

TO WHAT EXTENT IS ALCHEMY AN ESOTERIC SCIENCE?
A CASE STUDY OF IBN ARFA' RA'S
(FL. SIXTH/TWELFTH CENTURY)

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the so-called occult or esoteric sciences: fields like magic, geomancy, and alchemy, long-neglected by scholars of the Middle East, are now receiving a fair amount of scholarly attention. Workshops and conferences are organized, articles, special issues of journals, conference volumes, and even handbooks are being published¹.

The term “occult sciences” refers to sciences that should not be disclosed to the masses, or sciences that should be kept secret². It also refers to sciences that deal with the hidden properties of natural things that are not discernible by the senses³. In classical Arabic, they are primarily called *al-‘ulūm al-khafiyya* (the hidden sciences), which is extremely close to the English “occult sciences”. Arabic terms more prominent after the fourth/tenth century include *al-‘ulūm al-gharība* (the obscure, difficult, or unusual sciences) and *al-‘ulūm al-ghāmiḍa* (the obscure, difficult, or concealed sciences)⁴.

1. Prominent recent publications include M. S. Melvin-Koushki and N. Gardiner (eds.), *Islamicate Occultism: New Perspectives*, special double issue of *Arabica* 64.3-4 (2017); N. El-Bizri and E. Orthmann (eds.), *The Occult Sciences in Pre-modern Islamic Cultures* (Beirut 2018); S. Günther and D. Pielow (eds.), *Die Geheimnisse der oberen und der unteren Welt. Magie im Islam zwischen Glaube und Wissenschaft* (Leiden 2018); L. Saif (ed.), *Special Issue: Islamic Esotericism*, in *Correspondences* 7.1 (2019): 1-299; L. Saif et al. (eds.), *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice* (Leiden 2020).

2. M. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam* (Leiden 1972), 1.

3. Oxford English Dictionary, «Occult, adj. and n.», <https://www.oed.com/View/Entry/130166?rskey=OsokhJ&result=1&isAdvanced=false> [accessed 4 Aug. 2024].

4. L. Saif and F. Leoni, «Introduction», in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, ed. L. Saif et al. (Leiden 2020), 2.

In the following, I do not discuss alchemy as an occult science (although that would be the normal term for alchemy and also the one I prefer), but rather its status as an esoteric science; this allows me to pick up on the classical “occult” aspects of alchemy, such as secrecy, and to think about it in terms of “exoteric” and “esoteric” or *zāhir* and *bāṭin*.

I first discuss the philosophical context of “esoteric” as a term and its possible rendering in Arabic as *bāṭin*, then I introduce Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, a sixth-/twelfth-century Moroccan scholar and alchemist and his work. The main section of this contribution is concerned with what elements in Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs’s work may indicate that he conceived of alchemy as an esoteric science. Establishing this helps us more clearly understand whether we are dealing with a literary trope or with a conceptualization that was significant to post-classical Arabic alchemists.

Terminology: Exoteric and Esoteric, Zāhir and Bāṭin

The term “exoteric” (ἐξωτερικός) first appears with Aristotle, who classified some of his works as such. There is a long discussion in the scholarship about what Aristotle meant, but it seems that this “toward the outside” was used to mean “popular,” “non-technical,” or “propaedeutic”.⁵ Of Aristotle’s works, only his “esoteric” ones have come down to us; his exoteric teachings (which he alludes to in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, in his *Metaphysics*, and his *Politics*), especially his dialogues, are extant in small fragments only.⁶ In fact, his exoteric writings were quite popular for a long time, it was only after the first century BCE that his esoteric teachings became more significant to his readers.⁷

In Aristotle’s conceptualization (as in Plato’s), “esoteric” quintes-

5. K. Gaiser, «Exoterisch/esoterisch», in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 2: D–F, ed. J. Ritter (Basel 1972), col. 865; H. Traub, «Esoterologie—Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Esoterikforschung», *Steiner Studies. Internationale Zeitschrift für kritische Steiner-Forschung* 2 (2021), 7.

6. G. W. Most, «Platons exoterische Mythen», in *Platon als Mythologe. Interpretationen zu den Mythen in Platons Dialogen*, ed. M. Janka and C. Schäfer (Darmstadt 2014), 16; Traub, «Esoterologie», 7–8.

7. Most, «Platons exoterische Mythen», 16.

entially means that a work's intended audience is not the general public, but readers who are philosophically trained⁸. While Aristotle's opus (as we have it) consists of his esoteric writings, Plato's written work is exoteric, meant for a broad audience⁹. This is also apparent in the literary form: both Aristotle and Plato wrote dialogues for a broader public ("exoteric dialogues"). While Plato kept his esoteric teachings oral and did not write them down, Aristotle transmitted his esoteric thoughts in writing¹⁰.

In the first centuries CE, attested for the first time with Lucian and Galen, "esoteric" came to mean "intended for schooled philosophers"¹¹. It then also became connected to an – originally Pythagorean – idea of secrecy: special philosophical knowledge had to be hidden¹².

It is this late antique conceptualization that is revealed in modern usage, such that the entry for "esoteric" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reads as follows: "Of philosophical doctrines, treatises, modes of speech, etc.: Designed for, or appropriate to, an inner circle of advanced or privileged disciples; communicated to, or intelligible by, the initiated exclusively. Hence of disciples: Belonging to the inner circle, admitted to the esoteric teaching"¹³.

This more general usage of the terms is reflected partly in Arabic where the terms "exoteric" and "esoteric" are usually rendered by *ẓāhir* (apparent, outer, literal) and *bāṭin* (inner, hidden, deeper)¹⁴. *Ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* may be used in different ways¹⁵. First, they denote the inner

8. Traub, «Esoterologie», 8.

9. Cf. Traub, «Esoterologie», 15–16.

10. Cf. Traub, «Esoterologie», 16–17; Most, «Platons exoterische Mythen», 16–17.

11. Gaiser, «Exoterisch/esoterisch», col. 866.

12. Gaiser, «Exoterisch/esoterisch», col. 866.

13. Oxford English Dictionary, «Esoteric», <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64367?redirectedFrom=esoteric> [accessed 4 Aug. 2024].

