symbolizing the Tree of Life occurs frequently in Paracelsus’ works as well (Pachter, 1951).

Not all the divine dew collected was a result of condensed water vapor—some was produced by plants exuding water (a process known as guttation). One extraordinary producer of dew is lady’s mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris* L.). The genus name *Alchemilla* was derived from the word alchemy by Linnaeus precisely for this reason (Reader’s, 1986). This plant was used by alchemists in the attempted production of Philosopher’s Stone and Elixir of Life (Reader’s, 1986).

An old herbal work I was able to find provides proof that the sundew was in all likelihood another herb used to create Philosopher’s Stone, and was used in medicine as well. Gerard’s Herbal was first printed in England in 1597, and is frequently republished (in part, at least). The Herbal described two sundew species—*Drosera intermedia* Hayne and *D. rotundifolia* L.—both with the common name “youthwort.” Pre-Linnaean names for these plants are given respectively as *Ros Solis folio oblongo*, and *Ros Solis folio rotundo*. In Medieval Latin the word *Ros* translates as dew, while

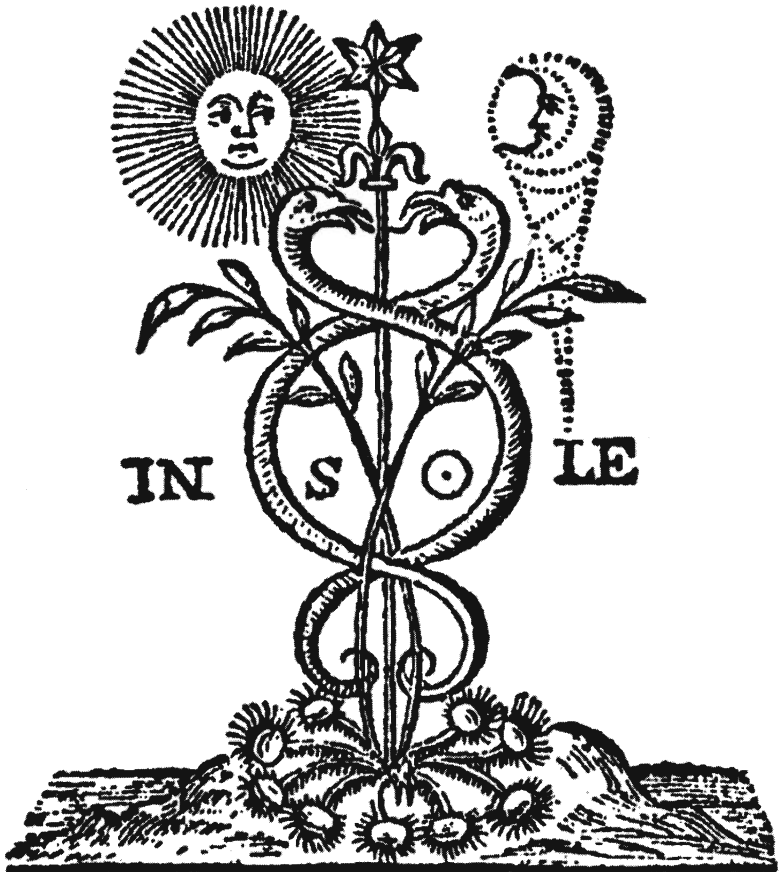


Figure 1: Early seal of the spagyric laboratory ‘Soluna’, founded in Germany 1921. *In Sole*, Latin = In Sun.

*Solis* of course translates as sun. Here we find the two most important symbols in alchemy together: Sun-dew.

The purported herbal tonic usage for sundews is as follows: "It strengthens and nourishes the body especially if it is distilled into wine, and that liquor thereof which the common people do call *Rosa Solis*." The aforementioned alchemic connections are suggested as well: "The distilled water hereof that is drawn forth with a glass still, is of a glittering yellow color like gold, and colors silver put therein like gold". —Note the reference to the gold color; hence golden tincture or Philosopher's Stone! A more recent source shows a golden "tincture" extract of *D. rotundifolia* (Polunin, 1992). Also note in Gerard's Herbal that the gold-tinted metal appears to be the sort of deceptive false gold mentioned previously.

Gerard's Herbal continues: "Later physicians have thought this herb to be a rare and singular remedy for all those that have consumption of the lungs, especially the distilled water thereof. For as the herb does keep hold fast to the moisture and dew..." As early as the 13th century, alchemists (yes, the book states "alchemists") had recorded positive results from the use of sundew extract in the treatment of consumption of the lungs, or tuberculosis (Reader's, 1986).

Nowadays this property of the sundew is used primarily as an expectorant in cough medicine (Fluck, 1988). The constituent is plumbagine and hydroxy-plumbagine (=droserone). So we see that old herbals record magical usage by alchemists, and medical usage by physicians. In both magic and medicine the sundew was esteemed for its dew.

Another book, *Green Magic* (Gordon, 1977), gives basically the same information and contains a little more: Silver put into the water distilled from the sundew turns golden. In Italy was made a kind of liqueur called Rossoli. The sundew was used as a remedy for that all too common illness—old age; hence the moniker youthwort. Remember, a tincture is an alcoholic solution. Obviously *Rosa Solis* and Rossoli are related to the Elixir of Life. As you can see, it was in use over a wide area, from at least England to Italy. Oxford English Dictionary tells that the alcoholic drink was known in France, Portugal, and Spain as well.

Finally, in my quest for information I was amazed to find an illustration (see Figure 1) with classical alchemical symbols which features *D. rotundifolia* (Roob, 2001). Surprisingly in this one the serpents of the *caduceus* are entwined around the inflorescence of the sundew. More commonly serpents are shown clinging to the Tree of Life. The originator of the seal, Alexander von Bernus, was very interested in the work of Paracelsus. I wonder what secrets he may have uncovered.

### Closing Remarks

Should you choose to use sundew extract as a medication, please be advised to use as prescribed. What is the efficacy of youthwort, does it really work? According to alchemists, the answer would be a resounding YES. It is fun to imagine that perhaps modern science might rediscover some secret property of our precious glittering sundew. However I would not suggest you drink a beverage of it in hope of restoring youth. It may actually be quite toxic. Do not be deceived, it certainly does not have the power to transmute metals! I would like to close this article with a quote from Paracelsus' first public lecture: "The end of alchemy is not to change lead into gold. The end of alchemy is to find new ways to heal." (Susac, 1969)

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