

RESEARCH ARTICLE

On cathedrals and alchemy: some modern interpretations of medieval iconography by Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant

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Abstract

This article explores the theme of the alchemical interpretations of medieval iconography through the life and the writings of Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant (c.1590–between 1652 and 1665). This French alchemist and poet indeed composed a dissertation on some of the ornaments on the main facade of Notre-Dame de Paris, in which he asserted that the sculptures that adorn it conceal alchemical allusions. This curious thesis, written by a practitioner who was in contact with leading political figures of his time, such as the diplomat Léon Bouthilier (1608–52) or the marshal Abraham Fabert d'Esternay (1599–1662), did not emerge from nothing. It is part of an exegetical literature that combines alchemical theories, scriptural allegories, and a sense of heritage for Gothic monuments that were often in disrepair at the time. Far from being anecdotal, Gobineau's treatise continued to be studied and read over the following centuries by alchemists, writers, art critics and even archaeologists. This influence, albeit discreet, justifies rediscovering his life and his dissertation. It also reminds us of the need to consider works linked to Western esotericism in the study of European cultural and scientific history.

In 1856, the historian Ferdinand de Guilhermy (1808–78) and the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–79) published a *Description de Notre-Dame, cathédrale de Paris*. Dedicated to the archbishop of the city, then Marie Dominique Auguste Sibour (1792–1857), the aim of their work was to summarize the historical knowledge accumulated about the building and to finance its restoration (which lasted from 1844 to 1864). This study is still interesting to read today, not only for its historiographical qualities and for the personalities of its authors, but also for all the erudite information it contains. For example, in the chapter devoted to the central portal of the church, and after recalling the biblical identification of one of his bas-reliefs, the two scholars state, 'This interpretation departs somewhat from the explanations that have been produced since the sixteenth century by the Hermetists, led by Gobineau de Montluisant.'¹ A handful of cases follow, implying (among other things) that the prophetic figure of Job is a cryptic symbol of the philosophers' stone. This strange assertion takes us back a few centuries, to a time when chemistry and alchemy were not yet entirely

¹ Eugène Viollet le Duc and Ferdinand de Guilhermy, *Description de Notre-Dame cathédrale de Paris*, Paris: Bance, 1856, p. 38. Passage initially present in Ferdinand de Guilhermy, *Itinéraire archéologique de Paris*, Paris: Bance, 1855, p. 48.

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distinct,² and when the latter flourished in a profusion of images and allegories.³ This article invites the reader to follow the footsteps of that Gobineau de Montluisant mentioned by the restorers of Notre-Dame, presenting his biography and his works, his peculiar hermetic interpretations (those linked to what was sometimes called the ‘art of Hermes’, in other words alchemy), and his posterity.

Gobineau, a gentleman from Chartres

The name Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant stands out in Metz in the early 1630s. Annexed to France in 1552 before being granted its own parliament in 1633, the city was undergoing major changes at the time, and the three works published by our author were part of this intense renewal. The first, entitled *Le Sacré Mont Carmel* (1632), is a versified panegyric written for the Carmelite religious order and dedicated to Anne de Fabert, the sister of the future marshal of France of the same name. The second, *L'Ordre sacré de la sainte prestrise* (1633), consists of a short poem composed to celebrate and honour the Catholic priests, who had become the target of much satire at the time.⁴ The third, *La Royale Thémis* (1634), appears to be a work of circumstance: in the first part, the poet describes celestial and terrestrial justice, then praises, using acrostics, the members of the fledgling Messin Parliament. The names of some of them still ring familiar bells, such as Nicolas Fouquet (1615–80), Louis XIV's future superintendent of finances; Mathurin Malebranche (1591–1666), Louis XIII's physician and uncle to Nicolas Malebranches (1638–1715); and Nicolas Rigault (1577–1564), a philologist formerly in charge of the Royal Library. The magistrate Pierre Leclerc de Lesseville (d. 1680) is also honoured, and it was no doubt thanks to his protection that Gobineau became secretary–auditor of the enquiries at this same parliament (the latter having been the secretary of the former, as will be seen below). However, Gobineau's poetic work remained minor and was received with varying degrees of acclaim. A century later, for example, the Jansenist polemicist Claude-Pierre Goujet (1697–1767) described his verses as ‘bad’.⁵ On the other hand, the bibliographer Gabriel Peignot (1767–1849) hailed him as a ‘prolific and determined maker of acrostics’.⁶ It seems, however, that the author's courtly, baroque style, full of hyperboles and metaphors, quickly consigned his poems to oblivion.

Despite the fate of his poetic works, the memory of Gobineau was, in the end, not completely lost, as shown by several biographical notes devoted to him. In addition to that of Goujet, they were written by the men of letters Claude-Sixte Sautreau de Marsy (1740–1815) and Barthélémy Imbert (1747–90),⁷ by the historian Guillaume-Ferdinand

² The general term ‘chymistry’ has been proposed to remedy this ambiguity. See William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, ‘Alchemy vs. chemistry: the etymological origins of a historiographic mistake’, *Early Science and Medicine* (1998) 3(1), pp. 32–65. Given the subject of our article, we will mainly talk about alchemy here.

³ For an introduction to this topic see Jennifer M. Rampling, ‘Art and representation: the alchemical image in the Islamic and Christian Middle Ages’, in Charles Burnett and Sébastien Moureau (eds.), *A Cultural History of Chemistry*, London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, vol. 2, pp. 149–84.

⁴ On this poem see Alain Cullière, ‘Le prêtre hors de cour: Réflexions sur les vers d'Esprit Gobineau (1633)’, in Danielle Pister (ed.), *L'image du prêtre dans la littérature classique (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles)*, Actes du colloque organisé par le Centre ‘Michel Baude – Littérature et spiritualité’ de l'Université de Metz, 20–21 novembre 1998, Bern: Peter Lang, 2001, pp. 3–15.

⁵ Claude-Pierre Goujet, *Bibliothèque française, ou Histoire de la littérature française*, Paris: Hippolyte-Louis Guérin and P.G. Le Mercier, 1753, vol. 15, pp. 346–7.

⁶ Philomneste [Gabriel Peignot], *Le livre des singularités*, Dijon and Paris: Victor Lagier and Pelissonnier, 1841, p. 437.

⁷ Claude-Sixte Sautreau de Marsy and Barthélémy Imbert, *Annales poétiques, depuis l'origine de la poésie française*, Paris: Merigot, 1781, vol. 19, p. 241.

Teissier (1779–1834),⁸ by the councillor at the Royal Court of Metz Emmanuel Michel,⁹ by the councillor of the Paris Court of Appeal Auguste Benoît,¹⁰ by the writer Jacques-Albin-Simon Collin de Plancy (1794–1881)¹¹ and by the archivist Lucien Merlet (1827–98),¹² as well as by one of his direct descendants, the general Charles de Montluisant (1820–94).¹³ Gisèle Mathieu (b. 1935) finally carried out a more detailed study in 1968,¹⁴ while Didier Kahn (b. 1960), for his part, did not forget to mention him in his article on ‘Alchemy and architecture’ published in 1998.¹⁵ Based on these various sources and on original research, his life can be retraced as follows.

Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant is believed to have been born around 1590 in Chartres. The Saint-Saturnin parish register records the birth of an Esprit Gobineau, son of Jehan Gobineau and Louyse Gruault, on 25 October 1590.¹⁶ However, this indication contradicts the genealogy commonly accepted for this character, who is said to be the son of the alderman Jacques Gobineau and his wife Françoise Boilleau; for want of conclusive evidence, we can only mention these two lineages here. According to Lucien Merlet, Esprit Gobineau took the name Montluisant from a family property in Luisant, on the outskirts of his birth town. For a time, he worked for Claude de Montescot (1542–1622), the king’s local treasurer, who probably helped him obtain a position as secretary to the magistrate Pierre Leclerc de Lesseville, then a member of the Parliament of Paris.¹⁷ Gobineau preceded his employer to Metz, where he married Claude Pierron, widow of a certain Didier Renault, on 8 May 1628. He likely received minor orders in the years 1632–3, and became, as we have seen, secretary–auditor of the enquiries at the local parliament when Leclerc de Lesseville was appointed there (from 1633 onwards). The poet appears to have been well integrated into the Messin high society, as his dedication of *Le Sacré Mont Carmel* to Anne de Fabert proves. He was married for a second time on 14 January 1641 to Catherine Lucat, widow of Dominique Toutlemonde; they had a son named Estienne (1642–80), who was to become a prosecutor at the same parliament.¹⁸ It was probably during the 1640s that Gobineau began to take an interest in the occult sciences, particularly alchemy and astrology.¹⁹ His correspondence with the military Abraham Fabert d’Esternay (1599–1662), future marshal of France, and

⁸ Guillaume-Ferdinand Teissier, *Essai philologique sur les commencemens de la typographie à Metz, et sur les imprimeurs de cette ville*, Metz and Paris: Ch. Dosquet and Tilliard, 1828, pp. 83–6.

⁹ Emmanuel Michel, *Biographie du Parlement de Metz*, Metz: Nouvian, 1853, pp. 200–1.

¹⁰ Auguste Benoît, *Notice sur Esprit Gobineau poète chartrain du XVIIe siècle*, Chartres: Garnier, 1862.

¹¹ Jacques-Albin-Simon Collin de Plancy, *Dictionnaire infernal*, 6th edn, Paris: Henri Plon, 1863, p. 305. Earlier editions already mention Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant, but without giving him a specific entry.

¹² Lucien Merlet, *Bibliothèque chartraine antérieure au XIXe siècle*, Orleans: H. Herluison, 1882, pp. 190–3; and Merlet, *Poètes Beaucerons antérieurs au XIXe siècle*, Chartres: Durand, 1894, vol. 2, pp. 69–76 (notice written in 1874).

¹³ Charles de Montluisant, *La famille de Montluisant: Recherches historiques & généalogiques*, Moutiers-Tarentaise: F. Ducloz, 1891, pp. 14–18.

¹⁴ Gisèle Mathieu, ‘Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant, poète et alchimiste’, *Annales de l’Est* (1958) 5(1), pp. 31–54.

¹⁵ Didier Kahn, ‘Alchimie et architecture: De la pyramide à l’église alchimique’, in Frank Greiner (ed.), *Aspects de la tradition alchimique au XVIIe siècle, Actes du colloque international de l’Université de Reims-Champagne-Ardenne* (Reims, 28 et 29 novembre 1996), Paris and Milan: S.E.H.A. and Archè, 1998, pp. 295–335, 323–5.

¹⁶ Archives départementales d’Eure-et-Loir: Chartres, Saint Saturnin parish, E 2/5 B.M.S. 1578–1591, view 65 of the scanned document.

¹⁷ Pierre Leclerc de Lesseville’s family history is recounted in Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux, *Historiettes*, edited and annotated by Antoine Adam, Paris: Gallimard, 1960, vol. 1, p. 156.

¹⁸ Archives municipales de Metz: Metz, Saint Victor parish, GG 187 (1600–1667), view 30033 of the scanned document. The pages covering the year 1628 are now too mutilated to be readable. See also François-Jacques Poirier, *Metz, documents généalogiques, armée, noblesse, magistrature, haute bourgeoisie, d’après les registres des Paroisses (1561–1792)*, Paris: Lamulle and Poisson, 1899, p. 276. This contradicts Didier Kahn’s assertion that Esprit Gobineau moved to Paris in the 1640s.

¹⁹ According to the biographer Joseph Barre (1692–1764), Gobineau drew up Abraham Fabert d’Esternay’s horoscope and predicted his death during a climatic year. See Joseph Barre, *Vie de M. le marquis de Fabert, Marechal de*

the diplomat Léon Bouthillier (1608–52), Earl of Chavigny and former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs under Louis XIII, is particularly instructive in this respect (and will be discussed later).²⁰ Gobineau's name still appears in the registers of Metz in 1652, where he is listed as a witness at a wedding in Saint-Martin Church; but when his own son married on 17 February 1665, he is recorded as deceased.

Gobineau's essay on Notre-Dame de Paris

Apart from the poems he wrote in Metz, Gobineau is best known for a dissertation entitled *Enigmes et hieroglifs philosophiques qui sont au grand portail de Notre-Dame de Paris*. It is a text of alchemical symbolism, theory and practice, which offers an alchemical reading of some of the sculptures on the main western facade of the Parisian cathedral. This dissertation is none other than the one alluded to by Ferdinand de Guilhermy and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, of which four handwritten versions have been preserved in public collections: Columbia University Library MS. 458286 (seventeenth century),²¹ Wellcome Library MS. 249 (seventeenth century),²² Wellcome Library MS. 2530 (c.1760)²³ and Wellcome Library MS. 2454 (c.1765).²⁴ As none of them are autograph documents, their study leads us to presume the existence of an original copy, now lost, and the existence of two versions, one short (MS. 458286, MS. 249 and MS. 2454), and one long (MS. 2530). The latter was arguably the model for the text, modernized in form and spelling, published in the fourth volume of the *Bibliothèque des philosophes alchimiques* (1754).²⁵ This definitive version is due to the editorial work of a mysterious 'Amateur des Vérités Hermetiques' designated by an anagram: 'Philovita, ó, Uraniscus'.²⁶ If 'Philovita' states that he collected the dissertation 'from the works of Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant, Gentilhomme Chartrain, Ami de la Philosophie

France, Paris: Jean-Thomas Herissant, 1752, vol. 2, p. 277. Fabert seems to allude to this in a letter dated 1 September 1649. See Paris, Archives nationales, K 118 A, n° 3-21.

²⁰ The letters are held in Paris, Archives nationales, K 117 B and K 118 A, but also in La Courneuve, Archives diplomatiques, P 16721(2), P 16722(1), and P 16723(1). Their existence was first mentioned by Jules Bourelly, *Le maréchal de Fabert (1590-1662), Etude historique d'après ses lettres et des pièces inédites*, Paris: Didier & Cie, 1880, vol. 2, pp. 323–8. On this subject see my paper given at the 9th International Conference of the ESSWE (Malmö University, 26–8 June 2023): 'How to stage an alchemical practice? The case of the unpublished correspondence of Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant (between the years 1647–1651)'. See also below.

²¹ A handwritten note on the cover reads, 'Meredith Read III, Magus, Paris, 1897'. This person was probably the American colonel John Meredith III (1869–1940), husband of the Savoyard countess Alix de Foras (1866–1942).

²² This manuscript belonged to the library of a certain D. Croyat, as well as to that of Julius Kohn (d. 1934). Kohn is the author of a *Catalogue of Alchemical Manuscripts of Elias Ashmole deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford* (c.1904), today preserved in Amsterdam, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, PH377.

²³ Entitled *Epitomé des secrets de nature*, this manuscript belonged to the library of Lionel Hauser (1868–1958), cousin and financial adviser to the French writer Marcel Proust (1871–1922); his collection of occult works was sold in 1934. See the *Catalogue of the Very Extensive and Important Library of Early Books and Manuscripts Relating to Alchemy & the Occult & Physical Sciences, the Property of M. Lionel Hauser*, London: Sotheby & Co, 1934.