14. In the Greco-Arabic translation movement, the word *exoterikos* found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the construction *exoterikois logois* was rendered as *al-aqāwīl al-khārija* («the outer words»), cf. A. Akasoy and A. Fidora, *The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics* (Leiden 2005), 57; M. Ullmann, *Wörterbuch zu den griechisch-arabischen Übersetzungen des 9. Jahrhunderts, Supplement 1: A-O* (Wiesbaden 2006), 371.

15. B. Radtke, «Bāṭen», in *EI*, 3:859–61; D. De Smet, «Esotericism and Exotericism», in *EI*³ (fasc. 2015–2): 96–103.

and the outer meaning of the same thing, especially the same word or text, but possibly also a natural phenomenon. The inner meaning of the thing is not directly accessible to the senses, while the outer is. The knowledge of the inner meaning, for example, of the Qur'ān, is reserved for the educated elite (*khāṣṣa*), and should not be disclosed to the general public (*ʿamma*)¹⁶. It is in respect to the audience that the terms *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* can be seen as similar to esoteric and exoteric.

Second, the terms *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* relate to the epistemological quality of knowledge which may be generally accessible (*ẓāhir*) or restricted to a trained audience (*bāṭin*). This would be a strong reflection of the Platonic-Aristotelian usage of exoteric and esoteric as descriptions of genres of texts, while the first usage relates to one and the same text and its various aspects.

The *ẓāhir-bāṭin* opposition is especially prominent in Sufi and Shī'ī circles¹⁷. The idea of the inner meaning of the Qur'ān (as well as the *sharī'a*) known to the imam, became a central element in Shī'ī doctrines¹⁸. The inner meaning and its knowledge are accessible to the elite (*khāṣṣa*) only, while the common people (*ʿamma*) cannot reach it.

In a Shī'ī conceptualization, the *bāṭin* must be hidden – just as alchemical knowledge must be hidden¹⁹. In Ismā'īlī thought, the concept was considerably broader: in an adaptation of Neoplatonism, the lower world was considered the outer (*ẓāhir*) of the higher, hidden (*bāṭin*) world²⁰.

As for alchemy, it seems fitting to think about it both in the framework of “esoteric” and “exoteric” as well as of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*: the (late) antique discourse of “esoteric” versus “exoteric” might be applicable as alchemists saw themselves as philosophers. Therefore, their doctrines and writings could perhaps be “esoteric” in the sense of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. On the other hand, in an Arabic context, the terms *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* would be the obvious renderings, *bāṭin*

16. De Smet, «Esotericism and Exotericism».

17. Radtke, «Bāṭen».

18. Radtke, «Bāṭen»; De Smet, «Esotericism and Exotericism».

19. E. Kohlberg, «Taḳīyya in Shī'ī Theology and Religion», in *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, ed. H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa (Leiden 1995), 348–80; De Smet, «Esotericism and Exotericism».

20. De Smet, «Esotericism and Exotericism».

being the term most clearly defining a special, hidden meaning and a restricted audience²¹.

Ibn Arfa' Ra's and His Works

Ibn Arfa' Ra's was a sixth-/twelfth-century Moroccan alchemist. He is traditionally identified with a Mālikī jurist (*faqīh*) with a similar name who died ca. 593/1197 and was active as a preacher (*khaṭīb*) at al-Qarawīyīn Mosque in Fez. However, this identification is far from certain, and leaves us with few certain facts about the alchemist²². It seems likely that Ibn Arfa' Ra's left the Maghrib at some point for Egypt (as many scholars from the Muwaḥḥid/Almohad realm did), but whether he settled there or returned to the West is not clear²³.

Ibn Arfa' Ra's's fame stems from a collection of poems that usually goes by the title *Shudhūr al-dhahab* (The splinters of gold)²⁴. The forty-three poems of the collection, more than 1,400 verses, are ordered by their rhyming letter, with each letter of the alphabet represented by at least one poem. The poems vary in length (between four and sixty-six verses); it is important to note that this is not one long didactic poem, but a collection of relatively shorter poems. Usually the alchemical content of the poems only becomes clear toward the end of a poem: very often, they are *ghazal* poems with an alchemical turn. Therefore, I argue that they might not be meant as didactic, strictly speaking, but directed to those already well-versed in the art of alchemy²⁵.

Ibn Arfa' Ra's *dīwān* was well received, both as poetry and as alchemical literature: its poetic aspects were praised in the bio-bibliographical literature²⁶, and poetic reworkings exist in Arabic (as

21. Cf. T. Zadeh, «Postscript: Cutting Ariadne's Thread, or How to Think Otherwise in the Maze», in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, ed. L. Saif et al. (Leiden 2020), 610.

22. R. Forster and J. Müller, «The Identity, Life, and Works of the Alchemist Ibn Arfa' Ra's», *al-Qanṭara* 41.2 (2020): 373–408.

23. Forster and Müller, «The Identity», 400.

24. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Shudhūr al-dhahab: Dīwān*, ed. al-H. Ghazzālī (Beirut 2018).

25. Cf. R. Forster, «Alchemical Stanzaic Poetry (*muwashshah*) by Ibn Arfa' Ra's (fl. twelfth century)», *Asiatische Studien—Études Asiatiques* 75.2 (2021), 651.

26. Al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-wafayāt*, 2 vols., ed. M. M. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo 1951–

takhmīs)²⁷ and Turkish (as a Turkish alchemical *dīwān*)²⁸. In alchemy, the *Shudhūr* was commented on many times: Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs himself wrote a commentary, entitled *Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, and a steady commentary tradition extends all the way through to the nineteenth century²⁹.

Besides the *Shudhūr* and his commentary, Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs authored other works on alchemy: two short treatises of a rather technical nature and at least one *muwashshah* (stanzaic poem). The authenticity of the prose works remains an open question until now. Finally, other prose works on magic and healing have been attributed to him, though these are almost certainly spurious³⁰.

In the following, I focus on the *Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr* and discuss whether the version of alchemy it contains may be considered an esoteric science.

