CHAPTER FIVE

ALCHEMICAL POETRY AND ACADEMIA:
MANUSCRIPTS AS CHRONICLES OF SCHOLARLY ENQUIRY

Why do readers of *alchemica* think what they think, and how do they think about it? Various ways of structuring thought, and techniques for the acquisition and organisation of knowledge on the page and in a collection, were taught to and acquired by generations of alchemical practitioners and scholars throughout the history of the corpus around the “Verses upon the Elixir”. The underlying discourse communities, ranging from craftsmen to scholars, constructed and conceptualised their manuscripts and collections in a mixture of method and personalisation which allows the discovery of the ways in which they understood books and nature.

The final parts of this book concern essentially early modern learned approaches to the corpus around the “Verses” and the materiality of the organisation of knowledge. This chapter focuses on a copy of the “Verses upon the Elixir” in a sixteenth-century manuscript (TCC MS R.14.56) which has been kept in a Cambridge college since the early seventeenth century. The early modern manuscript page and the academic library, two physically limited spaces of astonishing internal complexity, determined the history of this codex. The first part of this chapter will put the tail ends of the manuscript’s history into perspective, i.e. its origins and final storage in Trinity College Library, which has determined its institutional context and reception for the past four centuries. It will then introduce relevant theoretical background, especially sixteenth-century developments in book culture.¹ Finally, it will show how, through scholars’ avid use of the Trinity manuscript, this particular copy of the “Verses upon the Elixir” graduated from being a plain recipe text to a means of communication.²

¹ This will also be relevant to the context of Chapter 6 below.
² This chapter is based on materials first used for the compilation of the following article: Timmermann, “Sixteenth-Century Manuscript”.

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In 1637, Thomas Whalley, vice-master of Trinity College Cambridge, died. His connection with the College had started with his matriculation as a student fifty-three years earlier, and, a cleric, priest, lover of books and probably a bachelor, he had decided to consider the College’s Library in his will. His bequest included the handsome sum of £120 for the acquisition of printed books, as well as ten manuscripts he had acquired for his own studies and delectation. Among the latter was an alchemical manuscript (now TCC MS R.14.56, henceforth the ‘Trinity Compendium’), which reached its final destination on the College Library’s shelves. Even then, only a few decades after its original compilation, the codex showed signs of heavy use in the form of a multitude of annotations, which led early twentieth-century bibliographer M.R. James to describe it as “a very ugly shabby book”.

The turbulent history of the Trinity Compendium was, however, much more fascinating than James knew. The Trinity Compendium is a digest of late sixteenth-century alchemical knowledge compiled from several manuscripts. Large parts of the volume were written by the same person, in a reasonably neat secretary hand and over a period of time, as inks and the quality of the script and paper vary. Other parts, written in different hands, appear to date from the same period. Unfortunately, the early history of the Trinity Compendium is rather confused.

Since its assembly into its current state happened at a relatively early date (most likely around the turn of the seventeenth century), and hence reflects an early modern compilation

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[^3]: £120 in 1637 represents the equivalent of £15,000 of present-day currency (cp. Measuring Worth), Gaskell, Trinity College Library, 83 and 90.
[^4]: James, Western Manuscripts, 2: 341, entry 925. This remark can be put into perspective with the help of the following study: Sherman, “Soiled”.
[^5]: Sherman proposes that an analysis of ink quality may be as helpful in the dating of manuscripts as watermarks for that of paper stocks: Sherman, John Dee, 223.
[^6]: Diverging systems of page numbers, the presence of some smaller leaves bound into the volume at ff. 49–52 and the loss of fifty-one folios in a middle section attest to the fact that its quires were not always arranged in the current order. Due to the absence of the primary copyist’s name or a clearly identifiable, extant exemplar (see stemma below) it is difficult to determine a more precise time of composition than the long mid-sixteenth century, or to pinpoint when the volume assumed its current collation.
[^7]: Sherman proposes that an analysis of ink quality may be as helpful in the dating of manuscripts as watermarks for that of paper stocks: Sherman, John Dee, 223.