

The Use of Dew in Alchemy

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Dew, as the condensation of water vapor from the air at night was considered by some alchemists to be the starting liquid from which they prepared a special healing elixir. Dew was considered to harbor special energies, but it had to be gathered at special times and in the proper manner.

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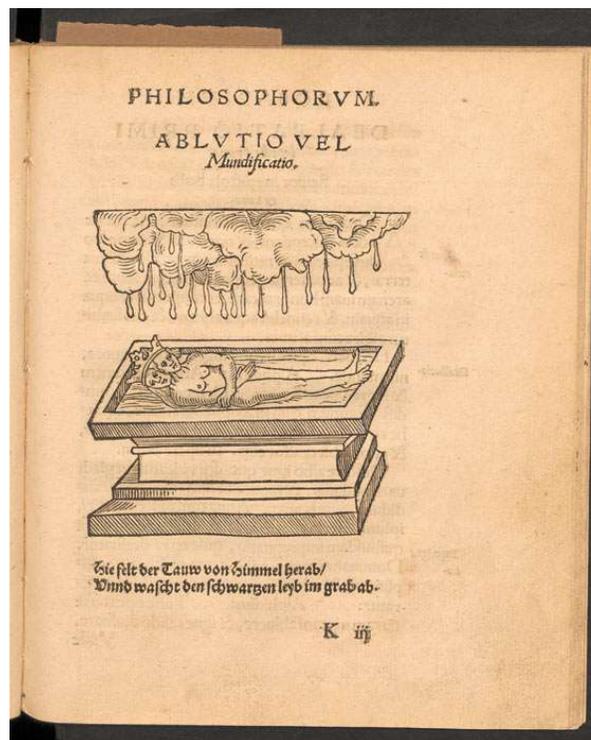
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Dew as Sublimation Droplets

Antoine-Joseph Pernety in his *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique* (1758), mentions the term *dew* a few times as defined by alchemists. He writes that *dew* was used as a symbol for condensation droplets that appear after sublimation in their glass vessels. He says that this idea was founded on what several alchemists believed that the dew was the reservoir of the universal spirit of nature.



Rosarium Philosophorum, Frankfurt, 1550

In the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, we find a stage in the alchemical process called *Ablutio vel Mundificatio*, with the German text at the bottom of the page: *Hie fiele der Tauw von Himmel herab/ Unnd wascht den schwarzen leyb im grab ab*, what translates as "The dew fell down from heaven/ And washed the black body in the grave." This is clearly a laboratory process, in which dew is the term for the sublimated vapors falling down again as drops on the black *Prima Materia*.

Natural Dew

In regard to natural dew, gathered in the months of May and September, Pernety remarks that some Chemists regarded it as the true Matter of the Hermetic work. "They said that it takes two Matters, one male, the other female. They gave the name of male to the fall or September dew, and that of female to that of the month of May." "The dew of spring participates more from the cold of the winter that preceded it, and the other from heat and hot summer."

Another term for dew is *Water of the Equinoxes*, what Pernety describes as: "It is properly the dew of spring and that of autumn, whose properties are admirable for the cure of many diseases, when they are worked by a skillful hand in Spagyric work."

It is clear that Pernety who was learned in all the alchemical literature of his time, knew that alchemists considered dew, be it sublimation droplets in their vessels, or natural dew used for alchemical operations, was endowed with healing energies.

Mutus Liber

In *Mutus Liber*, the Mute Book, published in La Rochelle, in 1677, we see the alchemist and his wife collecting dew from blankets hung over a meadow. They put the dew in glass vessels. Afterwards, the dew undergoes various operations to finally produce the *Aurum Potabile*, or Drinkable Gold. The ram and bull indicate that the dew should be collected during these astrological signs, Aries and Taurus, or April and May. Both Sun and Moon, and a wide array of cosmic rays shine down on the meadow, impregnating the dew with their etheric energies.



Mutus Liber, 4th plate

Armand Barbault

The Frenchman Armand Barbault (1906-1974) based himself on *Mutus Liber* for his own alchemical preparations using dew and sap of plants repeatedly impregnating the *Prima Materia* (First Matter) for which he used a cloth of earth. By his process he produced the *Potable Gold*, or *Vegetable Gold* which had medicinal properties.

Barbault said that dew, like sap in plants, possesses special properties, and that the ancient spagirists made use of both of them in their concoctions which were designed to capture universal energies. He wrote about his alchemical work in detail in his book *L'or du millièème matin* (*Gold of a Thousand Mornings*), published in 1969. You can read my article of [Gold of a Thousand Mornings](#) for a

summary of his work.