²⁴ This version was most probably copied from London, Wellcome Library, MS. 249.

²⁵ Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant, 'Enigmes et hieroglifs physiques, qui sont au grand portail de l'Eglise Cathédrale & Métropolitaine de Notre-Dame de Paris', in Jean Maugin de Richebourg [?] (ed.), *Bibliothèque des philosophes alchimiques, ou hermétiques, contenant Plusieurs Ouvrages en ce genre très-curieux & utiles, qui n'ont point encore parus, précédés de ceux de Philalethe, augmentés & corrigés sur l'Original Anglois, & sur le Latin*, Paris: André-Charles Cailleau, 1754, vol. 4, pp. 307–93. The text is preceded by another essay attributed to Gobineau, but which we will not discuss here: 'Avec une instruction très-curieuse, sur l'antique situation & fondation de cette Eglise, & sur l'état primitif de la Cité'.

²⁶ He is probably identical to 'Philovite. *.*.*.*. Cosmocole', who published, the previous year, a treatise entitled *La vérité sortant du puits hermetique; ou La vraie quintessence solaire et lunaire, Baume radical de tout Estre, & origine de toute Vie. Confection de la medecine universelle*, London, 1753. A German translation of this work was produced in 1783 by 'AdaMah Booz' (Adam Melchior Birkholz, who may have been one with the physician Adam Michael Birkholz (1746–1818)).

naturelle & Alchimique’, he unfortunately does not give us any further information about his sources. Proof of the interest shown in this text even on the other side of the Channel, an English translation based on the printed French version was produced in 1797 by the physician Sigismund Bacstrom (c.1750–1805).²⁷ Gobineau’s essay was subsequently copied and republished throughout the following centuries, while its original date of composition has long remained uncertain. Although Wednesday 20 May is mentioned in all the versions, the year differs: 1640 for the printed copy, but 1648 or 1658 for the manuscript ones. However, only the date of 20 May 1648 is historically accurate and corresponds perfectly with the author’s period of alchemical activity, as revealed in his letters.

Before tackling some of Gobineau’s exegeses, let us dwell for a moment on the title of his essay. MS. 458286 gives it as follows: *Enigmes hieroglifiques philosophiques qui sont au grand portail de l’église Notre Dame de Paris expliqués le 2[0] May 1648 p[ar] E[sprit] G[obineau] s[ieur] d[e] M[ontluisant]*. The use of the term ‘hieroglyphic’ places Gobineau’s work in a direct line with the famous *Livre des figures hieroglifiques de Nicolas Flamel escrivain* (1612), a book that popularized the alchemical legend of this ancient Parisian scribe (c.1330–1418).²⁸ The anonymous author proposes in it an alchemical reading of the illuminations adorning an old manuscript, as well as the painted sculptures and bas-reliefs built by the aforementioned Flamel under two of the arches of the Parisian cemetery of the Innocents.²⁹ One of the consequences of the success of this work was the widespread use of the term ‘hieroglyph’ in French alchemical literature, a word generally considered since the Renaissance, and the wave of the ‘hieroglyphica’, as a synonym for ‘enigma’.³⁰ In the two writings mentioned here, the word is understood as an equivalent of ‘architectural element’, implying that certain religious sculptures on certain Parisian monuments contain a hidden (here, alchemical) meaning. Incidentally, the thematic proximity between the book attributed to Flamel and the explanation written by Gobineau is such that the librarian Samuel A.J. Moorat (1892–1974) put the version in MS. 249 under the name of Nicolas Flamel.³¹ The

²⁷ Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, *Manly Palmer Hall Collection of Alchemical Manuscripts*, Box 18, MS. 102, v. 3, pp. 41–79. About the translator see Adam McLean, ‘Bacstrom’s Rosicrucian Society’, *Hermetic Journal* (1979) 6, pp. 25–9; and Didier Kahn, *Le fixe et le volatil*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2016, pp. 162–3, 176.

²⁸ See Robert Halleux, ‘Le mythe de Nicolas Flamel ou les mécanismes de la pseudépigraphie alchimique’, *Archives internationales d’histoire des sciences* (1983) 33, pp. 234–55; as well as Didier Kahn’s afterword to Nicolas Flamel (ps.), *Ecrits alchimiques*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993. An English translation of Flamel’s work was published in 1624: Nicholas Flammel, *His Exposition of the Hieroglyphicall Figures which he caused to bee painted upon an Arch in St. Innocents Church-yard, in PARIS. Together with the secret Booke of ARTHEPHIUS, and the Epistle of John Pontanus: Concerning both the Theoricke and the Practicke of the PHILOSOPHERS STONE, Faithfully and (as the Maiesty of the thing requireth) religiously done into English out of the French and Latine Copies by Eiranaeus Orandus, qui est, Vera veris enodans*, London: T. Snodham and T. Walkley, 1624. See the modern edition by Laurinda Dixon, *Nicolas Flamel: His Exposition of the Hieroglyphicall Figures* (1624), New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994. This anonymous text is attributed by the researcher Claude Gagnon to the writer François Béroalde de Verville (François Vatable Brouard, 1556–1626); his hypothesis was put forward as early as 1976, but we still have doubts about this attribution. See Claude Gagnon, *François Béroalde de Verville alias Nicolas Flamel, L’invention du Livre des Figures Hiéroglyphiques*, with a foreword by Daniela Mauri, Longueuil: Presses philosophiques, 2021.

²⁹ See the interesting description of this site by the Reverend William Cole (1714–82), *A Journal of my Journey to Paris in the Year 1765*, edited from the original MS. in the British Museum by Francis Griffin Stokes with an introduction by Helen Waddell, London: Constable & Co, 1931, pp. 297–8. These arcades were demolished in 1786. See Michel Fleury and Guy-Michel Leproux (ed.), *Les Saints-Innocents*, Paris: Délégation à l’action artistique de la Ville de Paris, 1990, pp. 42–9.

³⁰ In fact, the word had already been used at the end of the sixteenth century to describe a religious sculpture, in this case by the physician Pierre Langlois, *Discours des hieroglyphes aegyptiens, emblemes, devises, et armoiries*, Paris: Abel l’Angelier, 1583, fol. 52r–v.

³¹ Samuel A.J. Moorat, *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts on Medicine and Science in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library*, London: Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1962, vol. 1, p. 153.

idea of the gentleman from Chartres was therefore not new, but this did not prevent his exegeses from proving highly original.