Esoteric (and Exoteric) Aspects of the Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr

As mentioned, Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs wrote a commentary on his own *dīwān*, entitled *Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr* (The unravelling of the difficulties of the “Splinters”)³¹. The *Ḥall* is presented as a dialogue

53), 2:181; al-Ṣafādī, *Kitāb al-wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, ed. R. Baalbaki (Wiesbaden 1983), 22:260; al-Maqqarī, *Analectes sur l’histoire et la littérature des Arabes d’Espagne*, 2 vols., ed. R. Dozy et al. (Leiden 1855-61), 2:606. Cf. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimpwissenschaften*, 231-32; Kh. al-Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām*, 8 vols. (Beirut 1954-59), 5:26; E. Calvo Labarta, «Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿsahu», in *Biblioteca de al-Andalus*, ed. J. Lirola Delgado and J. M. Puerta Vilchez (Almería 2004-12), 2:334.

27. By Muḥammad b. Mūsā l-Qudṣī (fl. eighth/fourteenth century), cf. A. Schippers, «al-Anṣārī, Abū l-Ḥasan», in *EI*³ (fasc. 2009-1): 92-93; on *takhmīs* as a literary form see Ph. F. Kennedy, «Takhmīs», in *EI*² (1998), 10:123-25.

28. *Dīwān-i hikmet*, written before ca. 1000/1600, cf. T. Artun, *Hearts of Gold and Silver: The Production of Alchemical Knowledge in the Early Modern Ottoman World*, PhD diss., Princeton University 2013, esp. 36.

29. Cf. J. Müller, «Planets in Alchemy: Commentaries and Glosses on the Opening Verses of Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs’s *Shudhūr al-dhahab*», *JAIS* 22 (2022), 1-30, esp. 6-10.

30. Forster and Müller, «The Identity», 380-81; C. Braun and R. Forster, «Alchemist and Magier? Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs (fl. 12. Jh.) im Kontext der arabisch-islamischen Gelehrsamkeit», in *Der Begriff der Magie in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. J. Eming and V. Wels (Wiesbaden 2020), 15-34, here 26-32; Forster, «Alchemical Stanzaic Poetry», 641.

31. Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr in the transmission of Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Anṣārī*, ed. J. Müller (Beirut and Berlin 2023).

between Ibn Arfa' Ra's and his disciple Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī. This Abū l-Qāsim is, at least in some manuscripts, called “not only the disciple (*tilmīdh*), but also the friend (*ṣāhib*), heir (*wārith*), and son-in-law (*ṣihr*) of Ibn Arfa' Ra's”³². In the dialogue, he is addressed as “my brother” (*akhlī*) or “my dear one” (*ḥabībī*)³³, expressions that stress the close relationship between the master and his disciple. The *Hall* does not comment on all verses of the *Shudhūr*, it leaves out many verses and even some poems³⁴. Ibn Arfa' Ra's himself calls his text a short commentary (*mukhtaṣar*), and promises to write a longer one, yet there is no more extensive version available – so he might never have written it³⁵.

The attribution of the *Hall* to Ibn Arfa' Ra's may be questioned on the following grounds³⁶: (1) There are slight incongruencies between the verses cited in the *Hall* and their form in manuscripts of the *Shudhūr*; (2) the *Hall* reveals a familiarity with Sufi thought as developed by Ibn al-ʿArabī – who would have been too young to have influenced Ibn Arfa' Ra's; (3) some manuscripts contain references and quotations from later works; and (4) al-Jildakī (fl. mid-eighth/fourteenth century), notorious for his familiarity with almost all alchemical works, does not seem to know the *Hall*.

However, even in the mid-seventh/thirteenth century, the alchemist al-Sīmāwī cites the *Hall* as a work by Ibn Arfa' Ra's. Furthermore, the *Hall* refers to Ibn Arfa' Ra's's *muwashshah*, which was otherwise not very well-known³⁷, and the *Hall* is just as critical of Jābir b. Ḥayyān as is the *Shudhūr*. Both works share a critical approach to one of the most important authorities of Arabic alchemy, which could be an argument that they are by the same author. All in all, I think Juliane Müller is correct in crediting Ibn Arfa' Ra's's with the authorship of the *Hall*.

In the very title of his commentary, Ibn Arfa' Ra's refers to the esoteric and exoteric components of the work. While it deals with the

32. J. Müller, «Introduction», in Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr in the transmission of Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Anṣārī*, ed. J. Müller (Beirut and Berlin 2023), 11–31.

33. Cf. Müller, «Introduction», 13.

34. Cf. Müller, «Introduction», 14.

35. Müller, «Introduction», 14.

36. For a more complete discussion of the *Hall*'s authorship see Müller, «Introduction», 15–17.

37. Forster, «Alchemical Stanzaic Poetry».

problems (*mushkilāt*) of the text it comments on, that is, aspects that make the base text, his *dīwān Shudhūr al-dhahab*, accessible to a very few scholars, the commentary solves these problems, thus it is a *ḥall*, a solution³⁸. Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs therefore promises that this text will make the *Shudhūr* intelligible – perhaps not only to initiates. From the title, we could think of the *Shudhūr* as an esoteric text and of the *Ḥall* as its exoteric counterpart³⁹. The combination of difficult (“esoteric”) text (especially in poetic form) with a prosaic (“exoteric”) commentary seems to be a typical phenomenon for texts of the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, as is also seen in the work of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) and Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240)⁴⁰.

Hiding and promulgating knowledge

The classical esoteric topos prominent in most – or perhaps all – alchemical writings is the premise that alchemical knowledge should not be promulgated. Rather, it is meant for the initiated, the educated elite (*khāṣṣa*)⁴¹. This topos is also prominent in the *Ḥall*. For example, Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs explains:

This is a discipline (*fann*) of symbol and rhetoric, and it requires variety in expression according to the sages’ use of repetition to further the knower’s knowledge (*ʿilm*) and the ignorant’s ignorance.

38. The title varies in the manuscripts and the work is sometimes simply called a *sharḥ* (commentary), cf. Müller, «Introduction», 22.