Mutus Liber, detail, distilling the dew

Barbault might also have read [*Chymical secrets and rare experiments in physick & philosophy with figures collected and experimented*](#) by Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665), published in London, 1683. In the chapter of *Opus Magnum ex Virginea Terra*, it talks about taking Virgin Earth and imbibing it with dew. Barbault did the same thing, in contrast with Mutus Liber (upon which he based himself) where there is no earth visible in the vessels. From the beginning of this chapter:

Take reddish rich Virgin Earth in ♀, impregnate it with ☉, ☽, serene and dew, till the end of May: Then imbibe sprinklingly with dew gathered in May, and dry in ☉, expose all Night to the ☽ and Air, securing it from Rain. Still when it is dry, imbibe and turn the Earth often...

The same book mention dew in other alchemical recipes, for example, from an abbot called Abbot Boucaud: "Put your Oar of ♁, or Lithargy in one or more Cucurbites, and pour upon it of the aforesaid distilled {water}, or distilled Dew, so much as may cover it the breadth of seven or eight fingers, ..."

Under the chapter *Concerning May Dew*, we find an interesting alchemical description of dew:

MAY Dew is the true Minera of the dissolvent. Aug. This Liquor is such, that if it be gathered at a certain Season, two Uses, &c. One, that hereby you may infuse Gold in a Liquor of its proper Seed, when you begin first to dissolve it, &c. Cosmop. But this {water} is said to be the Menstruum of the World: Speaking of the Element of {water}, the Menstruum of the World is tripartite, &c. the more pure resolved into Air. There is in the Air an Occult

Nourishment of Life, which we call Dew in the Night, and in the day-time {water}, rarefied, whose invisible congealed Spirit is of more value than the whole Earth, Idem. The principal Matter of Metals is the Humidity of the Air (the Aërial Substance) mixt with heat, ☿ prepared aforesaid is governed by the rays of the ☉ and ☽ prepared in the Sea; not one place or one Countrey will afford it you. Experience testifieth, that ☉ is not sought for save in Mountains, because it can be seldom had in a Plain.

This text tells us that the dew contains an energy that is present in the air, an energy that nourishes all life. It is here called the Minera(l), that is a physical substance, that contains the dissolvent. The dissolvent refers to the Universal Dissolvent, also called Mercury and Alkahest, names for life-energy.

So, *Mutus Liber* is not the only alchemical book that uses dew for an alchemical preparation. It seems that other alchemists were using dew, but it was not a widely spread practice. Most alchemists were more interested in making gold, or in chemical processes. Nevertheless, in the Western world, many pharmacists were practicing alchemists, preparing alchemical medicines, and some of them knew of the special energies in dew, collecting mainly from grass, but sometimes also from special plants.

Guttation Plants

As you can see in the *Mutus Liber* book, dew was collected from meadows, and thus grass. Barbault did the same. But alchemists noticed that certain plants forms droplets which stayed long after the dew of on other plants had evaporated.

These drops were also called *Pearls of the Chymists*. The water collected on the leaves is not dew but created within the leaf itself through a process called guttation. The plant pulls up more water than it can use and the root pressure forces some of it to exude through the leaves through special structures called water stomata or hydathodes, forming the droplets. The result is water that is high in minerals, organic acids, sugars and even enzymes.

One such plant is Lady's Mantle.



Lady's mantle

Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*), also called the Little Alchemist, has a long history as a sacred, magickal herb. The name was given to this plant by German herbalist Hieronymus Bock in 1539, because alchemists would gather the dew that collected on the plant's foliage because they remained on the leaves after the morning dew had dried on other plants. They use it to enhance the potency of their formulas.



Sundew

Another guttation plant is the sundew (*Drosera* genus), a carnivorous plant that secretes many droplets at its leaves, attracting insects which are then trapped because of the stickiness of the droplets. The 'dew' of round-leaved sundews once formed the basis of anti-ageing potions as people believed it was a source of youth and virility.

Conradus Khunrath (1555-1613), brother of the famous Heinrich Khunrath, but himself also a Paracelsian alchemist, mentions the medicinal properties of sundew in his *Medulla Destillatoria*, published in 1594. He writes that like the May dew, the alchemists also regarded the glandular secretion drops of the sundew plant as "water impregnated with astral seeds", and "through the art of alchemy can be extracted and the pure separated from the impure. It is a flower of the sun, and its rays and influence, more than any other vegetable, expand (just as among all other metals gold does), whereby it also surpasses all other herbs and vegetables in form, color, nature, virtues and powers."

In *The Herball or, Generall historie of plantes*, published in 1597 in London, we find the many medicinal properties of the Sundew which had the English folk name of Youthwort, in Medieval Latin *Ros Solis* (*Ros*=dew; *Solis*=sun).

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*.

Sundew flourisheth in summer, it flowereth in May or June: it is to be gathered when the weather is most dry and calm. The distilled water hereof that is drawn forth with a glass still, is of a glittering yellow colour like gold, and coloureth silver put therein like gold.

