

# The Effluents of Deity



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*Alchemy and Psychoactive Sacraments in  
Medieval and Renaissance Art*

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Mark A. Hoffman

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# Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
<b>Chapter 1 • The Secret of Secrets</b>	<b>3</b>
Conversion	3
Jacob's Journey	5
Visualization	8
Jacob's Pillow	9
Samuel and Lilith	13
The Ekron Goddess	14
The Scorching Noon of Isaac	16
Human Sacrifice	17
Whores and Catamites	19
Lignum Vitae	20
Ark of the Covenant	22
Oblatio Offerens	24
The Lord Provides on the Mountain	27
Jacob and Esau	31
<b>Chapter 2 • Column at the End of Time</b>	<b>33</b>
The Tree of Jesse	33
The Temptation	37
Solomon's Bridge	41
Golden Embossed Apples	43
Felix Culpa	46
The Millennial Column	48
Salamander Tree	51
One Foot on the Chalice	54

<b>Chapter 3 • Blazons of the Saints</b>	59
Church Demons	59
Ichthyomorphic Fungi	62
Voice of Thunder in a Wheel	63
Whirling Wheels of Passion	66
Harvesting the Dragon's Head	70
Gorgon's Blood	72
Knightly Fare	74
Lynx Urine and Hemorrhoids	76
The Knights of St. George	78
The Cross of St. George	79
Urine Crystals	83
Raven's Bread	85
Mushroom Eggs	87
<b>Chapter 4 • The Grail</b>	91
Dynastic Validation	91
The Question Not Asked	96
A Tale of Two Knights	98
Good Friday Confession	101
The Holy Blood of Bruges	103
The Marys of the Sea	105
The Two Wives' Predictions	106
The Lance of Longinus	112
<b>Chapter 5 • The Fountain of the Bleeding Lance</b>	115
The Water of Life	115
A Trinity of Eights	117
Aqua Vitae	120
The Poison Cup	121
The Twin Timbers of Life	125
The Alchemical Elixir	125
The Duke's Laboratory	128
Pigmentation	130
The Order of the Golden Fleece	133
The Holy Vessel	139
The Emerald Stone	140
Ordination	141

<b>Chapter 6 • God's Throne on Earth</b>	147
The Triple Crown	147
Priest as Victim	151
The Celestial Choristers	154
The Miracle of <i>Santissima Annunziata</i>	155
Ecclesia and Synagogue	159
Anti-Semitic Polemic	161
Column of the Faith	164
The Crown of Twelve Stars	167
A Crown in Waiting	170
King Arthur's Crown	175
The Isle of Avalon	181
The Peacock Angel	185
<b>Chapter 7 • Mapping the Pathways</b>	189
Constructing the Cosmic Axis	189
The Power of Knowledge	189
Synagoga Conversa	192
Kether	194
Chaldean Magic	196
The Seven Sacraments	196
The Seven Seals	199
The Seven Planetary Spheres	200
Da'at	202
Zodiacal Man	203
Horoscope	204
<b>Chapter 8 • The Effluents of Deity</b>	209
Celestial Milk	209
The Lactation of St. Bernard	211
The Holy Infant's Pee	213
The Orb and the Cross	217
Piss Prophets	219
The Crystalline Fortress	220
The Virgin Receptacle	223
Books of Secrets	226
Conceptio in Vitro	227
Arcana Arcanissima	229
Mining the Truth	232

Sitting in State	234
Fuller's Agent	235
Love in the Fountain	238
Lewd Waters	240
Semen	241
Parrot	242
The Infant's Penis	244
Divine Fertility	246
The Holy Prepuce	247
The Genitals of Christ	249
Uniting with Christ	250
<b>Chapter 9 • In Plain Sight</b>	253
Vexierbild	253
Jakob Böhme	255
The Ephrata Cloister	256
Uroborus	256
Draped in Disguise	258
Gilled Feathers	262
Videre est Credere	267
The Celestial Ciborium	270
The Golden Paten	271
The Burning Bramble	273
Ravens in the Sky	275
A Babe among the Flowers	276
Born in the Caul	278
<b>Chapter 10 • The Eucharist</b>	285
Cibus Innoxius	285
Love Fest	287
Heretical Eucharist	291
Tale of the Sun-Mushroom	294
The Zoroastrian Simon	296
Revelation	297
<b>Bibliography</b>	303
<b>Index</b>	331

# Preface

## “... from Whom all blessings flow.”

The Ghent Altarpiece was the decade-long collaboration of Jan van Eyck and his presumed brother Hubert, commissioned by its donors Joost Vijdt and his wife Lysabette Borluut, and apparently facilitated in its completion by the patronage of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, and his newly wed third wife Isabella of Portugal. Its twenty-four disparate panels seemingly baffle a unified conception, blamed on the different intentions of the two artists, the spiritual aspiration of its pious donors, and the political dynastic ambition of its unacknowledged noble patrons.

Its theme is the End of Time as revealed in the *Apocalypse* of John, an event widely anticipated with the approach of the mid-millennium. The donors and patrons, by the manipulation of its complex theological symbolism, are striving to position themselves in the ascendancy for the renewal of the world as the New Jerusalem. It offers the hope of a Eucharist upon the True Presence, consisting of the alchemical Water of Life, the sacred effluent of Divinity, the elixir of Gnosis, whose implausible secret is blatantly disclosed only for those who have eyes to see.

Philip inaugurated the Altarpiece with the founding of the Order of the Golden Fleece, an elite chivalric society based on alchemical principles, whose highest knights were initiated by secret rites celebrating their spiritual transcendence to golden perfection. The model was King Arthur's Round Table, and the Altarpiece also establishes Philip's claim to the divine sanction of the legendary king in the quest for the Holy Grail and a final Crusade to recapture the Holy Land.

The Altarpiece is construed as an alchemical talisman to rearrange and call down the occult powers of the cosmos to bless his and the donors' aspirations. To this end, it encompasses symbolism assimilated into Christendom from the ancient mystery cults and pagan antecedents that authenticate the sovereignty of the Valois lineage. Prime among these is the figure of the Gorgon Medusa

and her European analogue as the fairy mermaid known as Melusina. The sacred aquatic stone that crystallized from her spilled blood is an alchemical version of the holy Eucharist.

The Ghent Altarpiece is the central point of reference about which we circle and repeatedly return as we place it in its greater context of what we might call medieval and Renaissance ecstatic scholarship, the intense meditation upon the Holy Scriptures to summon the visionary apparition of the secrets of its ultimate truths. The rabbi Abulafia, as the culmination of a millennium of such scholarship, had such a vision toward the end of the 13th century and set off to convert the pope.

The papacy was always a dual authority, with temporal rule often more demanding of concern than the mystical experiences of those members that the Church honored by canonization into the ever-swelling company of saints. The context for the Ghent Altarpiece was the third quinquennial expectation for the long awaited End of Time. It hadn't happened, as expected, for the millennium. In anticipation of that event, the bishop Bernward of Hildesheim, a metallurgist and alchemist, later canonized as saint, constructed another great work of art and architecture, the Michaeliskirche and its monastic school, for his tomb and pathway to celestial transcendence. The painted ceiling added to celebrate his canonization encodes the same secret that Abulafia divulged.

The third quinquennial and the millennium marked calculations for a period of time much more immediate. At the end of the 1st century, it was already overdue for an event expected within the lifespan of the original apostles and prompted the apocalyptic *Revelation* of John on the island of Patmos that established the vocabulary of symbols for the later repetitions.

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