39. Obviously, we could argue that the *Shudhūr* are indeed so obscure that they could be openly spread, as there was no danger of them being understood by those not initiated, while the *Ḥall* had to be kept away from the masses as it was too clear and outspoken (I owe this idea to Sébastien Moureau). However, the fact that a text would not be understood by the masses does not make it exoteric; an exoteric text is meant for the masses, the general public is the intended reading public meant that is supposed to understand the text (as explained above), which is probably not the case of the *Shudhūr*.

40. Cf. commentaries to Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s poetry, see G. Scattolin, «Ibn al-Fāriḍ and the Commentaries by al-Farghānī and by al-Tilmisānī», in *Les mystiques juives, chrétiennes et musulmanes dans l’Égypte médiévale*, ed. G. Cecere et al. (Cairo 2013), 37–62; on the (especially Persian) commentaries on Ibn al-ʿArabī’s work, see W. C. Chittick, «Ebn al-ʿArabī, Moḥyī-al-Dīn,» in *EIr*, 7:664–70.

41. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, 1–4.

Know that from the knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of the truth of the connection one knows the science and the work completely. So, understand this and hide it⁴²!

As in other places, Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs admonishes his pupil Abū l-Qāsim to understand and at the same time, hide the alchemical knowledge. The student is clearly considered a member of the distinguished elite, and therefore part of the next generation to maintain the secrecy of alchemy. Instruments for hiding alchemy include symbols (see below) and rhetorical language⁴³, according to a tradition set forth by the ancient sages.

The combination of the admonishment to understand and hide this knowledge is found repeatedly. For example, in the explanation of the poem on *thāʿ*, in a passage about the heat of the fire needed for a certain operation, which does not seem particularly problematic, we read, «Understand that, hide it and do not show it to anyone who is not from its [i.e., alchemy's] people»⁴⁴. Similarly, Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs stresses his use of a symbolic language by adding imperatives to his pupil that he should understand, for example, “And the meaning is symbolized through the egg. Understand! Therefore, I have followed the tracks of the alchemists in all my speech”⁴⁵.

All these passages insist on the exclusiveness of alchemical knowledge, and stress the esoteric character of the divine art. However, Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs understands that he is not writing for his pupil Abū l-Qāsim only: “So, listen to my speech and be careful to understand my system, you and whoever comes after you, if you want to reach this knowledge and attain this art”⁴⁶.

42. Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 13-14.

إِنَّ هَذَا فَنٌّ رَمَزٌ وَبَلَاغَةٌ، فَاقْتَضَى التَّفَنُّنَ فِي الْعِبَارَةِ عَلَى مَا جَرَتْ بِهِ الْعَادَةُ مِنَ الْحُكْمَاءِ فِي التَّكْرِيرِ لِيَزِدَادَ الْعَالِمُ عِلْمًا وَالْجَاهِلُ جَهْلًا. وَاعْلَمْ أَنَّ مِنْ مَعْرِفَةِ حَقِيقَةِ الْمَوَاصِلَةِ يَعْلَمُ الْعِلْمَ وَالْعَمَلَ كُلَّهُ، فَافْهَمُ ذَلِكَ وَاكْتُمُهُ.

43. The expression *fann ramz* (a discipline of symbol) is repeated later (Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 157).

44. Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 38.

فَافْهَمُ ذَلِكَ وَاكْتُمُهُ وَلَا تَظْهَرِ عَلَيْهِ أَحَدًا مِنْ غَيْرِ أَهْلِهِ.

45. Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 27.

فَكَانَ الْمَعْنَى مِنَ الْبَيِّنَةِ فِي الرَّمْزِ إِثَامًا، فَافْهَمُ. وَلِهَذَا اقْتَضَيْتُ أَثَرُ الْقَوْمِ فِي جَمِيعِ كَلَامِي.

In the work of Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, the term *al-qawm* (the people) means the alchemists, cf. Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 34, 38, 47, 49.

46. Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 400.

فَاصْغُ لِكَلَامِي وَتَنْبِّهْ لِفَهْمِ نِظَامِي، أَنْتَ وَمَنْ بَعْدَكَ، إِنْ كُنْتَ تَرِيدُ الْوُصُولَ لِهَذَا الْعِلْمِ وَالْفَوْزَ بِهَذِهِ الصَّنَاعَةِ.

Abū l-Qāsim is not the only addressee of the *Hall*, but those who come after him are intended as well. Therefore, the esoteric instruction aimed at a direct disciple broadens: the target audience is not only the direct student, but also those who come later. These later pupils cannot be controlled by Ibn Arfa' Ra's in the same way as his direct disciple: the esoteric science is bound to become exoteric at some point.

At the same time, there is a media shift from oral teaching to the written word. In its book form, the *Hall* can never be as exclusive as the actual oral exchange between Ibn Arfa' Ra's and Abū l-Qāsim. In this media shift, the discussion about the medium of esoteric teaching in ancient philosophy seems to reverberate. While Plato's dialogues, as written texts, are his exoteric legacy, the actual oral interactions that served as the starting point for the literary form were conceived as esoteric (as explained above). The same may be the case here: the *Hall*, it seems, was never meant to be exclusive. Rather, Ibn Arfa' Ra's insists that the clarity of his writing makes his work and its knowledge accessible for generations to come:

If you are not informed by this, then neither you nor whoever comes after you will ever understand it from any book after this, for neither under the blue sky nor on the face of the earth – having wandered East and West –, have I seen anyone who has clarified (*ṣarraḥa*) what I have clarified to you in this short work (*mukhtaṣar*)...

It was impossible for me not to comply and to help you.... And I did not hesitate like Ja'far did toward Jābir, but I hastened and complied⁴⁷.

