
Reviewed by George Elliott (Purdue University Northwest)

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Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Jennifer M. Rampling's *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300-1700* is a long-needed contribution to the history of alchemy. While it certainly adds to the subject in a general sense, its focus on English alchemy provides a necessary and valuable synthesis of its development in one geography over many centuries, in contrast to the tendency by historians of alchemy to focus on one practitioner instead. Rampling argues that from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, “authority and invention contributed to the development of a particular body of natural knowledge—alchemy—in the context of one national tradition” (p. 4). Over the course of nine chapters, divided by threes into three parts, Rampling traces alchemy's development in the face of a host of textual, practical, religious, political, economic, and intellectual factors.

In the first part, Rampling explores the medieval origins of English alchemy. The first chapter begins appropriately in the fourteenth century with Edward III, “the first English king to patronize alchemical transmutations” (p. 25). As she does throughout the book, here Rampling takes several moments to focus on essential questions around alchemical terminology and identification. Rampling helps both scholars and lay readers alike in these moments by sorting out what terms signified alchemical interest, reading, and practice. This chapter also grounds the reader and provides some background into the origins of medieval alchemy in Europe and England. The second chapter moves into the next century and introduces, in detail, the central figure for much of Rampling's scholarly work, the fifteenth-century author and “doyen of English alchemy,” George Ripley (p. 73). Rampling also introduces the reader to another sort of alchemist in her example of the “wooleman” William Morton, who constructed a furnace at the priory in Hatfield. Unlike the academically oriented alchemy in the previous chapter, Morton represents another kind of English alchemy the reader encounters throughout the book, one far more closely tied to practice than theory. The third and final chapter focuses again on Ripley as well as the fraught ideas of opinion and experience in
alchemical texts. The reader also receives an introduction to one of Ripley's principal works, his *Bosome Book*, “a manuscript compendium of treatises and recipes that Ripley seems to have compiled during the 1470s” (p. 108).

The second part moves on to the golden age of English alchemy in the sixteenth century. The fourth chapter focuses on religion, particularly its waning influence on English alchemy during the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s. Rampling argues that this event is a significant turning point in the history of English alchemy as it escaped the English religious and their libraries and moved into the nation's secular domain. She also temporarily departs from examining Ripley’s alchemy to interrogating the lesser-known alchemy of the French or Flemish tutor of Henry VIII, Giles du Wes. As with the first chapter, the reader is again brought back into English court conditions to better understand du Wes’s alchemy and influence. The fifth chapter, in part, challenges older assertions about Henry VIII’s disinterest in transmutation and alchemy. Here, Rampling also focuses on the complicated and blurred boundaries between alchemy and magic during this era. Much of the chapter, too, expands on what is known about the alchemy of William Blomfild, a former Benedictine monk who practiced the art in the middle of the fifteenth century in London. Patronage and the court again become central to Rampling’s analysis in the sixth and final chapter of the second part of the book. In this chapter, she looks at the work of the Dutch figure Cornelius de Lannoy, the “first alchemical philosopher known to have received substantial royal support” in the Elizabethan court, but also other influential thinkers, such as Thomas Charnock, the author of the “first ‘history’ of English alchemy” (pp. 204, 235). Rampling argues that increasing demand for alchemical knowledge in the Elizabethan age “enhanced the prestige of fifteenth-century adepts like Ripley and Thomas Norton,” English alchemists from previous generations (p. 206).

In her third part, Rampling looks at the legacy of medieval alchemy in early modern England. In the seventh chapter, she returns again to Ripley by thinking about his legacy in the Elizabethan period, as his *Bosome Booke*, in particular, received attention from alchemists, such as Samuel Norton. Among its close textual details, the chapter also notes details Rampling herself gained from experimenting with Ripley’s alchemy. The eighth chapter looks at English alchemy's continental connections and influences from jailed practitioners, such as Edward Kelley, and better-known Elizabethan alchemists, such as John Dee. The ninth and final chapter represents the only part focused entirely on the seventeenth century. As a result, it covers many subjects, for example, English alchemy’s major shift from manuscript to print mid-century, the contributions of the alchemist George Starkey to the legacy of Ripley, and the “ends” of English alchemy in the latter half of the century.

Rampling’s book is an excellent and long-needed synthetic work on English alchemy from its medieval origins to the seventeenth century. It is a necessary addition to the library of any historian of alchemy and does impressive work in contextualizing centuries of alchemy's history within England’s religious, political, economic, and intellectual developments. Yet the work could have done more at certain moments to escape the tendency among intellectual histories to focus too granularly on specific texts without putting them in a greater context, for example, in chapter 3’s close reading of three anonymous alchemical tracts on goldless elixirs. Another area to expand on would be the book’s final part. Although the book gives attention in the eighth chapter to “a Pan-European network in which English practitioners like Dee and Kelley were enthusiastic and influential participants” and recognizes how “this network now survives only in fragmentary form,” it almost entirely omits possible English colonial influences (p. 318). Rampling’s recognition of continental influences on the development of English alchemy might have been bolstered by a further
discussion of the connections between alchemy in England and its colonies. The one significant exception to this omission comes in Rampling's discussion of the Bermudan and Harvard graduate Starkey, plus a brief remark on Martin Frobisher's return voyage to North America. Filling out her discussion here would have also strengthened her temporal breadth as, although the book states that it covers the years 1300 to 1700, it gives no significant attention to the decades after the 1660s. The book's lack of a conclusion also leaves the reader disoriented as the end of English alchemy is only discussed in the final two pages of chapter 9. After providing such extraordinary temporal coverage, the author could have ended with some reflections on the most critical trends, themes, and history covered. However, these omissions to the book do not detract in large part from such a monumental and vital addition to the history of alchemy.

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