Gobineau's meditation on Notre-Dame's portal

As a preamble to his explanation, the alchemist indicates that he went to Notre-Dame on the eve of Ascension Day to pray to God and the Virgin Mary. It was only on leaving the cathedral that he carefully considered its portal and that he made his comments.³² The emphasis placed on the narrator's piety seems to deliberately echo the *topos* of divine revelation, generally considered in the West to be an indispensable prerequisite for acquiring the secret of *chrysopoëia*.³³ In his conclusion, Gobineau acknowledges that he has indeed benefited from a grace granted by 'divine Providence' (p. 393). There are also quite a few allusions to Christian theology: for example, the author believes that the cathedral facade has three gates to represent the Holy Trinity (p. 367). He refers to the alchemical principle of sulphur (which expresses the metallic qualities of hot and dry) as the 'Catholic soul', 'universal spirit' or 'oil of life', and to mercury (which recalls the metallic qualities of cold and moist) as the 'Mercury of life' or 'first-born moist'. According to Gobineau, it is the creation of these two first principles that is depicted in a sculpture placed on the keystone of the portal of Sainte-Anne (the one on the right-hand side, for visitors facing the cathedral): God the Father, holding a cherub in each of his two open hands, offers this 'source of life' to the beings of the sublunary world (pp. 367–8). In doing so, the author discreetly adds his text to the list of numerous writings that have proposed an alchemical interpretation of the Genesis.³⁴ However, he does not really fill his explanation with biblical quotations, and simply indicates a few verses from the Psalms (Ps. 18:6–8) and the Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 1:5–6) to illustrate the idea of a life-giving, heavenly and divine spirit, which would reside in the sun (pp. 374–5). A short passage from Proverbs (Pr. 21:20) is also used, but without any contextualization (p. 387). This scant recourse to Scripture reinforces the idea that the content of this essay is built primarily on allegorical comparisons, made from a direct observation of the cathedral's facade.

A similar example allows Gobineau to clarify his alchemical theory: on the tympanum of the same portal, a little further down, he notes the presence of three children who originally represent the angelic hierarchies celebrating the Nativity. However, according to the alchemist, these three characters symbolize the secondary principles of all things: salt, sulphur and mercury (pp. 369–70). This explanation gives us a better understanding of Gobineau's philosophical and practical perspectives, definitively tinged with Paracelsianism.³⁵ This way of proceeding – taking an iconographic element and applying an alchemical meaning to it – is in some ways reminiscent of the contemporary vogue for the alchemical interpretations of mythology. Seeking both to justify the antiquity of the

³² Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant, 'Enigmes et hieroglifs physiques, qui sont au grand portail de l'Eglise Cathédrale & Métropolitaine de Notre-Dame de Paris', in Jean Maugin de Richebourg [?], op. cit. (25), p. 366. We quote the printed version, because it is the one that was known and commented on afterwards.

³³ See Tara E. Nummedal, 'Alchemy and religion in Christian Europe', *Ambix* (2013) 60(4), pp. 311–22; or Chiara Crisciani, 'Alchemy and Christian religiousness: the Latin Middle Ages', *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* (2017) 43(2), pp. 17–38.

³⁴ Written at the same time (1647), the *Paradoxes chimiques* of the surgeon François Thyboureil also proposed an alchemical interpretation of the biblical text. See Sylvain Matton, 'Une lecture alchimique de la Bible, les *Paradoxes chimiques* de F. Thyboureil', *Chrysopoëia* (1988) 2, pp. 401–22. See also Didier Kahn, 'L'interprétation alchimique de la Genèse chez Joseph du Chesne dans le contexte de ses doctrines alchimiques et cosmologiques', in Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer (ed.), *Scientiae et artes: Die Vermittlung alten und neuen Wissens in Literatur, Kunst und Musik*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 641–92.

³⁵ On the spread of Paracelsianism in France see especially Didier Kahn, *Alchimie et paracelsisme en France (1567–1625)*, Paris: Droz, 2007.

alchemical art and to elucidate the chemical transformations they observed, many practitioners of the modern era attempted to find equivalences between laboratory operations and classical references.³⁶ The author himself, in one of his letters to Fabert, uses this subterfuge to describe a stage in his alchemical work.³⁷ However, Gobineau is dealing here with biblical images, and the fact that he chose to give solely alchemical meanings to religious elements sets him apart from a majority of other writers. To quote him once again, the pseudo-Flamel had, in his work, taken care of offering ‘philosophical’ (or ‘alchemical’) interpretations only after ‘theological’ commentaries, the latter providing a veneer of acceptability to the former.³⁸ No doubt this omission (imprudence or impudence?) on Gobineau’s part explains why his text was not printed until the second half of the eighteenth century, as it would have come under strong ecclesiastical condemnation. The Minim Marin Mersenne (1588–1648), for example, had a few years earlier criticized exegeses that regarded the biblical text or Christian dogmas as mere treatises on alchemy. He even went so far as to qualify the authors of such interpretations as ‘impious’ (*impietas*) in his *Quaestiones celeberrimae in Genesim* (1623).³⁹ We hasten to point out that, given the content of his text, such a classification does not really apply to the alchemist of Metz. Rather, it seems that the author, in the zealous vein of his earlier poems, has clumsily attempted to find some of these ‘beautiful similarities’ sought by many pious authors of the time, who saw in alchemy both a means of learning about religious truths and a means of defending the Catholic faith.⁴⁰

Gobineau’s interpretation of Notre-Dame’s sculptures

Gobineau’s commentary can be divided into three spatially organized parts. The author begins by interpreting the sculptures in the portal of Saint Anne (on the right of the facade), which is Romanesque and the oldest of the three doors: it was installed around 1200, incorporating the remains of an earlier tympanum. He then moves on to the portal of the Holy Virgin (on the left of the facade), built around 1210–20, and finally to the central portal, known as the portal of the Last Judgement, built between 1220 and 1230. An overall reading does not really suggest any other plan; its study reveals instead that Gobineau was content to interpret only a few sculptures of his choice, and that his approach was by no means systematic. What’s more, he had only a very superficial knowledge of Gothic art and is often mistaken in his identifications. His comments touch on several issues: that of astral influences on matter, that of the temporal organization of alchemical work and the piety required to carry it out, that of the allegories of the philosophers’ stone or of the alchemical principles, and that of the adept or of the puffer. The bad alchemist is referred to in

³⁶ On this peculiar topic consult Sylvain Matton, ‘L’interprétation alchimique de la mythologie’, *Dix-huitième siècle* (1995) 27, pp. 73–87; Didier Kahn, ‘Alchemical interpretations of classical myths’, in Vanda Zajko and Helena Hoyle (eds.), *A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology*, Oboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017, pp. 165–78; or Tom Fischer, ‘Le patronage d’Homère, Virgile et Ovide chez les alchimistes: Notes pour une recherche historico-littéraire’, in Léo Bernard and Tom Fischer (eds.), *Recherches francophones sur l’ésotérisme, Actes de la première journée des doctorants de l’Association francophone pour l’Etude universitaire des courants ésotériques (FRESCO)*, Lugano: Agorà & Co, 2023, pp. 43–60.

³⁷ La Courneuve, Archives diplomatiques, P 16722(1), piece 415 (244).

³⁸ Pierre Arnould de la Chevalerie [?] (ed.), *Trois traictes de la philosophie naturelle, non encore imprimez*, Paris: Veuve de Matthieu Guillemot and Samuel Thiboust, 1612, pp. 57–63.

³⁹ Marin Mersenne, *Quaestiones celeberrimae in Genesim, cum accurata textus explicatione*, Paris: Sébastien Cramoisy, 1623, col. 653. See Armand Beaulieu, ‘L’attitude nuancée de Mersenne envers la chimie’, in Jean-Claude Margolin and Sylvain Matton (eds.), *Alchimie et philosophie à la Renaissance, Actes du colloque international de Tours (4–7 décembre 1991)*, Paris: Vrin, 1993, pp. 395–403. Also consult on this topic Kahn, op. cit. (15), pp. 312–17.

⁴⁰ See Sylvain Matton, ‘Thématique alchimique et littérature religieuse dans la France du XVII^e siècle’, *Chrysopoeia* (1988) 2, pp. 129–208; and Sylvain Matton, *Philosophie et alchimie à la Renaissance et à l’Age classique: Scolastique et alchimie (XVI^e–XVII^e siècles)*, Paris and Milan: S.E.H.A. and Archè, 2009.

the grotesque sculptures known as the ‘ridicules’ (pp. 379, 384), while the good one takes the shape of a bishop defeating a dragon (pp. 379–80). Gobineau’s arguments are therefore at once theoretical, practical and symbolic, making his dissertation a standard treatise on alchemy.