Ibn Arfa' Ra's wanted to teach generations to come although he could not judge whether his future readers would be worthy of his knowledge. Therewith, the esoteric knowledge becomes transgenerational and eventually exoteric. In addition, Ibn Arfa' Ra's was the perfect teacher: he had superior knowledge, and he shared it in a way that was incomparable. As the perfect teacher, he was willing to go to great lengths simply to help his students and in this way, he was quite

47. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 518-19.
فإن لم تفهم منه وإلا لما بقيت تفهمه لا أنت ولا من بعدك من كتاب بعد هذا البتة ، لأنني ما رأيت تحت
خضراء السماء ولا فوق صفيح الأرض، وقد جلّت المشارق والمغارب ، من صرح مثل ما صرحت
لك في هذا المختصر فلم يسعني إلا إجابتك ولم يمكّني إلا مساعدتك، ... فلم أنوقف كنوقف جعفر
لجابر ، بل بادرت وأجبت.

different from Ja'far al-Šādiq, who refrained from teaching Jābir b. Ḥayyān everything. This is a very bold statement given that – at least in Shī'ī circles – Ja'far was considered one of the founding fathers of the esoteric sciences⁴⁸. In addition, Jābir's status as the alchemist per se, was hardly ever challenged. When Ibn Arfa' Ra's boasted of being a better teacher than Ja'far, he also claimed to be a more accomplished alchemist than Jābir. This may be seen as in keeping with a passage in the *Shudhūr*, as well as in a passage earlier in the *Hall*, in which Ibn Arfa' Ra's seems to be rather skeptical of Jābir's type of alchemy⁴⁹. The esoteric-exoteric presentation here also serves to stress the author's own status and self-importance.

However, despite Ibn Arfa' Ra's characteristics as a great teacher, there remains a tension between a symbolic language that is difficult to understand and his wish to expose alchemical instruction in a comprehensible way. For example, Ibn Arfa' Ra's emphasizes the difficulty of reaching the alchemical goal:

Its goal (*al-maṭlūb minhā*)... is encoded in symbols (*marmūz*), obscure (*muṣtaḡhliq*), and it is only reachable by scientific instruments, the principles of wisdom, long thinking, pertinent intellect and opinion and extended patience. I will give you the details one by one, until I crush all your doubt about it...⁵⁰.

In general, however, Ibn Arfa' Ra's did not consider his *Shudhūr* to be incomprehensible at all: this is clear from the fact that he did not comment on all the verses, nor on all the poems. At times, he does not comment and instead says: “and the rest of the speech is understood” (*wa-bāqī l-kalām maḥḥūm* / *wa-bāqī l-kalām kulluhu maḥḥūm*)⁵¹ or simply adds after the citation of a verse “understood” (*maḥḥūm*)⁵². Thus, he stresses that his addressees – his student Abū l-Qāsim as well as later readers – should be able to grasp the meaning of a verse or of the

48. D. De Smet, «Ja'far al-Šādeq. iv. Esoteric sciences», in *EIr*, 14:362–63.

49. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Shudhūr*, 231; Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 284; cf. Forster and Müller, «The Identity», 401; Müller, «Introduction», 16–17.

50. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 402.

والمطلوب منها ... فهو مرموز مستغلق لا سبيل له إلا بآلات علمية وقواعد حكيمية واستعمال أفكار طويلة وعقل سديد ورأي وصبر مديد. وأنا أفصل لك ذلك أولاً فأقول حتى لا أدعك في شك منه.

51. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 36, 49, 335.

52. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 283, 423.

remaining verses of a poem. This might not be completely true – at least many later scholars commented on the parts Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s did not –, but it shows how Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s himself thought about the comprehensibility of his work. While he himself felt the necessity of writing a commentary, he did not feel that it needed to be very detailed. But, perhaps this is not the whole story: if we take the above citation that calls the *Ḥall* a short commentary (*mukhtaṣar*) and Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s insistence that he was going to write a more extensive one, he might have intended to comment on all the poems and verses in a later work. As there are no traces of a complete commentary and the *Ḥall* is not directly – in its title or preface – called a *mukhtaṣar*, we cannot judge whether Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s thought his *Shudhūr* did or did not require a complete commentary. On the other hand, it is very clear that later alchemists were convinced that this was the case: al-Jildakī alone wrote no fewer than four commentaries on the *Shudhūr* and parts of it⁵³. In the case of its reception, the *Shudhūr* seems to have been considered a typical esoteric work in need of an exoteric commentary. At least from the Mamlūk period onward, the so-called occult (or “esoteric”) sciences became quite popular⁵⁴, and while this has been, so far, mostly been discussed in terms of lettrism, magic, and astrology, it seems to hold true for alchemy as well. Knowledge, by being written down, became widely and uncontrollably accessible⁵⁵. Through later commentaries, secrecy became, no doubt, even more of a literary game than it had been, for a very long time. The idea that the art should be hidden was a literary topos that could be played with and varied and that was meant to stress alchemy’s high rank and importance.

53. Müller, «Planets in Alchemy», 8–9.

54. See for example N. Gardiner, «Forbidden Knowledge? Notes on the Production, Transmission, and Reception of the Major Works of Aḥmad al-Būnī», *JAS* 12 (2012): 81–143; N. Gardiner, «Esotericist Reading Communities and the Early Circulation of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad al-Būnī’s Works», *Arabica* 64.3–4 (2017): 405–41; N. G. Harris, «In Search of ‘Izz al-Dīn Aydamir al-Gildakī, Mamlūk Alchemist», *Arabica* 64.3–4 (2017): 531–56; M. Melvin-Koushki, «Introduction: De-Orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism», *Arabica* 64.3–4 (2017): 287–95.

55. Cf. K. Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands. A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh 2012).

Zāhir and bāṭin

To the best of my knowledge, the terms *zāhir* and *bāṭin* hardly ever appear in Arabic alchemical writings. In the Jābirian corpus, they appear in the *Kitāb al-bayān* (The book of proof) in a messianic context⁵⁶. However, the *‘ulūm bāṭina* (inner sciences) mentioned are not identified and it is not clear what sciences are referred to by *bāṭin*⁵⁷. The terms are more prominently used in the *Kitāb al-ahjār* (The book of stones) and the *Kitāb al-khamsīn* (The book of fifty), both non-alchemical works. In both works, these terms do not refer to any type of knowledge or audience⁵⁸. Rather, the Jābirian corpus suggests that every material thing consists of four natures, of which two are outward and manifest (*zāhir*), while two remain hidden (*bāṭin*) in the matter⁵⁹. In this way, Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī (d. 353/964), author of the famous *Rutbat al-ḥakīm* (The rank of the sage) and *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (The goal of the sage), in his less well-known *Kitāb al-rawḍa* (The book of the garden) used the terms to describe that all matters have two of the four basic qualities that dominate them on the outside, while the other two remain on the inside⁶⁰. Yet, Maslama also uses *zāhir* and *bāṭin* in two places to indicate a way of dealing with and talking about the art of alchemy: he seems to refer to *Decknamen* (coded language)⁶¹, and to the usage of a symbolic language⁶².

