

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Stanton J. Linden, ed.** *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xxvii + 260 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-79234-9; \$30.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-79662-0.

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This is a collection of English translations (previously translated elsewhere) of primary sources relating to alchemy. The collection is divided into three parts (ancient; Islamic and medieval; Renaissance and seventeenth century), each part comprising nine authors. The first part includes excerpts from the works of Hermes Trismegistus (*The Emerald Tablet*), Plato, Aristotle, Pseudo-Democritus, the anonymous *Dialogue of Cleopatra and the philosophers*, anonymous recipes, Zosimos of Panopolis, Stephanos of Alexandria, and an anonymous poem; the second part has selections from Khalid ibn Yazid, Jabir ibn Hayyan, Avicenna, Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Nicolas Flamel, Bernard Earl of Trevisan, and George Ripley; the last part contains translations of Paracelsus, Francis Anthony, Michael Sendivogius, Robert Fludd, Gabriel Plattes, John French, George Starkey, Elias Ashmole, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton. Each translation is prefaced with a brief biography and description of the excerpts, with a judiciously concise bibliography (a full bibliography is appended at the end of the volume). Although this kind of anthology would never please the purist or the specialist (notable omissions include the writings of Raymond Lull, Arnald of Villanova, and Marsilio Ficino), it is nevertheless helpful to have in one volume so many standard authorities on alchemy and their *loci classici*. It should be noted that this is a text-based “Reader,” so there is little about the actual alchemical instruments or laboratory layouts, or on archaeological material.

*The Reader* begins with a useful introduction, pointing out the recent historiographic rehabilitation of alchemy as a significant part of cultural history of pre-modern Europe. It includes an explanation of the symbols, basic principles (to do with the relationship between art and nature), and alchemical processes (there is further glossary at the end of the book). As the author points out, “much alchemical writing

is highly visual” (p. 23), and to this end, fourteen alchemical figures are gathered together at the front of the book. A study of figure 14 alongside the excerpt from Flamel’s *Exposition of the Hieroglyphical Figures* is rewarding, and justifies the editor’s comment that it is “an excellent example of the combining of visual and verbal mediums” (p. 123). Yet an opportunity is missed with figures 1 and 12 from the *Musaeum hermeticum* (not translated in *The Reader*) where the text accompanying the image would have made an excellent introduction to the relationship between God’s creation, nature, and art—without translation, these figures are not terribly useful in a non-Latinate classroom. Moreover, three of the figures are from Michael Maier’s works, whose texts are not included in the volume. Alchemical images are notoriously difficult to comprehend, and given the care with which the texts are annotated, the figures could have been provided with some explanatory annotation or a summary translation of the text accompanying the figures.

Throughout the volume, there are recurring themes, such as the relationship between art and nature, divine and human creation, alchemical principles and processes, and the ever-elusive philosopher’s stone—these suggest some common preoccupations in alchemy. The third part, in particular, demonstrates the enduring importance of Hermes Trismegistus, whose *Emerald Tablet* is the first translation in this volume. On the other hand, the selection as a whole succeeds in showing the variety of styles and the heterogeneity of alchemical writing. Some, such as Sendivogius’s *A Dialogue Between Mercury, the Alchmyist and Nature* and Gabriel Plattes on how to detect a “cheat” make for compelling reading on their own. Others, such as Zosimos’s lessons and Flamel’s *Exposition of the Hieroglyphic Figures*, may turn out to be more challenging in the classroom.

This book can be used in university courses profitably, alongside Lyndy Abraham's *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, as the back cover suggests. I would myself favor Gareth Roberts's *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideals and Images in Manuscripts and Books, from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (1994) and, more generally, Sophie Page's *Magic in Medieval Manuscripts* (2004), to counter-balance the text with images. If one is looking for more texts, continental and Latin sources are translated by P. G. Maxwell-Stuart in his *The Occult in Early Modern Europe: A Documentary His-*

*tory* (London: Macmillan, 1999). Although the selected texts in this *Alchemy Reader* deserve to be studied in a course on alchemy *sui generis*, the selections in the third part could well serve as an excellent background for a literature course on Johnson's *The Alchemist*, and almost half of the selections (i.e. Hermes, Plato, Aristotle, pseudo-Geber, Avicenna, Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Paracelsus, Starkey, Boyle, and Newton) could be used as material for a history of science course which has a focus on matter theory. This is a useful addition to the bookshelves of students and teachers interested in alchemy.

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