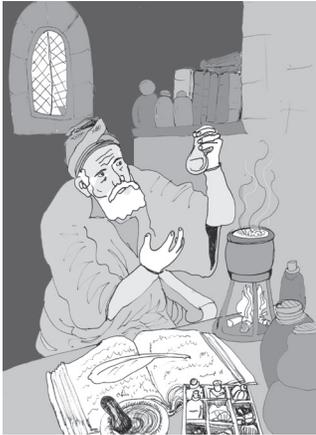


Alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone

The Wizarding World Meets the Real World (But Not Really)



Harry Potter was released in the United Kingdom under the title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The title was changed to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* for the US market. The main reason is because—and rightly so—the publisher figured that most Americans wouldn't get “philosopher's stone.” But the original title was actually far more appropriate. Here's why.

Throughout history, kings, queens, and, well, anyone who was anyone, deeply desired the philosopher's stone. Why? Because legend said that with the philosopher's stone, you could make two things that pretty much everyone wants: endless money and to live forever.

Alchemy was the attempt to turn ordinary substances into gold or a potion for an everlasting life. Alchemy is the ancestor of modern-day chemistry. It was a mix of chemistry and sorcery, so it wasn't a true science by today's standards. But sorcery, ghosts, and demons were as real to people 200 years ago as DNA is to us today. And unlike modern science, alchemy was shrouded in secrets and mystery.

People who practiced alchemy were called alchemists. All alchemists sought the philosopher's stone. This legendary stone was not really a rock. Or maybe it was a rock that you ground up into a powder. In any case, it was a substance that could be used to do two things. The first was change ordinary metals into gold. Whoever had the philosopher's stone could have unimaginable riches. The second was to make a drink

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called the elixir of life. An elixir is kind of like a medicine. Drinking it would make you live longer, or even forever.

Alchemists based their science on the idea that the world is made up of four basic elements. These are earth, air, fire, and water. Modern science tells us that the world is made up of elements, too (and atoms).

Alchemists worked in labs that were very similar Harry Potter's Potions classes. The alchemists mixed different—and often weird—things together and recited spells. They hoped these brews would magically form into the philosopher's stone. None ever did, as you can imagine.

What's interesting is that through modern chemistry, you can actually combine certain elements to create gold. Unfortunately, it costs much more to make gold than to buy it. So it's not worth the effort.

Modern chemistry can't make you live forever, but it can help people live longer lives. As science advances, it could help people live to be 120 or even 150 years old. They believe that such a long life will be possible through a mix of healthy living and gene therapy. They also believe that these scientific advances could happen within your lifetime. But don't tell You-Know-Who.

