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Alchemy In Selected Plays Of Shakespeare



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Alchemy in literature; Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616--King Lear; Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616--Hamlet; Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616--Julius Caesar; Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616--Macbeth

Abstract

Alchemy, as a philosophical system incorporating elements of religion, psychology, and myth, provided a rich matrix of imagery and associations. The mean of certain allusions and processes in Shakespeare's plays are clarified and extended by reference to alchemical concepts. Research includes examination of primary alchemical texts, a survey of historical

and critical comment on alchemy, exploration of alchemical metaphors in selected plays of Shakespeare, and an intensive examination of Hamlet. Citations from alchemical texts are compared to specific passages in Shakespeare's works, not as sources, but as explanatory analogues. Historical evidence indicates that alchemy was more eclectic, more pervasive, and more influential than previously judged. In both its exoteric and esoteric aspects, it held a significant place in the developing thought patterns of mankind. The material of esoteric alchemy was man himself. The alchemists assumed a world which operated as chemical process, a Nature which tended toward perfection but might be diverted, and a method through which man could participate in the restoration and rejuvenation of himself and his world. Alchemical references are implied in the metaphorical use of blood as tincture in Julius Caesar and Macbeth. Cordelia is related to the Paracelsian idea of balm in King Lear. Alchemical imagery associated with the processes of tincturing, surfeiting, healing, and magic is found in other selected references. Hamlet participates in a process of restoration which includes both his destruction and his fulfillment. His actions are linked to the passage of time and a movement through various stages which may be compared to the steps of the alchemical process: dissolution, separation, putrefaction, fixation, and projection. His world, like the world of the alchemists' is full of the potentialities of taint or tincture. Alchemy is examined as an essentially dramatic and poetic complex of ideas suggesting the possibilities of transformation.

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