CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Information overload not only applied to the early modern period, but also applies to the nature of sources for the history of alchemy today. Historians’ difficult task is to find fresh and illuminating ways to navigate a body of writing whose manifestations and forms, migration through manuscripts, across disciplines and geographical areas are as diverse as their original writers’ and readers’ lives and work. This book has proposed and demonstrated a historiographical approach based on a history of texts in manuscripts, particularly *anonyma*, guided by the textual networks of alchemical poems. The boundaries of this research were defined by a family of texts, the corpus around the poem “Verses upon the Elixir”. Its directions and applications were suggested by the historical materials themselves. Chapters 3 and 4 investigated the roles of authorship and authority in the reception of the corpus. They discovered that named authorship and distinctive manuscript features like a scroll format and illustrations did not have the same impact on the poems’ reception as they do on our perception of the body of alchemical writing and manuscripts today. Chapters 5 and 6 combined the history of the corpus around the “Verses” with more familiar narratives about institutions, collections and notetaking techniques. Here the verse-related angle provided insights into the minds of both anonymous and named individuals who had hitherto escaped closer historical analysis. In all studies the focus on text corpora lent a new perspective on materials partly familiar and partly undiscovered. Historical disentanglement of a pandemonium of sources, when ordered by the history of corpora of texts, can, therefore, expand our knowledge about the communities around the individuals wrote and received them.

Beyond the themes highlighted in these studies many more remain to be explored in future scholarship. My list of *desiderata*, as prompted by this research, includes increased investigation on the communication of ideas at the lower ends of the alchemical-social strata: analysis of texts used by anonymous alchemical writers and practitioners with interests ranging from the metallurgical to the philosophical, and any kind of alchemical texts from brief, elliptic recipes to lengthy theoretical treatises. Again, manuscript manifestations of texts, complete with annotations and textual changes, would offer a useful approach to hitherto undiscovered material. This research would successively capture the breadth of alchemical activity.
in the Renaissance. The materiality of manuscripts, another aspect of historiography that merits a dedicated focus in the history of alchemy, would provide the tools for these inquiries.

Another area opened up by the case studies in this book from a slightly different angle is a reader-driven history of libraries and collections. The collector as reader and the history of books after they enter a collection, beyond disciplinary boundaries intimated by an institution or its shelving system, offer much food for thought: they supplement the impressions of the role of alchemy in society recovered by the recent work on the sites where chymistry was practised. An ‘institutional history’ of alchemy would also aid the effort of discovering historical practices and correcting a historical record that had originally, unwittingly, edited alchemy out of academic circles.

A matter only touched upon here but worthy of note is the study of pre-Paracelsian contacts between medicine and alchemy in their manuscript context, and thus in their literary cultural contexts. Here, too, the book as object, as means of the preservation and transmission of knowledge, and silent witness of practical approaches to texts will suggest fruitful paths, and a consideration of the movement of texts situated between the medical and the alchemical will open up inquiries beyond case studies on individual books and personalities: in this instance, a thorough study of the recipe as text form would be particularly promising.

A third area of pressing questions in the history of alchemy concerns alchemical expression: terminology, genres, and the non-verbal communication of alchemical lore. This book focused on alchemical verse; and my subsequent work on alchemical images is intended to investigate the communication of alchemical practices in non-verbal elements of alchemical manuscripts, and thus translates the approach shown here to other types of alchemical documentation. But much remains to be investigated once a certain cross-section of alchemical manuscript writings is evaluated. No matter what the specific type of text or document under investigation, corpus-based research will be ideal for distinguishing individualisations of texts and codices, regional or temporal fashions for textual or practical parts in the history of alchemy from more general movements. Both the individual and the wider context merit investigation, but, as their intermingling in the

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1 The Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry hosts a series of conferences on the ‘Sites of Chemistry’ to showcase this work, to date with a temporal focus more recent than the period discussed here, but nevertheless indicative of exciting research on places of chymical practice: http://www.ambix.org/projects/sites-of-chemistry/ (4/2013).
final two case studies has shown, a corpus-based perspective adds another dimension to locating manuscripts and historical actors in the large web of communication that presents itself in extant alchemical manuscripts. Ideally, a significant number of critical editions and their conjunction in a virtual environment would highlight particularly noteworthy individuals, manuscripts, places and periods. The medium of digital editions and new approaches to stemmata would aid this process significantly.

A final logical step into the future of research to be mentioned here is the contextualisation of alchemical writings in the wider world of Middle English literature and culture. Here, too, a textual approach will facilitate the combination of research on other areas of Middle English writing, both literary and pragmatic. Joint textual corpora would also offer an opportunity for studies into the development of vernacular technical terminology and tropes over time. Certain parallel developments in, for example, medicine and alchemy, as well as influences of other languages and literatures and even fashions in the use of equipment would emerge (some of which are peculiar to alchemy, others borrowed from, or lent to, other areas of language, literature and practice).

All research directions outlined here naturally intersect with existing studies, and would complement them by merit of their textual-material approach to formerly neglected materials. The widest implications of research presented in this book, then, affect the discovery of research angles that capture new materials for historical investigation. The reception of anonymous *alchemica*, when seen through the history of the corpus around the “Verses”, indicates that the genre of Middle English alchemical poetry lent authority to texts. I therefore selected it here as a theme guiding the researcher and reader of this book through a variety of materials not hitherto investigated in combination with each other, or not studied at all in existing scholarship. Like the texts investigated in this book, a large number of anonymous prose texts and unidentified text fragments, particularly in vernacular languages, lie undiscovered and unresearched in manuscripts and archives all over Europe and beyond. They are often neither captured in catalogues nor even classified appropriately to indicate their content, length or origin. But it is this recipe literature that defines practical applications of alchemy in medieval and early modern Europe. With a focus on the characteristics of texts it might be possible to find other criteria which helped these manuscripts’ writers and readers navigate their texts, and this will define a strategy for their recovery and analysis. If not a recipe for the alchemical secret, corpus-based research may yet be a method of turning information overload into knowledge.