

The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300–1700.

Jennifer M. Rampling.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. xviii + 408 pp. \$35.

In *The Experimental Fire*, Jennifer M. Rampling offers an accretive history of English alchemical texts articulating a strand of practice unified by use of “an inexpensive mercury drawn out of base metals,” called sericon, as *prima materia* (14). As the subtitle suggests, the book traces how early modern English alchemists created a national tradition of alchemy through repeated exegeses on medieval texts. Rampling proceeds chronologically across three parts divided into three chapters, defining and building a case for “alchemical reading,” the set of sophisticated reading techniques employed by “reader-practitioners” (7).

Historical alchemical texts were deliberately enigmatic. Rampling identifies a set of rhetorical techniques particular to alchemy, to which prospective alchemists had to adhere if they were to achieve alchemical understanding (both philosophical and practical). Decoding *Decknamen*, reading across texts to “assemble a writer’s true meaning” camouflaged by *dispersio*, interpretation of biological metaphors, extrapolating practices from principles, and comparing text to firsthand experience are some methods with which Rampling’s alchemical readers approached, and subsequently altered, their texts (44). Applying a kind of period eye to the history of alchemy, Rampling additionally argues that alchemical reading is equally indispensable to modern historians.

The first section introduces the corpus of works that form the core of this thread in English alchemy: those attributed to Raymond Lull. Chapter 1 explicates how English alchemy became defined by the merger of mineral and medicinal alchemy under the authority of Lull through the reading practices of fourteenth-century alchemists, and introduces what will become two defining tenets of alchemical reading: “exposition of obscure texts and the reconstruction of difficult practices” (60). The second chapter demonstrates how fifteenth-century English alchemists like George Ripley used these techniques to convince prospective patrons of their expertise, augmenting and amending the pseudo-Lullian corpus to suit their needs. The third chapter considers the role of practice in these efforts, examining three little-known examples of alchemical recipes to demonstrate how idiosyncratic readings of authoritative texts yielded differing practical approaches.

Part 2 turns to the ways sericonian alchemy was pursued through the dissolution of the monasteries. The fourth chapter considers the movement of alchemy from monastery to secular library and laboratory, while the fifth gathers little-studied sixteenth-century appeals for royal patronage to argue for sericonian alchemy’s endurance during the reign of Henry VIII. Many of the manuscripts that Rampling examines have not been published before. She attributes some for the first time, with striking attention to material clues from the texts themselves. Chapter 6 discusses both the particularities of different alchemists’ understandings of pseudo-Lullian theory and how they

constructed a hallowed tradition of English alchemical philosophy in their patronage suits, which Rampling reads in light of their authors' alchemical reading practices (203).

The third part covers how medieval alchemy was again reinterpreted in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Chapter 7 discusses medieval pseudo-Lullian alchemy in the seventeenth century through Samuel Norton's rediscovery of George Ripley's *Bosome Book*, a collection of texts attributed to Ripley that today survives only in copies and translations. Rampling convincingly argues that Norton was indeed in possession of the original with a close comparison of its contents to Ripley's other writings. Chapter 8 focuses on texts written by Edward Kelley while in service to (or imprisoned by) Emperor Rudolf II, and his use of English alchemy for self-invention at court in Prague. Chapter 9 considers the seventeenth-century works of Elias Ashmole and George Starkey, closing the volume with a consideration of how Ripley's sericonian alchemy was ultimately transformed by their interpretations, which reimagined his content while maintaining his authority as English alchemist par excellence.

Rampling prioritizes word over image or experiment. The text includes images, but their content is rarely analyzed and their potential role in alchemical reading merits elaboration (198). Though material knowledge is by no means discarded (Rampling discusses her own laboratory reconstructions primarily in chapter 7), for Rampling it was the constant reinterpretation of texts that led to practical developments, then entered back into the canon through commentaries, exegesis, and transcriptions; thus, practical experience primarily serves the project of harmonizing sometimes contradictory textual sources (335). The relationship between reading and practice articulated here leaves little room for a deeper look at how embodied practical knowledge might have itself informed alchemical reading.

The Experimental Fire is a reconstruction of the English sericonian alchemical tradition worthy of its subject. It provides avenues for further elaboration and contributes new research and an insightful methodology to the field. By tracing the understanding, circulation, and reception of texts across the early modern period, Rampling creates a cohesive alchemical history, reading the English sericonian alchemical corpus and its commentators in the same way it was read by alchemists of the past.

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A Companion to Death, Burial, and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, c. 1300–1700. Philip Booth and Elizabeth Tingle, eds.
Leiden: Brill, 2021. xviii + 511 pp. €229.

In this fourth pandemic year it is poignant to read the editors' dedication of this volume to healthcare workers and those who died in "the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020." How little we all knew then. This book is a welcome addition to what was already a