This sounds very much like the golden colored elixir the alchemists talked about. Maybe they took this sundew preparation as special medicinal elixir. After the sundew plant was used to cure various ailments.

In 1921, a modern alchemist, Alexander von Bernus, founded the [Soluna Laboratorium](#), which produced naturopathic remedies the spagyric way. They still exist today. Their trademark logo shows Sun (=Sulfur), Moon (=Mercury) and Star (=Salt), with intertwined serpents around a ... sundew plant!



For those who are interested in guttation plants, Burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*), and Goatweed (*Aegopodium podagraria*) also produce guttation drops.



Burnet



Goatweed

Dew from the Moon and Stars

Where did the alchemist's interest in dew come from? They understood that dew was formed by water vapor rising up from the ground to the air and condensing at night when the temperature drops, as it was already mentioned by Aristotle (384–322 BC) in his *Meteorologica*.

However there was also a common belief that held that dew was an astral vapor sent down by the Moon and in smaller quantities by the stars (because dew happens on cloudless nights when the Moon and stars are visible). We find this in Pliny's *Natural history* and Plutarch's *Concerning the face which appears in the orb of the moon*.

The Swiss/German alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541) probably read those accounts, as he explains in *Concerning the Generations of the Elements*:

This vapor (excreted from the stars) flows down every day from the stars, and falls on the earth. During the day it is consumed by the sun. But by night it glides down to the earth before the sun rises, and is called dew. Through the winter, or during a cold autumn, it is frozen, and becomes hoar-frost. This is nothing else than the exudation of the stars in the whole firmament, which thus falls drop by drop. For as boiling water evaporates upwards towards the sky, or sends its dew on high, so the stars send their exudation downwards. (The hermetic and alchemical writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus, by Arthur E. Waite, Vol. I, 1894, page 221)

Paracelsus' writings were very influential to other alchemists of his time and those that came after him. The term dew is also used for the universal energies coming down from the stars, and contained in the physical dew drops. It seems that they didn't always make a distinction between the two.

Paracelsus used dew in some of his preparations:

Firm Tincture. Take Ib.j. of sal alkali, the same quantity of calx of eggs, two parts of clavellated cinder, also four parts of the dew of heaven. Decoct all these to the third part. Afterwards thrice distil through the alembic. Perform this diligently and you will have very strong water, with which Mercury and all bodies of metals are dissolved...(ibid., in *A Manual of Paracelsus the Great*, page 360)

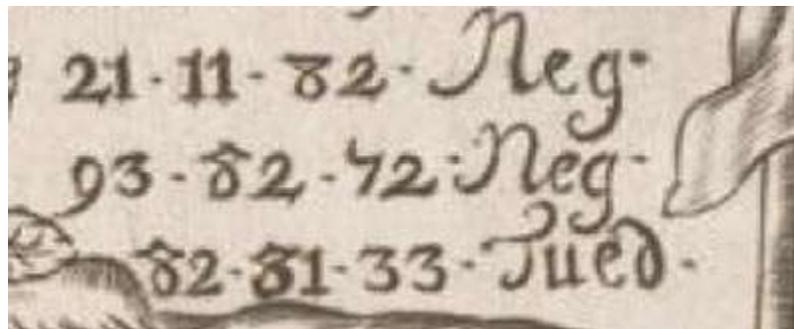
It was sometimes explained that the water vapor rises from the earth to the Moon and stars, and then they send it back but in a purified form. Because the Moon is associated with fertility, the water sent back by the Moon is therefore beneficial and fertile. The Moon was believed to nourish the plants and animals with her dew. In Greek mythology it was the Moon goddess Selene who sent forth her rays and forms the dew making the trees and plants grow.



Mutus Liber, 1st plate

When we look at the very first plate of *Mutus Liber*, we see that the alchemist is awakened by an angel blowing a trumpet, a reference to the heavenly influence to awaken the alchemist and the spiritual energies necessary in the Great Work. The heaven contains only the Moon and stars (it's night), which, send down the energized dew in the fields below.

Under the text we see the following notation:



These notations are written from right-to-left, as in Hebrew, and thus refer to:

Genesis 28: 11 + 12

Genesis 27: 28 + 39

Deuteronomy 33: 18 + 28

Genesis 27:28, "So God give thee of the dew of heaven, and of the fat places of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine."

Genesis 27:39, "And Isaac his father answered and said unto him: Behold, of the fat places of the earth shall be thy dwelling, And of the dew of heaven from above."

So, right from the start we are show that the dew is central to the Great Work.

This same Biblical quotation appears on the title page of John Dee's *Hieroglyphic Monad* (1564, a century earlier than *Mutus Liber*), a work very influential on the alchemists and on the Rosicrucian movement that would follow. The quote is at the bottom of the page.