56. S. N. Haq, «Greek Alchemy or Shī‘ī Metaphysics? A Preliminary Statement Concerning Jābir ibn Ḥayyān’s *zāhir* and *bāṭin*», *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 4.2 (2002), 23.

57. Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, *The Arabic works*, ed. E. J. Holmyard (Paris 1928), 12; Haq, «Greek Alchemy», here 23, translates «occult sciences», yet without discussing which sciences could be meant.

58. P. Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān: Contribution à l’histoire des idées scientifiques dans l’Islam*, 2 vols. (Cairo 1942–43), 1:147 and 2:178; S. N. Haq, *Names, Natures and Things: The Alchemist Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān and His Kitāb al-Ahjar (Book of Stones)* (Dordrecht 1994), esp. 153 [Indian pagination 35].

59. Haq, *Names*, 96; Haq, «Greek Alchemy», esp. 26–30; S. N. Haq, «Occult Sciences and Medicine», in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 4: *Islamic Cultures and Societies to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. R. Irwin (Cambridge 2010), 655–57.

60. V. Ziegler, *Im Garten der Alchemie. Traditionsgeschichtliche Einordnung des arabisch-alchemischen Werkes Kitāb ar-Rauḍa mit deutscher Übersetzung und kritischer Edition* (Baden-Baden 2022), 197, 346–47, 370–71.

61. Ziegler, *Im Garten*, 344–45.

62. Ziegler, *Im Garten*, 360–61.

It is therefore not surprising that the terms *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* are not very prominent in Ibn Arfa' Ra's's works. The most obvious starting point is the ninth verse of poem 24 of the *Shudhūr* (on *ṭā'*):

بَاطِنُهُ ظَاهِرٌ وَظَاهِرُهُ إِنْ شَكَّ عَنْ كَالْجَيْنِ يَنْكَشِطُ⁶³

Its inside is apparent, and its outside

if one doubts, like silver is pulled off

Ibn Arfa' Ra's explains this verse, yet not in his own words, but with a quotation of Hermes Trismegistus:

Its meaning is what the lord of the great sages, the father of the noble philosophers, said, when he was asked about the process, and he is Hermes the prophet (peace be upon him). He said: showing the inner and hiding the outer. Likewise, here the inner is shown, and this is the redness, and the outer is hidden and pulled off, and this is the whiteness. This is meant for those who are doubtful [about] whether the inside of the stone is gold. This is the most perfect sign (*dalīl*) and the most eloquent testimony for one who doubts and negates that the alchemists' stone (lit. "the stone of the people") is gold⁶⁴.

The terms *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* here are used not in the sense of "esoteric" and "exoteric" but to mean the outer and inner parts of the stone, a usage that had already occurred in Maslama al-Qurṭubī's *Kitāb al-rawḍa*.

However, there is a single passage in the *Hall* where *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* seem to be used to mean "esoteric" and "exoteric." Here, Ibn Arfa' Ra's explains that normal people's distillation is *ẓāhir* ("outward"), while "our" distillation is inward (*bāṭin*). He finishes the sentence with the admonishment: "so understand this and be certain about it"⁶⁵.

63. I follow the reading of Svetlana Dolgusheva's forthcoming edition of the *Shudhūr*, that Ghazzālī also gives in his apparatus, while he has a slightly different reading in his text for the second half-verse: لَا شَكَّ عَنْهُ اللَّجَيْنُ (Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Shudhūr*, 195). Most of the *Hall* manuscripts offer عَنْكَ اللَّجَيْنُ (Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 177).

64. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 177-78.

معناه ما قال سيّد الحكماء العظماء وأبو الفلاسفة الكرماء حين سئل عن التدبير، وهو هرمس النبي عليه السلام، فقال: إظهار الباطن وإبطان الظاهر. فهكذا هنا ظهر الباطن وهي الحمرة، وبطن الظاهر وانكشط وهو البياض، وذلك لمن شك هل باطن الحجر ذهب أم لا، فهذا أتم دليل وأبلغ شاهد للشاك المنكر لحجر القوم أنه ذهب.

65. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 250.

فافهم ذلك وكُنْ منه على يقين.

The difference of the processes depends on whether one belongs to the in-group or not – a clearly esoteric conceptualization.

Symbolization

One of the features that most clearly marks alchemy as an esoteric science is its very specific language. This is most evident in the usage of the famous *Decknamen*, the code names (*rumūz*) that make alchemical texts inaccessible or perhaps esoteric. The *rumūz*, in alchemy, but also in other fields, are considered “a device deliberately used by philosophers, prophets or alchemists to hide their knowledge from the ignorant and a touchstone intended to distinguish the intelligent. The code is reserved for an elite, it is the instrument of the wise to speak to the wise and to deceive the ignorant”⁶⁶. *Decknamen* feature more or less prominently in all alchemical works: some of them have become so standardized that their usage seems to be no more than an indication that this is actually an alchemical text. In other cases, texts may use a set of codes that is very distinct and almost incomprehensible. The establishment of dictionaries and lists for *Decknamen* is therefore an old phenomenon⁶⁷. In the work of Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, it is not always easy to understand whether he is using a code name, and whether he does so in the standardized way or not. There are multiple instances in which he speaks about the symbolic usage of language, about *ramz*⁶⁸. For example, he explains that both the eggs and the parts of animals, plants, and minerals that alchemists talk about are but symbols and similes no one should be fooled by and that only

66. S. Moureau and G. de Callatay, «In Code We Trust: The Concept of *Rumūz* in Andalusī Alchemical Literature and Related Texts», *Asiatische Studien–Études Asiatiques* 75.2 (2021), 444.