For example, he was greatly inspired by the details of a stone zodiac placed on the doorposts of the portal of the Holy Virgin. The fact that a flying dragon (an emblem of the philosophers’ stone) seems to be gazing at the signs of Aries, Taurus and Gemini means, to him, that the spring months of March, April and May are favourable for alchemical work. On the contrary, that the signs of Aquarius and Pisces are carved outside the doorway indicate that the material for the philosophers’ stone cannot be collected in January or February. Finally, the fact that the sign of Leo has taken the place of that traditionally attributed to Cancer points to the alteration of nature caused by the alchemist’s manipulations; it also underlines the idea that the summer heat is reminiscent of the warmth needed for laboratory work (pp. 382–3). Even if they are intriguing, such astrological observations are not very original: the physician Pierre Jean Fabre (c.1588–1658), who a few years earlier had also proposed an alchemical interpretation of two sculptures of the Saint-Sernin basilica’s portal in Toulouse,⁴¹ gives similar information in *L’Abrégé des Secrets Chymiques* (1633).⁴² Moreover, we found in this same book the image of the phoenix rising from its ashes, the discourse on heavens and the qualities of the sun, and the terms ‘radical moisture’, ‘mercury of life’ and ‘radical salt’ used by Gobineau to describe mercury and sulphur. His discourse on the ‘universal spirit of the world’ borrows a great deal from *L’Abrégé des Secrets Chymiques* too, maybe even the tripartition of soul–spirit–body into sulphur–mercury–salt, an old Paracelsian idea that is clearly stated in it.⁴³ In addition to this likely source, Gobineau’s dissertation is more generally in line with the alchemical literature composed under the influence of the Polish alchemist Michał Sędziwój (or Michael Sendivogius, 1566–1636), known as Le Cosmopolite. His development on the substances referred to as universal sulphur, mercury and salt, considered to be the principal principles of the generation of all things, is notably very similar to a chapter in the *Cosmopolite, ou Nouvelle Lumière de la Physique naturelle* (1604, first translated into French in 1609).⁴⁴

In the MS. 2530 of the Wellcome Library, the alchemist from Metz also mentions some of his readings in the preface to a text intitled *Epitomé des secrets de nature*. He quotes the writings of Hermes, Geber, Morien, Calid, Artepheus, Synesius, Roger Bacon, Thomas (or Samuel?) Norton, Nicolas Flamel, Le Cosmopolite (Sendivogius) and even Basil Valentine.⁴⁵ Although Gobineau probably wrote this confession long after his dissertation on Notre-Dame of Paris (he explains that he has been reading, rereading and meditating on the works of the ‘wise philosophers’ for over forty years), this list bears witness to a classical alchemical culture, whose authorities were almost all translated into French at the time. In his

⁴¹ Pierre Jean Fabre, *L’alchimiste chrétien (Alchymista christianus), Traduction anonyme inédite du XVIII^e siècle avec le fac-similé de l’édition latine originale* (1632), introduction, edition and notes by Frank Greiner, Paris and Milan: S.E.H.A. and Archè, 2001, pp. 230–6. These interpretations were repeated in Pierre Jean Fabre, *Panchymici seu anatomiae totius universi*, Toulouse: Pierre Bosc, 1646, vol. 1, pp. 433–4.

⁴² Pierre Jean Fabre, *L’Abrégé des Secrets Chymiques. Ou l’on voit la nature des animaux vegetaux & minéraux entierement découverte: Avec les vertus et proprieté des principes qui composent & conservent leur estre; & un Traitté de la Medecine générale*, Paris: Pierre Billaine, 1633, pp. 157–63.

⁴³ Fabre, op. cit. (42), in particular pp. 23–32, 48–56, 128–32. On this author, consult Bernard Joly, *La rationalité de l’alchimie au XVII^e siècle*, with a foreword by Jean-Paul Dumond, Paris: Vrin, 1992.

⁴⁴ Michael Sendivogius, *Cosmopolite ou Nouvelle Lumière de la Physique naturelle. Traictant de la constitution generale des Elements simples & des composez*, Paris: Abraham Pacard, 1618, pp. 39–60. This chapter also touches on most of Gobineau’s themes, from alchemy as a gift from God to the condemnation of false alchemists. On this Sendivogian literature see Rafał T. Prinke, ‘New light on the alchemical writings of Michael Sendivogius (1566–1636)’, *Ambix* (2016) 63(3), pp. 217–43.

⁴⁵ London, Wellcome Library, MS. 2530, fol. 2v.

explanation, he also cites the name of Bishop William of Auvergne (or de Paris, c.1180–1249), a key figure in the alchemical interpretations of Notre-Dame Cathedral since at least the early seventeenth century.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the author identifies him incorrectly with a statue of Denis, the patron saint of Paris (p. 379). Although Gobineau's interpretations of Notre-Dame's statuary reflect his ignorance of medieval symbolism, they do bring an ounce of materiality to the ancient alchemical metaphors, freeing the hermetic bestiary from the pages of the old grimoires and embodying it in an imposing new book of stone. In this respect, his theoretical interpretations turn out to be as interesting as some of his practical experiments.

Gobineau, an alchemist from Metz

Gobineau makes no reference to his explanation either in the other texts attributed to him in MS. 2530, nor in his correspondence with Fabert and Chavigny (which ran from 29 December 1646 to 1 November 1651). However, he probably composed it during a trip to Paris, where he met the latter and informed him of the progress of his work; we know that the two men met at least once before mid-September 1651, and that the alchemist left the diplomat a handwritten book on that occasion.⁴⁷ The question why Chabert and Chavigny funded Gobineau's research remains ambiguous. Fabert mentions financial worries on numerous occasions, notably in letters dated 13 January and 9 May 1647; the prospect of transmuting base metals into gold must therefore have attracted his attention. This pecuniary interest does indeed seem to have taken precedence over everything else since, in 1649, when Gobineau's work took a turn that was more chemical than alchemical, the disillusionment of the soldier became apparent: 'As far as I am concerned, apart from the pleasure of learning something of the composition of bodies, I do not believe that there can be any other advantage in pursuing this work'.⁴⁸ Chavigny's motivations, on the other hand, seem to be rooted in a long-standing interest in alchemy: the anonymous author of *La Vie de maistre Jean Baptiste Morin* (1660) is particularly prolific in describing the man's curiosity about an attempted transmutation, performed in front of Louis XIII by the forger Noël Picard (known as Dubois, †1637).⁴⁹ No doubt Chavigny also hoped to reap financial rewards from these experiments, in order to further his political intrigues. Deprived of his position as a member of the Regency Council by the annulment of Louis XIII's will (18 May 1643), then disgraced by Anne of Austria (1601–66) because of Cardinal Mazarin's intrigues, Chavigny was preparing his return to the forefront of the French political scene at this time. His arrest in September 1648 and forced exile in Provence, far from Paris, were the consequences of his involvement in the early days of the Fronde (1648–53) and certainly account for the lack of correspondence during that year. The same silence for 1650 may be explained this time by the arrest of Louis II de Bourbon-Condé (1621–86), Chavigny's main ally (18 January 1650): political events must necessarily have taken precedence over alchemical concerns. Chavigny's recall to Paris in 1651, and his entry into the new ministry set up under the influence of Prince de Condé, probably gave him the latitude he needed to turn his attention back to alchemy. The resumption of the exchange of letters with Fabert on this subject in September 1651 coincides with a period of calm for the minister, who took advantage of it to retire for a while to his lands. His setbacks in 1652, which included the publication of a pamphlet written against him by Cardinal de Retz, then Fabert's role as

⁴⁶ François Béroalde de Verville, *Le moyen de parvenir* (1616), transcription with presentation, notes and index by Hélène Moreau, André Tournon and Jean-Luc Ristori, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004, vol. 1, p. 354.