Hieroglyphic Monad, 1564

DE RORE CAELI, ET PINGVEDINE TERRAE, DET TIBI DEVS. Gen. 27.

De rore caeli, et pinguedine terrae, det tibi Deus. Gen. 27

John Dee probably interpreted the *dew of heaven* as divine grace, instead of using dew for laboratory work.

In 1615, the famous Rosicrucian work *Confessio Fraternitatis* was published at Cassel, together with another text, *Consideratio Brevis* of Philip à Gabella, which contains the same Genesis 27: 28 verse on the title page version. Not surprisingly, the *Consideratio Brevis* quotes extensively from John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*.

This is still half a century before *Mutus Liber* appeared. It seems that some alchemists were not aware that dew had special qualities and could be used for alchemical laboratory work, although the special energies of morning dew were well known among country folks.

The Rosicrucian Order also took the term dew into their very name. *Ros* is Latin for dew, and *Crucis* means crucible or flask. It is the esoteric meaning for the usual rose and cross symbolism. The usual symbol for the Rosicrucian Order is a picture of a rose flower with dew droplets on the petals.

Dew in Folklore

In many countries we have folklore associated with dew and its magical properties. Here are just some examples.

In England, girls and women would roll naked in the early morning dew of the month of May to regain their beauty. A traditional rhyme claimed that:

The fair maid who on the first of May
Goes to the fields at break of day
And washes in dew from the hawthorn tree
Will ever after handsome be.

The dew was also believed to prevent freckles, sunburn, chapping, and wrinkles during the coming year. Dew would cure or prevent headaches, skin ailments and sore eyes. Applied to the eyes, it ensures alertness and feeling refreshed. Walk barefoot in the dew cures soreness, prevents corns and bunions and ensures healthy feet.

Ireland also had a profound belief in the curative properties of dew. Dr. Gerard Boate, Thomas Molineux and others wrote in *A Natural history of Ireland*, published in Dublin in 1725:

The English women and gentlewomen in Ireland, as in England, did use in the beginning of the summer to gather good store of dew, to keep it by

them all the year after for several good uses both of physick and otherwise. Their manner of collecting and keeping it was this. In the month of May especially, and also in part of the month of June, they would go forth betimes in the morning, and before sun-rising, into a green field, and there either with their hands strike off the dew from the tops of the the herbs into a dish, or else throwing clean linen cloths upon the ground, take off the dew from the herbs into them, and afterwards wring it out into dishes: and thus they continue their work until they have got a sufficient quantity of dew according to their intentions. That which is gotten from the grass will serve, but they chose rather to have it from the green corn, especially wheat, if they can have the convenience to do so, as being persuaded that this dew hath more vertues and is better for all purposes than that which hath been collected from the grass or other herbs. The dew thus gathered they put in a glass bottle and so set it in a place where it may have the warm sunshine all day long, keeping it there all the summer; after some days rest some dregs and dirt will settle to the bottom; the which when they perceive, they pour off all the clear dew into another vessel, and fling away those settings. This they do often as those good women see any notable quantity; they still pour off the the clear dew from them: doing thus al summer long, until it be clear to the bottom. The dew thus thoroughly purified looked whitish, and kept good for a year or two after.

In Scotland (especially at Arthur's Seat, Calton Hill and Blackford Hill near Edinburgh) many people would go to wash their face in morning dew in May for luck and fertility. This lasted for hundreds of years, even lasting until the 1960's. Even in 1987 a reporter wrote that a few people were still doing it.



Three girls wash their face in the morning dew at the top of Arthur's Seat during the traditional May Day ceremony in Edinburgh, 1987.

Dew on magical herbs or trees would have special properties as James M. Mackinlay wrote in *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs* (1893), chapter 17:

The hawthorn had likewise another mystic property attributed to it. The dew on its branches on the first of May had the power of giving beauty to the maiden who washed her face with it. May-dew from the grass was equally efficacious, except when gathered from within a fairy ring, as the fairies would in that case counteract the influence of the charm. A curative power was also ascribed to May-dew. Till quite lately there was a belief in some parts of England that a weakly child would be made strong by being drawn over dewy grass on the morning in question. To effect a complete cure, the treatment had to be repeated on the two following mornings. Dew from the grave of the last person buried in the parish churchyard was counted specially remedial if applied to the affected part before sunrise on May-morning.

Russian herbalists use dew collected from chamomile on the New Moon in the evening to treat nervous and psychological disorders. They also believe that morning dew will cure diseases and ailments. They often used rituals and prayers when gathering the dew.

In Finland, the dew formed on midsummer night was believed to have healing powers. The dew of Midsummer is said to bestow health to whomever drinks of it. Morning dew collected from red clovers can bring beauty and charm.

Icelandic folklore says that if you bathe naked in the morning dew on the morning of June 24, you will keep aging at bay for longer, or you will be cured of your ailments.