CHAPTER SIX

ALCHEMICAL VERSE AND THE ORGANISATION
OF KNOWLEDGE

Whether a quick jotting down of an idea or the careful composition of a treatise, the use of pen and paper to order thoughts is familiar to all literate men throughout history. Alchemical practitioners of all levels of literacy were among those who employed language and writing to advance their knowledge, among them the writers and annotators of the corpus around the “Verses upon the Elixir”. A particularly articulate group of corpus readers emerges in the late sixteenth century: physicians discussing the uses and misuses of chemical remedies in medicine. Paracelsus, his followers and opponents constitute the most famous part of the history of pharmacy, a development which had been foreshadowed by alchemo-medical stirrings from the late Middle Ages onwards. Alchemica now appeared in private book collections at the same time as doctors refined their commonplacing techniques.

The sixteenth century generally showed crucial developments in the history of the corpus around the “Verses upon the Elixir”: the Trinity Compendium (of the previous chapter) was subjected to annotation, the Ripley Scrolls advanced towards Scotland, the “Verses upon the Elixir” now also existed in a Neo-Latin prose version, and the corpus as a whole reached peak circulation before its imminent demise in the mid-seventeenth century. Within this plurality of readings and expanding materiality, corpus manuscripts produced in the early modern medical, learned reception of alchemical poetry reveal much about their writers’ understanding of medicine and alchemy in an evolving structure of learning.

This final chapter concerns a series of notebooks written by a physician in the final decades of the sixteenth century. Widely read in the natural philosophical literature available in his time, the physician produced more than three dozen volumes in which he investigated the uses of alchemy for medical purposes, among other things, with the help of the corpus around the “Verses upon the Elixir”. The notebook writer’s contributions to manuscript culture are remarkable for three reasons: firstly, his access to literature and books details early modern communication networks and their uses of alchemical poetry. Secondly, while the Trinity Compendium of the previous
chapter represented a communication of a group of peers, the notebooks
display a single individual’s working space. His personal way of arranging
and processing alchemical and medical information develops a distinctive
architecture of alchemo-medical thought. And thirdly, the physician’s com-
bination of literary and actual experience provides a unique opportunity to
look over the shoulder, into the mind and, exceptionally, the workshop of
an early modern doctor with alchemical interests. This chapter explores the
notebooks (henceforth, the ‘Sloane notebooks’, named after their current
place of storage in the British Library’s Sloane collection), their contents,
organisation and purpose.¹

1. THE SLOANE NOTEBOOKS:  
MEDICINE AND THE CORPUS AROUND THE
“Verses upon the Elixir”

1.1. Introduction to the Notebook Series

Towards the end of the sixteenth century a physician set out to preserve
the wisdom he gleaned from books in writing. His notes and thoughts, gath-
ered over the period of several decades, eventually filled approximately fifty
notebooks, of which thirty-four survive today. In their contents, these note-
books cover alchemical, medical, philosophical and political matters.²Their
language is that of the learned. In their form, they employ distinctive note-
taking strategies. But in their presentation, the notebooks are essentially
personal: they do not record the compiler’s name, they are not numbered or
indexed, and do not otherwise preserve any aid for orientation which would
be necessary for anyone other than their compiler to make sense of them.
Moreover, the Sloane notebooks’ compiler did not prepare texts for publi-
cation, a pursuit which led many of his contemporaries (including Simon
Forman and Andreas Libavius) to write similarly extensive notes with com-

¹ Timmermann, “Doctor’s Order”, is an early version of the work presented in this chapter.
² Subject matters covered in each of the Sloane notebooks (a = alchemy; m = medicine;  
a/m = alchemo-medicine/pharmacy; p = allegorical painting/other): BL MSS Sloane 1041  
(p), 1042 (a/m), 1043 (a/m), 1060 (a/m), 1061 (a/m), 1062 (a/m), 1063 (p), 1082 (p), 1092 (a),  
1093 (m), 1095 (a), 1096 (p), 1097 (a), 1098 (a), 1099 (a/m), 1105 (a), 1113 (a), 1114 (a), 1127  
(a/pharmaceutica), 1136 (a), 1146 (a), 1147 (a), 1148 (a), 1149 (a), 1150 (a), 1151 (a), 1152 (a), 1153  
(a), 1158 (m), 1169 (p), 1170 (a), 1171 (a), 1181 (a), 1186 (a). The original number of notebooks is  
an estimate based on general statistics of manuscript loss for the period, combined with the  
otebooks’ own contents and references to further volumes.