67. A. Siggel, *Decknamen in der arabischen alchemistischen Literatur* (Berlin 1951); G. Ferrario, «Understanding the Language of Alchemy: The Medieval Arabic Alchemical Lexicon in Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms Sprenger 1908», *Digital Proceedings of the Lawrence J. Schoenberg Symposium on Manuscript Studies in the Digital Age* 1.1 (2009), Art. 2, <https://repository.upenn.edu/ljsproceedings/vol1/iss1/2> [accessed 4 Aug. 2024]; G. Ferrario, «An Arabic Dictionary of Technical Alchemical Terms: MS Sprenger 1908 of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (fols. 3r–6r)», *Ambix* 56.1 (2009), 36–48.

68. Müller’s index lists more than fifty occurrences for *ramz* (Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 40).

the ignorant try to hold on to them⁶⁹. The “egg” for example, is no more than a simile (*mathal*), an indication (*dalīl*), an allusion (*kināya*), and a metaphor (*majāz*)⁷⁰. Yet, it seems possible that an expression is both true and symbolic (*ramz wa-ḥaqīqa*), as are the properties of the sulphurs that kill those who smell them⁷¹.

The ancient alchemists, like Zosimus, Democritus, and Aras, spoke in *ramz*⁷², and it is a general practice (*‘āda*) among the alchemists (*al-qawm*) to use *ramz*⁷³, at least to speak about some aspects of alchemical work⁷⁴. In addition, *ramz* as a practice is found among Indian sages and in the books of the sages, in which the symbols are juxtaposed with *alghāz* (riddles)⁷⁵. In fact, most stories and similes are but symbols for the art⁷⁶.

Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, however, solves the symbols for his interlocutor (and his readers)⁷⁷. He even claims to have explained to Abū l-Qāsim how to attain the real gold of the sages without any symbol, so that his explanation will be completely sufficient⁷⁸.

Borrowing of terminology and the status of the sciences

Even more interesting than the ongoing reference to a symbolic language is the way in which Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s uses technical vocabulary from other sciences as alchemical terminology⁷⁹. For example, in the

69. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 50–51.

وذلك أن بيض الحيوان وجميع أجزاء الحيوان والنبات والمعدنيات رمز وتمثيل، فلا يغتر أحد به البتة، ولا يتمسك به إلا جاهل خسيף العقل.

70. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 51.

71. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 47.

72. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 11, 53, 180, 460, 510.

73. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, e. g. 27, 217, 302, 412, 518.

74. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 54, 334.

75. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 189.

76. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 201.

لأن كثيراً من الحكايات والأمثلة كلها رموز على الصناعة.

77. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 189 (see also 339).

وأنا أحل لك رمزه إن شاء الله تعالى.

78. Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 300–1.

79. At a first glance, this seems reminiscent of an Ismā‘īlī text on astrology, *Kitāb al-fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt al-‘ashara* (Book of intervals and the ten conjunctions) that stipulates an inner sense of astrological terminology (cf. E. Orthmann, «Zāhir und bāṭin in der Astrologie: Das *Kitāb al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt al-‘ashara*», in *Differenz und Dynamik im Islam. Festschrift für Heinz Halm zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. H.

first verse of the *Shudhūr*'s first poem, we encounter two technical terms that are well-known from astronomy and astrology, *tathlīth* (the trigon or trine) and *muqārana* (the conjunction)⁸⁰. In the *Hall*, Ibn Arfa' Ra's explains *tathlīth* as follows:

The trigon (*tathlīth*) is sufficient in everything and has a variety of meanings (*ḥukm*) in the science of the stars, in natural science (*al-ṭabī'a*), and in the art [i.e., alchemy]. For its meaning in the science of the stars there are three zodiacal signs between two planets [...] And in natural science, it refers to the tertian fever among the various fevers [...] Concerning the trigon of the art, it is close to the other two in its form (*ṣūra*), but different from them in its sense (*mafhūm*) and accidentals (*ʿawāriḍ*)⁸¹.

Similarly, Ibn Arfa' Ra's explains that the term *muqārana* has two meanings: "The conjunction (*muqārana*) has a meaning in the science of the stars and another one for us. Concerning the first, it is that two planets are in the same zodiacal sign, and this is commonly understood (*wa-huwa mafhūm*). For us, [it is] an expression of the marriage (*al-muzāwaja*) and the union (*ittihād*)"⁸².

Alchemy, at least in Ibn Arfa' Ra's's conceptualization, does not use a specific terminology, it uses terms from other sciences and applies specific meanings to these terms. This might be the case because alchemy is the pinnacle of all sciences:

[...] for this art's knowledge is different from all other knowledge (*ma'lūmāt*) and its inventions from all other inventions because it [the art] is the basis of this world (*dunyā*), the system of the universe (*ʿālam*), the essence (*zubda*) of philosophy, and the fruit of wisdom [...]

H. Biesterfeldt and V. Klemm (Würzburg 2012), 337-58). However, in the *Kitāb al-fatarāt*, an allegorical interpretation is claimed to be necessary, while for Ibn Arfa' Ra's, the same terms may simply be used differently in different sciences.

80. Cf. Müller, «Planets in Alchemy», 16-27, 21-22.

81. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 2-4.

والتثليث في كل شيء مرض وله في النجوم حكم، وله في الطبيعة حكم، وله في الصناعة حكم. أما حكمه في النجوم فهو أن يكون بين الكوكب والكوكب ثلاثة بروج، ... وأما حكم الطبيعة فهو كالحمي المثلثة في باب الحميات، ... وأما التثليث الصناعي فهو قريب منهما في الصورة، ويخالفهما في المفهوم والعوارض.

82. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 7.

المقارنة لها عند أهل النجوم معنى، وعندنا معنى. أما الأول فهو أن يكون الكوكبان حاليين في برج واحد، وهو مفهوم، وعندنا عبارة عن المزوجة والاتحاد.

One must read the ten propaedeutic philosophic sciences, which are (1) logic... (2) medicine... (3) natural science (*ṭabīʿa*)... (4) the science of the stars (*nujūm*)... (5) geometry (*handasa*)... (6) arithmetic... (7) music (*al-adwār*)... (8) wisdom (*ḥikma*)... (9) the absolute propaedeutic science (10) theology (*ilāhī*).... And only it (alchemy) is called science and made special because of its nobility⁸³.