⁴⁷ La Courneuve, Archives diplomatiques, P 16723(1), piece 98 (80).

⁴⁸ Paris, Archives nationales, K 117 A, n° 26–34.

⁴⁹ Anonymous, *La vie de maistre Jean Baptiste Morin, natif de Ville-Franche en Baviolois, docteur en medecine et professeur royal aux mathematiques a Paris*, Paris: Jean Henault, 1660, pp. 41–3.

intermediary between Chavigny and Mazarin, and eventually Chavigny's death in October 1652, put a definitive end to the trio's alchemical ambitions.⁵⁰

The letters exchanged between these protagonists are very instructive: we learn that Gobineau had a laboratory in Metz, and that he was visited there by many prominent people. The alchemist gives the name of a certain Morainvilliers, who in August 1649 accompanied Abraham Rambour (1590–1651), professor of Hebrew and theology at the Sedan Academy and then minister of this same town.⁵¹ He also mentions Charles de Schomberg (1601–56), marshal and governor of Metz, who came to inspect his place several times.⁵² In some letters, Gobineau even gives an outline of his laboratory work. For example, the alchemist evokes three large 'glass towers', which unambiguously indicate the use of alembics, essential instruments for carrying out and monitoring distillation processes. Further on, the alchemist describes with emotion what he observes:

Now I'm starting to separate the most spiritual, volatile and ethereal part, using a three-pointed stick. I have often wished that you [Fabert] could have seen the atoms and films of the colour of pearls, or talc, which incessantly rose and fell in this first matter, especially as it was very beautiful.⁵³

The tool mentioned here is again clearly identifiable, as a description of a 'three-pointed stick' appears in *Le Bouquet composé des plus belles fleurs chimiques*, a treatise written a few years earlier by the physician and surgeon to Louis XIII, David de Planis-Campy (c.1589–1644) (Figure 1). This apparatus was used to separate the 'igneous' from the 'moist' parts of a substance and proved ideal for observing violent chemical reactions: Planis-Campy also mentions the formation of winter 'meteors' (no doubt a kind of hailstone) in the central flask.⁵⁴ Gobineau's practical experiments were clearly in line with those of his time.⁵⁵

However, the alchemist's pursuit of the transmutation of metals gradually turned into a quest for the secrets of matter. In a letter dated 23 September 1649, Gobineau indicates that he was inspired by the work of Le Cosmopolite to analyse 'frozen air'.⁵⁶ This study also inspired David de Planis-Campy in France and, later, John Mayow (1641–79) in England.⁵⁷ The alchemist refers here, without naming it, to the doctrine of 'aerial nitre'. In this theory,

⁵⁰ Jean-François Paul de Gondi, *Les contre-temps du sieur de Chavigny, premier ministre de Monsieur le Prince*, Paris [?], 1652.

⁵¹ La Courneuve, Archives diplomatiques, P 16722(1), piece 415 (244). Rambour's correspondence has been collected and published, but it makes no mention of alchemical preoccupations. See Jean-Luc Tulot, 'Correspondance d'Abraham Rambour, ministre de Sedan (1590–1651)', *Cahiers du Centre de généalogie protestante* (2005) 92, pp. 173–99; (2006) 93, pp. 3–19; (2006) 94, pp. 59–76; (2006) 95, pp. 119–34; (2006) 96, pp. 173–95; (2007) 97, pp. 18–50; (2007) 98, pp. 88–107.

⁵² La Courneuve, Archives diplomatiques, P 16723(1), piece 98 (80).

⁵³ La Courneuve, Archives diplomatiques, P 16722(1), piece 415 (244).

⁵⁴ David de Planis Campy, *Bouquet composé des plus belles fleurs chimiques. Ou Ajancement des preparations, & expériences és plus rares secrets, & Medicamens Pharmaco-Chimiques; prins des Minéraux, Animaux, & Vegetaux. Le tout par une methode tres-facile, & non commune aux Chimiques ordinaires*, Paris: Pierre Billaine, 1629, p. 221.

⁵⁵ It should be noted that Gobineau makes no reference to contemporary debates, such as the so-called anti-mony wars that were raging at the time between the Parisian medical faculty and the doctors trained at the Montpellier medical school. On this topic see Allen G. Debus, *The French Paracelsians*, Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 21–30. This may be explained in part by the geographical distance of the alchemist, as he lived in Metz, and by a lack of interest in the subject, as he did not primarily apply his research to the medical field.

⁵⁶ La Courneuve, Archives diplomatiques, P 16722(1), piece 425 (250).

⁵⁷ David de Planis Campy, *L'Hydre morbifique exterminée par l'Hercule chymique, ou Les sept Maladies tenues pour incurables jusques à present, rendues guerissables par l'art Chymique Medical*, Paris: Hervé du Mesnil, 1628, pp. 514–15. John Mayow, *Tractatus Quinque Medico-Physici*, Oxford: Theatrum Sheldonianum, 1674, pp. 21–31.

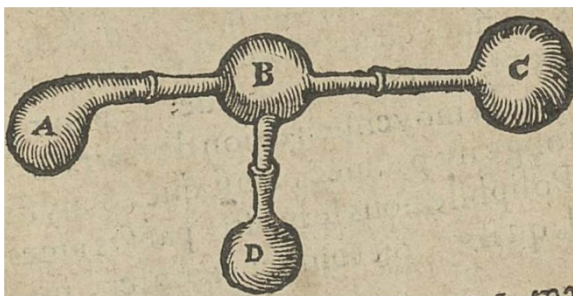


Figure 1. Alchemical tool known as the 'three-pointed stick'. David de Planis-Campy, *Bouquet composé des plus belles fleurs chimiques*, Paris: Pierre Billaine, 1629, p. 221.

air is considered a mixture, only part of which is used to sustain life; its active component is assimilated to the gas obtained from the calcination of saltpetre, also called 'nitre' (hence the name 'aerial nitre'). Le Cosmopolite postulated the existence of a whole system of terrestrial and solar influences, in which the 'mercury of the philosophers' (or 'sperm of the elements'), in vapour form, combines with the 'philosophical sulphur' present in the earth's soil. This vapour, depending on the impurities encountered along the way, creates various metals under the Earth, and different flowers and plants on its surface. This volatile 'salt of nature', once it reaches the atmosphere, finally unites with the rain and the celestial 'vital force', before falling back onto the soil and acting as a kind of universal fertilizer.⁵⁸ This doctrine, discussed and pursued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, paved the way for Antoine Laurent de Lavoisier's experiments (1743–94) on the composition of air and the discovery of oxygen.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, it was not this pioneering research that Gobineau's contemporaries remembered: only one alchemical recipe, relating to the preparation of a particular vitriol, is attributed to him in an eighteenth-century manuscript in the Arsenal library.⁶⁰ It was ultimately his essay on the sculptures on the facade of Notre-Dame that made him famous in alchemical history, not his experiments.

