



BOOK REVIEWS

PRE-1800

Eoin Bentick. *Literatures of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern England*

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Alexander N. Gabrovsky 

Independent Scholar

Email: alexander.gabrovsky@gmail.com

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Eoin Bentick's informative monograph is a study of the myriad ways in which alchemical texts have been interpreted and re-interpreted throughout medieval and early modern England. The ambitious scope of Bentick's work, which moves chronologically from Roger Bacon through Elias Ashmole, provides scholars with an essential bird's eye view of alchemy and its diverse readership of alchemical enthusiasts. Bentick also provides an insightful analysis regarding the inherently paradoxical nature of alchemical texts themselves that promise to unveil truths while simultaneously concealing them from its readers.

Bentick makes a clear distinction in the introductory chapter between the *sapientes*, those with chemical acumen, and the *fatuous*, armchair readers who create "myths" and are more drawn to alchemy's mystical associations. In chapter 1, he emphasizes the futility of alchemical pursuits in Chaucer's "Canon's Yeoman's Tale." Alchemical texts are used to manipulate their gullible readers, hiding empty promises in obscure language to hold power over them. Bentick acknowledges that Chaucer's work can be interpreted in various ways depending on the reader: a justification of spiritual alchemy or a scathing attack on alchemy as a worthless pursuit. Bentick gives the impression that he falls firmly into the latter. The Tale, he argues, cannot be "anything other than satirical," especially in reference to the promise of hidden knowledge being used to manipulate others (39). The purpose of Chaucer's poem is to expose "impotent attempts to recreate the fertile creativity of God" (47).

In the second chapter, Bentick covers fertile ground with an analysis of three English authors: Roger Bacon, John Gower, and Thomas Norton. While these writers are separated from each other by several centuries, Bentick manages to link them together through the theme of transmutation as a means of social reform. Of note, he examines in scrupulous detail the different versions of the *Secretum secretorum*, which has been misattributed to Aristotle as a compendium of knowledge for his pupil, Alexander the Great. Based on a misreading of the version of the *Secretum* by Philip of Tripoli, Bacon extends the transmutation of the elements to the alteration of humors that dictate human behavior to harness the power of alchemy for his moral crusade. As a practicing physician myself, I was intrigued by Bentick's account of how medieval humoral theory was used as a mechanistic framework to predict human psychology. Bentick also contextualizes alchemy as an instrument for social improvement across Gower's works. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of Thomas Norton's desire to reform England, applying alchemy's transformative powers to kingship and society at large.

Chapter 3 examines a fifteenth-century manuscript: London, British Library, MS Harley 2407. An illuminating case study, Bentick here reveals the ways in which varying audiences of the

manuscript across time interacted with a plethora of alchemical ideas. He divides the manuscript into four sections of poems: recipe, gnomic, theoretical, and conceit. Bentick often remarks that vague references to bodies, spirits, and souls are strictly alchemical technical terms void of any metaphysical, poetic, or philosophical meaning. For Bentick, the obscurities of alchemical texts are often deliberate, used as a kind of literary trick to attract patrons/readers of alchemy to its mysteries. Chapter 4 provides a theoretical framework for his arguments regarding concealment in alchemical texts with a discussion of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*. Looking into the Book of Nature meant there were hidden truths, and alchemists borrowed the Augustinian notion that there was a divine truth inscribed in the physical world of signs. Bentick tends to reject the potential for allegorical meaning and cautions against finding alchemical metaphors where he believes they were not intended.

Bentick's methodology draws heavily from studies in the history of science. This overall strategy is well-intended but at times limits his analysis of alchemical *poetry* in favor of privileging its more "chemical" aspects. Bentick speaks of the excited reader "who does not have great alchemical acumen" (132), which allows for "further and further slippage from the particular conception of alchemy as practiced by its compiler" (134). But what exactly that "conception" is remains debatable. Bentick's work is much indebted to the influence of William Newman and Lawrence Principe, historians who have rightfully situated alchemy firmly in the history of science, but who have minimized its mystical aspects as a means of doing so. It is understandable why Bentick and others carefully untangle any problematic Jungian associations from their work, distancing themselves from "pseudoscience." Alchemical imagery and metaphor have become, in essence, the sacrificial lambs, being stripped of religious or philosophical valence in favor of simplified *Decknamen* (cover names) to denote alchemical materials/processes. In recent years, a proliferation of studies on alchemy has infiltrated varying cultural spaces far beyond the confines of medieval science and has re-invigorated the intersection between religion/mysticism and alchemy. The work of Zachary Matus, for example, demonstrated how the Franciscan friars, highly prolific and influential writers on alchemy, were actually first and foremost committed to the *theological* ideas of alchemy as it related to their Franciscan philosophy. By not deviating far from the disciplinary boundaries that have encircled the history of science, many have overlooked the rich imagery connecting alchemy with medieval religious culture, as well as the literary, philosophical, and cultural value of alchemical poetry itself. Bentick does not examine the multiple other treatments of alchemy across Chaucer's *oeuvre*, though he concludes that in writing the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," Chaucer "acknowledges, but ultimately dismisses, the allure of alchemy's hidden secrets" (48). However, the Christian concept of alchemical wisdom as the grace of divine knowledge—a kind of self-reforming spiritual alchemy—is not a Jungian misreading but indeed proliferated in multiple fourteenth-century alchemical treatises, including the tracts that Chaucer himself directly quotes from. Any complex development of the Yeoman's character (via inner reflections on his own alchemical pursuits) is, therefore, unnecessarily blunted by Bentick's cautious yet cynical reading emphasizing manipulation, chemical futility, and power structures.

These minor points are trivial to Bentick's larger achievement. *Literatures of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern England* is an engaging and enjoyable read and firmly entrenches alchemical ideas in the broader cultural history of England. Bentick's insights are buttressed with well-researched footnotes and his succinct analysis of alchemy from third-century Alexandria through thirteenth-century Europe stands as a practical toolbox for medieval scholars without its academic jargon. A rich and comprehensive literary history of alchemy, Bentick's work provides insights for the specialist and nonspecialist alike, particularly regarding the evolving receptions of alchemical texts throughout the English landscape. This highly readable monograph is deeply informative and will be a valuable resource for years to come.