INTRODUCTION TO A CORPUS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH ALCHEMICAL POETRY

1. Alchemical Poetry in Late Medieval England

In the fifteenth century, on the threshold of the early modern period, England witnessed tremendous political, social and cultural change. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge operated amidst a growing number of academic institutions in the British Isles and in continental Europe—the Scottish universities of St. Andrews (1411) and Glasgow (1451) were part of a surge of new academic foundations—and headed the vibrant international scholarly exchange characteristic of the pre-Reformation period. The scholarly study of natural philosophy thrived alongside medical doctors’ attempts to contain epidemics, a general enthusiasm for astrological intelligence and its applications, and an increasingly vigorous flow of scientific information to a wider range of audiences. Scientific communication evolved amidst the contemporary cultivation of poetry that inspired Chaucer’s successors, John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve, as well as James I of Scotland. Meanwhile, craftsmen continued to work under the guardianship of the guilds while adding literacy to their set of professional skills.

Alchemy, a craft based on an intricate theoretical system, intersected naturally with university disciplines concerned with natural philosophy on a theoretical level, and with some crafts on a practical level. Not organised in a guild, it was commonly practised both by those who came into contact with alchemical lore in bibliophilic environments (scholars, clerics, medical doctors, etc.) and by craftsmen engaged with metals, furnaces and the modification of substances (smelters, smiths and workers in the mining industry). Sophistication of practice and individual emphasis on theory or practice necessarily varied between these groups as well as from one individual to another. But in the fifteenth century in particular craftsmen with alchemical leanings refined their knowledge in a newly revived combination of word and deed, in the workshop and on paper. It was in this environment, and

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¹ For a wider perspective on poetry in the English Renaissance see Marotti, Manuscript.
in the course of just a few decades, that Middle English alchemical poetry became the most emblematic, successful and current expression of the craft and its teachings.\(^2\)

The written world of alchemy into which alchemical poetry was introduced looked back upon a relatively homogeneous tradition. Although medieval manuscripts may be quite diverse in content and written expression, it is possible to discern two main types of medieval alchemical literature: firstly, ancient, traditional, Arabic or Greek texts, often theoretical in nature. These ancient texts had passed easily into the Latin tradition of the Middle Ages, which added large corpora of pseudonymous *alchemica*, populated under the names of ancient authorities, to the body of literature.\(^3\) They continued to be circulated, adapted and applied in the fifteenth century. This part of alchemical literature (both ancient and imitated) was associated closely with the high culture of writing, monasteries and, in the later Middle Ages, academic contexts. Secondly, medieval alchemical literature included texts written in, and for, the workshop. This pragmatic, applied body of texts consists of recipes and working notes, often of more imminent and recent origin than the traditional texts mentioned before. They were frequently noted down either in blank spaces of theoretical manuscripts or, as time passed, in dedicated volumes and craft recipe collections, so-called books of secrets, many of which are lost to the historical record.\(^4\) It was particularly this latter branch of alchemical writing that produced Middle English alchemical verse.

If a novelty in alchemical writing in the fifteenth century, Middle English alchemical poetry was nevertheless based on an ancient tradition, one that defined its genre and medium: like all medieval scientific poetry alchemical verse evolved as an adaptation, imitation, translation and continuation of classical didactic poetry.\(^5\) Poetry had been the preferred educational medium of classical Rome and was reintroduced to the canon of elevating and instructive writings in the course of the humanist revival of late

\(^2\) Pioneering research on alchemical verse includes Schuler, *English Magical*; and Schuler, *Alchemical Poetry*. The most comprehensive and recent survey of alchemical verse is Kahn, “Alchemical Poetry” (Parts I and II).

\(^3\) See the Introduction and Chapter 3 for details.