The posthumous success of Gobineau's interpretations

Gobineau's dissertation has had a certain underground influence right up to the present day. It can be divided into three branches: an alchemical heritage, a literary inspiration and a historical curiosity. For the first of these three cases, it is indeed part of a whole literary tradition that makes the Parisian cathedral a place of revelation for alchemists.⁶¹ The explanation of the Messin alchemist also resonates in the work of one of his direct epigones: Louis-Paul François Cambriel (c.1774–1850), author of a *Cours de philosophie hermétique ou d'alchimie en dix-neuf leçons* (published in 1843, but completed as soon as January

⁵⁸ See William R. Newman, *Gehennical Fire: The Lives of George Starkey, an American Alchemist in the Scientific Revolution*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 87–91.

⁵⁹ On this question consult Paulo Alves Porto, 'Michael Sendivogius on nitre and the preparation of the philosophers' stone', *Ambix* (2001) 48(1), pp. 1–16.

⁶⁰ Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS. 3007, pp. 81–3. This interest in vitriol traditionally dates back to the writings of the pseudo-Basile Valentin, whose *Twelve Keys* (1599) were translated into French in 1624.

⁶¹ See Kahn, op. cit. (15), pp. 312–34. You can also ask for my paper given at the 7th International Conference of the ESSWE (Amsterdam University, 2–4 July 2019), entitled 'Notre-Dame de Paris: a place of visions and revelations for alchemists'.

1829). This book was known to the chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786–1889), who criticized it (mentioning Gobineau) in the *Journal des savants*.⁶² It notably presents an illustration and a new alchemical interpretation of the sculpture that adorns the trumeau of Saint Anne's portal. According to Cambriel, this full-length statue of a bishop, towering over a dragon emerging from the flames, represents 'all the work, and the product or result of the philosophers' stone'; the decorations that surround it also symbolize the raw metals being purified (Figure 2).⁶³ Half a century later, we find his illustration in publications linked to the Parisian occultist milieu.⁶⁴ One of its members, the alchemist Albert Poisson (1868–94), even wrote a study on the alchemical monuments of Paris (published in 1893). He does not forget to summarize Gobineau's account, while integrating Cambriel's interpretation too.⁶⁵ In the same vein, an article on the old Paris written by a certain Paul Tottis also quotes the alchemist of Metz.⁶⁶ His colleague René Schwaebélé (1873–1922) called on the cathedral's exegete in two of his books: *Le problème du mal* (1911) and *La divine magie* (1914).⁶⁷ The novelist probably got his information from one of his acquaintances, the self-styled alchemist Alphonse Jobert (Alphonse Pierre Hippolyte Dousson, 1852–1921).⁶⁸ But it was above all thanks to the *Mystère des cathédrales* (1926), published under the mysterious name of Fulcanelli, that the alchemical interpretations of the portals of Notre-Dame were given a second lease of life (especially after the second edition of 1957). We will not attempt to summarize the contents of this work here; let us just mention that Gobineau is quoted twice in it.⁶⁹ Fulcanelli's followers, in particular Eugène Canseliet (1899–1982) and Claude d'Ygé (Claude de Lablatinière, 1912–64), each republished Gobineau's dissertation in their own way: in calligraphy for the first, and in print for the second.⁷⁰ Finally, a contemporary reissue of the *Bibliothèque des philosophes alchimiques* published in 2003 now provides easy access to this text for a new generation of readers.⁷¹

Apart from this somewhat occult transmission, it was above all writers who popularized these alchemical interpretations among the public. Victor Hugo (1802–85), as a promoter of the reappropriation of the medieval period through the eyes of a dark Romantic vision, alludes to them several times in his novel entitled *Notre-Dame de Paris* (or *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, 1831). The characters of Claude Frollo, archdeacon of the cathedral, and Jacques Charmolue, his pupil, comment extensively on the cathedral's 'symbolic' triple portal: it is

⁶² Michel-Eugène Chevreul, 'Cours de philosophie hermétique ou d'alchimie', *Journal des savants*, December 1851, pp. 752–68, 760–3.

⁶³ Louis-Paul François Cambriel, *Cours de philosophie hermétique ou d'alchimie en dix-neuf leçons*, Paris: Lacour and Maistrasse, 1843, pp. 29–35.

⁶⁴ Papus [Gérard Encausse], *Traité élémentaire de science occulte*, Paris: Georges Carré, 1888, pp. 212–15.

⁶⁵ Philophotes [Albert Poisson], 'Les monuments alchimiques de Paris', *L'Initiation* (15 February 1893) 18(5), pp. 97–109, 102–6. The autograph version of this work (as well as other documents written in Poisson's hand) are now kept in London at the Wellcome Library, MS. 3939. These archives belonged to the library of Lionel Hauser.

⁶⁶ Paul Tottis, 'Le vieux Paris: Autour de Notre-Dame', *L'écho du monde occulte* (20 November 1905) 2, p. 10.

⁶⁷ René Schwaebélé, *Le problème du mal*, Paris: Librairie du magnétisme, 1911, pp. 39–48; and Schwaebélé, *La divine magie*, Paris: Chez tous les libraires, 1914, pp. 17–20.

⁶⁸ Docteur J. [Alphonse Jobert], 'Cours pratique d'alchimie: Avant-propos', *L'écho du monde occulte* (20 December 1905) 4, pp. 8–10. Schwaebélé's conversations with Jobert are consigned in *La divine magie*.

⁶⁹ Fulcanelli, *Le mystère des cathédrales et l'interprétation ésotérique des symboles hermétiques du grand oeuvre*, 2nd edn, forewords by Eugène Canseliet, illustrated with thirty-nine plates based on drawings by Julien Champagne, Paris: Editions des Champs Elysées and Omnium littéraire, 1957, pp. 32, 107.

⁷⁰ Eugène Canseliet, *Trois anciens traités d'alchimie*, Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1975, pp. 99–139. It was probably Canseliet who also had Gobineau's explanation published in the journals *Le voile d'Isis* (1932) and *Atlantis* (1961) 208, pp. 31–40, (1961) 209, pp. 78–81. See also Claude d'Ygé [Claude de Lablatinière], *Nouvelle assemblée des philosophes chimiques, aperçus sur le Grand-Oeuvre d'après les meilleurs auteurs*, Paris: Dervy, 1954, pp. 175–97.

⁷¹ Jean Mangin de Richebourg, *Bibliothèque des philosophes chimiques*, Grez-Doiceau: Beya, 2003, vol. 2, pp. 483–532.



Figure 2. The trumeau of Saint Anne's portal. Louis-Paul François Cambriel, *Cours de philosophie hermétique ou d'alchimie en dix-neuf leçons*, Paris: Lacour & Maistrasse, 1843, between pp. 28 and 29.

they, not Gobineau, who claim that the figure of Job represents the philosophers' stone.⁷² Gobineau's name is not even mentioned here, as Hugo draws his examples from the *Histoire et recherches des antiquités de la ville de Paris* (1724) by the lawyer Henri Sauval (1623–76).⁷³ On the other hand, the writer Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) did not forget to mention the Sieur de Montluisant in a contribution to *L'almanach du bibliophile*, or in an article on 'La

⁷² Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1831, vol. 2, p. 93. The allusion is taken from Henri Sauval, *Histoire et recherches des antiquités de la ville de Paris*, Paris: Charles Moëtte and Jacques Chardon, 1754, vol. 3, p. 56. In his 1998 article, Didier Kahn conjectured that Gobineau and Sauval might have met in Paris; unfortunately, we have found no evidence in favour of this hypothesis. On the other hand, we do know that Sauval received some of his information on the links between alchemy and architecture from the physician Pierre Borel (c.1620–71), as the latter himself states. See Pierre Borel, *Tresor de recherches et antiquitez gauloises et françoises; reduites en ordre alphabetique, Et enrichies de beaucoup d'Origines, Epitaphes, & autres choses rares & curieuses, comme aussi de beaucoup de mots de la Langue Thyoise ou Theuthfranque*, Paris: Augustin Courbe, 1655, p. 158.