This closely resembles Maslama al-Qurṭubī's insistence on the ascension through the sciences toward first alchemy and then magic⁸⁴. Yet, Ibn Arfa' Ra's also stresses the fact that alchemy is much more than just another science; rather, alchemy is the basis of the world and the essence of philosophy. The true adept of the art will not just learn yet another science but understand the world per se. In our paradigm of "exoteric" vs. "esoteric", this insistence on the centrality of alchemy as the peak of the sciences and the basis of the world seems to belong to an esoteric discourse rather than a exoteric one.

Manuscript evidence

As with many alchemical texts, there is a very large body of manuscript evidence not only to the *Shudhūr* but also to its commentary, the *Hall*. Of the *Shudhūr*, nearly one hundred manuscripts dating from the eighth/fourteenth to the twentieth century are extant. These come from a variety of geographical areas and societal contexts and seem to suggest a wide audience over a long period of time⁸⁵. Nearly

83. Ibn Arfa' Ra's, *Kitāb Hall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr*, 402-6.

لأنّ معلوم هذه الصناعة مخالف لجميع المعلومات وأوضاعها لجميع الأوضاع، لأنها قوام الدنيا ونظام العالم وزبدة الفلسفة وثمرّة الحكمة. ... فيقرأ العلوم العشرة الرياضية الفلسفية، وهي المنطق ... ثمّ الطبّ ... ثمّ الطبيعة ... ثمّ النجوم ... ثمّ الهندسة ... ثمّ الأرتماطيقي ... ثمّ الأدوار ... ثمّ الحكمة، ... ثمّ العلم الرياضي مطلقاً ... ثمّ الإلهي ... وإنما سمّيت علماً وخصّت لشرفها ...

See also G. de Callatay, «Dividing Science By Ten», *SI 111* (June 2020): 1-32 (where a list from al-Makīn's *al-Majmūʿ al-mubārak* is discussed; its division is very similar to the one presented here).

84. Cf. G. de Callatay, «Encyclopaedism on the Fringe of Islamic Orthodoxy: The *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, the *Rutbat al-ḥakīm* and the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* on the Division of Science», *Asiatische Studien-Études Asiatiques* 71.3 (2017): 857-77.

85. Cf. C. Braun and R. Forster, «The Alchemist's Work: Ibn Arfa' Ra's and the Reception of His Collection of Alchemical Poems *Shudhūr al-dhahab*», *Asiatische Studien-Études Asiatiques* 75.2 (2021): 611-36.

one hundred manuscripts are, by any standard, a very substantial textual transmission that cannot be dismissed easily.

But even of the lesser known *Ḥall*, there are more than thirty copies. These mostly date from the tenth/sixteenth to the nineteenth century⁸⁶. While this is less impressive, it is still a considerable number that suggests an ongoing interest and will to invest money and time.

Were all these manuscripts copied and read by an esoteric group of adepts? This seems doubtful at least: These many traces are unexpected with truly esoteric instruction. Alchemy, at least at some point in the intellectual history of the Islamic world, perhaps after the “occultist turn” of the late Mamlūk period, became not so much an esoteric science, but a science that was read and studied intensively, though perhaps it was less often practiced in the laboratory.

Conclusion

To sum up, is alchemy an esoteric science – and is alchemy as conceptualized by this sixth-/twelfth-century Moroccan scholar an esoteric science? There is no doubt that there are many aspects of alchemy that make it decidedly esoteric, as evidenced by its continuous stress on secrecy and on knowledge reserved for an elite that must not be passed on to the masses. Yet the Arabic terminology of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, which are central to esoteric movements such as the Ismāʿīliyya, is largely absent from most alchemical writings.

These two general observations hold true for Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs and his works. Yet despite his many admonitions to keep alchemical knowledge secret, he is well aware that his *dīwān* and his commentary were passed on beyond his immediate circle of disciples: in commenting on his poetry in sometimes quite clear terms and in considering the generations to come, he even stresses that his work should be transmitted further, even if that meant that it would go beyond his control. It is striking that his commentary takes the form of a literary dialogue – the form adopted by Plato and Aristotle for their exoteric works! Perhaps the *Shudhūr* are Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs’s esoteric works, while the *Ḥall* is the exoteric, dialogic part. Yet, tempting as this would be, the manuscript evidence seems to suggest otherwise: the – esoteric?

86. Müller, «Introduction», 18–21.

– *Shudhūr* are extant in a far greater number than the exoteric *Hall*. However, even this fact of transmission could serve as an indication that the hypothesis is actually correct. Just as Aristotle's exoteric works are almost completely lost and became less important during late antiquity, Ibn Arfa' Ra's's exoteric *Hall* was far less important than his – esoteric ? – *dīwān Shudhūr al-dhahab* that reached an audience well beyond the happy few.

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ABSTRACT

Regula Forster, *To What Extent Is Alchemy an Esoteric Science? A Case Study of Ibn Arfa' Ra's (fl. sixth/twelfth century)*

This chapter discusses the status of alchemy as an esoteric science, oscillating between 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' and between the not quite synonymous Arabic *ẓāhir* (outer or apparent meaning) and *bāṭin* (inner or hidden meaning). Taking the works of the sixth-/twelfth-century Moroccan alchemist Ibn Arfa' Ra's as a case study, I discuss what elements in Ibn Arfa' Ra's's work may be interpreted as hints that he conceived of alchemy as an esoteric science. At the center of the contribution is a reading of Ibn Arfa' Ra's's commentary *Ḥall mushkilat Shudhūr al-dhahab* (The unraveling of the difficulties of the "Splinters") which already, in its title, promises a clarification and might therefore be considered an 'exoteric' work. While alchemy with its stress on secrecy seems to be an upfront candidate for consideration as an esoteric science, the Arabic terminology *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* is largely absent from most alchemical writings. Rather, alchemists in general, and Ibn Arfa' Ra's in particular, seem to play a game of hide and seek in which seemingly esoteric works become far more widespread than their exoteric counterparts.

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