⁷³ Tom Fischer, 'Victor Hugo et les mystères alchimiques de Notre-Dame de Paris', in Sylvain Ledda (ed.), *Cahier de l'Herne: Mondes invisibles*, Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 2023, pp. 43–6.

symbolique de Notre-Dame de Paris' (1905).⁷⁴ These few examples show that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the alchemical commentaries on the three portals of the Parisian cathedral seem to have been elevated to the status of a literary *topos*, in keeping with the fashion for the occult and the *fin de siècle* atmosphere that (partly) characterized the period.⁷⁵ The inclusion of Gobineau's explanation in a recent anthology, *Notre-Dame des écrivains* (2020), can thus be interpreted as a belated recognition of the interest shown by the literary world in the work of the alchemist from Metz.⁷⁶

Hermetic interpretations of the cathedral still feature in many books of local history and tourist guides from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷⁷ They have also been of interest to historians, archaeologists and even art critics; as we cannot mention them all here, we will simply quote the most representative. After Sauval, one of the first to report them was the man of letters Germain-François Poullain de Saint-Foix (1698–1776), author of the *Essais historiques sur Paris* (published between 1753 and 1777). In the seventh and last volume of this series, he presents and criticizes Gobineau's interpretations at length, making them easily accessible.⁷⁸ In the middle of the nineteenth century, the archaeologist Adolphe Napoléon Didron (1806–67) then published and commented on Gobineau's explanation in the *Annales archéologiques*. He justified it by his desire to draw the public's attention to thirteenth-century sculpture, and even confided that it was his reading of Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* that had prompted him to seek out this text, which was eventually bought for him by the architect Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Lassus (1807–57) from a Parisian bookseller on the quays of the Seine.⁷⁹ A similar investigation was carried out by Champfleury (Jules François Félix Husson, 1821–89), who set off in search of Cambriel in 1847.⁸⁰ However, it was in his *Histoire de la caricature au moyen âge* (1872) that the writer and art critic maliciously compared the contortions of some defenders of Christian symbolism, unable to explain certain obscene figures, to the rantings proposed by Gobineau.⁸¹ The dissertation of the latter was also punctually cited by the art historians Emile Mâle (1862–1954) or Emile Bréhier (1868–1951), before being used by the curator Alain Erlande-Brandenburg (1937–2020) and the professor Dieter Kimpel (b. 1942) in their study of Notre-Dame's ancient statuary. Although sometimes a little bit confused, Gobineau's account is in fact invaluable for the descriptions it contains, which pre-date the alterations made to the cathedral by the architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot (1713–80), the destruction consecutive to the French Revolution, and the restorations carried out during the Romantic period.⁸² Supporting this view, we discovered an alchemical manuscript that once belonged to the artist Antoine Denis Chaudet (1763–1810), who was very interested in the theses of the Messin adept. The illustrations it contains, produced between 1786 and 1789, provide us with a precious visual

⁷⁴ Joris-Karl Huysmans, 'Le quartier Notre-Dame', *L'almanach du bibliophile pour l'année 1899*, February 1899, pp. 18–30 (reprinted in *De tout*, Paris: P.-V. Stock, 1902, pp. 74–89); and Huysmans, 'La symbolique de Notre-Dame', *Le tour de France* (15 April 1905) 14, pp. 329–33 (reprinted in *Trois églises et trois primitifs*, Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie, 1908, pp. 3–38).

⁷⁵ See Philippe Muray, *Le 19e siècle à travers les âges*, Paris: Denoël, 1984.

⁷⁶ Collective, *Notre-Dame des écrivains*, with a foreword by Michel Crépu, Paris: Gallimard, 2020, pp. 64–75.

⁷⁷ For example in Jacques-Maximilien Benjamin Bins de Saint-Victor, *Tableau historique et pittoresque de Paris, depuis les Gaulois jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris: H. Nicolle and Le Normant, 1808, vol. 1, p. 127. The author mentions Gobineau by name.

⁷⁸ Germain-François Poullain de Saint-Foix, *Essais historiques sur Paris*, Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1777, vol. 7, pp. 7–12, 11.

⁷⁹ Adolphe-Napoléon Didron, 'Notre-Dame de Paris', in Didron l'Ainé (ed.), *Annales archéologiques*, Paris: Librairie archéologique de Victor Didron, 1861, vol. 21, pp. 137–47, 210–21.

⁸⁰ Champfleury, *Les excentriques*, Paris: Michel Lévy, 1852, pp. 98–109.

⁸¹ Champfleury, *Histoire de la caricature au moyen âge*, Paris: E. Dentu, 1872, pp. 252–3.

⁸² Alain Erlande-Brandenburg and Dieter Kimpel, 'La statuaire de Notre-Dame de Paris avant les destructions révolutionnaires', *Bulletin monumental* (1978) 136(3), pp. 213–66.

record of the sculptures at that time.⁸³ This is a fine example of the interest that the study of alchemical texts can have for the human sciences as a whole, and the recent mention of Gobineau's work by the essayist Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent (b. 1951), although full of approximations, tends once again to confirm this feeling.⁸⁴

Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant's dissertation, composed on 20 April 1648, has haunted the writings on Notre-Dame de Paris ever since. Although his life still retains grey areas, his alchemical work deserves to be brought out of oblivion. Despite some clumsiness, Gobineau's explanation is a surprising testimony to the interest of a Frenchman in the first half of the seventeenth century in trying to 'decipher' Gothic art, and a sign of appreciation for a medieval architectural heritage that was often in disrepair at the time. His alchemical reading of several of the 'hieroglyphic' sculptures on the facade of the Parisian cathedral, while in line with the writings attributed, for example, to Nicolas Flamel, also bears witness to the acclimatization of the alchemists' exegetical practices to a varied range of materials. Thanks to Gobineau, the palette of visual objects associated with alchemy has expanded for many protagonists of modern and contemporary European culture. Moreover, his unpublished correspondence with Léon Bouthilier and Abraham Fabert d'Esternay reveals the previously unknown practical work of the alchemist from Metz, as well as the alchemical interests of his patrons. Filled with valuable information, it confirms that the transition from alchemy to chemistry made its way to modest local experimenters, who gradually abandoned the search for the secrets of transmuting metals for the secrets of transforming elements. We may never know whether Gobineau really believed that behind the cathedral's iconography lay the secrets of the philosophers' stone; but if we look at his posterity, we know that his wish to write his dissertation to satisfy 'the learned amateurs of this divine art', or to arouse the curiosity of 'the new candidates who aspire to a knowledge of natural and hermetic science' (p. 393) was crowned with success.

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⁸³ London, Warburg Institute, Michael Innes Collection, MS. Innes 09. A few lines have already been written recently about this manuscript, but they should be treated with caution. See Laurent Segalini, 'Fulcanelli, Chaudet et Philovite: Quelques sources retrouvées de l'interprétation hermétique de Notre-Dame de Paris', in Collective, *Le château étoilé et la parole perdue, Surréalisme et franc-maçonnerie*, Gajan: Venus d'ailleurs, 2024, pp. 65–76.

⁸⁴ Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent, *La gloire de Notre-Dame, La foi et le pouvoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 2023, pp. 115–24.

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