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This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in:

JOURNAL English Studies

CITATION Norja, S. (2023) Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry in Middle English Literature. *English Studies*.

DOI 10.1080/0013838X.2023.2231310

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Sara Norja (2023) *Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry in Middle English Literature*, English Studies, DOI: [10.1080/0013838X.2023.2231310](https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2023.2231310)

Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry in Middle English Literature, by Curtis Runstedler, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023, xii+205 pp., €131.99 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-031-26605-8

Alchemy remains an understudied field in textual studies: the majority of English alchemical texts remain unedited. The past decade has seen increased interest, however, and alchemy is now a topic approached by textual scholars as well as historians of science. Curtis Runstedler's *Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry in Middle English Literature* brings another angle to the study of alchemical texts: literary criticism. I approach Runstedler's work as a philologist, and thus cannot provide detailed commentary on his literary analysis; however, in my view Runstedler sheds new light on staples of ME literature featuring alchemical themes such as Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The book shines when Runstedler moves to less studied works: an alchemical reworking of Lydgate's *Churl and the Bird*, and two anonymous fifteenth-century alchemical dialogues.

In Chapter 1, Runstedler describes his overall focus: 'the moral uses of alchemy in Middle English poetry' (p. 4). That is, he reads the poems as exempla, stories told to illustrate moral issues. Runstedler's central argument is that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century 'literary representations of alchemy [...] function as exemplary narratives which directly address the ambiguity of late medieval English practice' (p. 5). He considers the poems to have layers addressing human moral behaviour through alchemy. To initiate the reader into the secrets of alchemy, Runstedler devotes Chapter 2 to a thorough introduction to medieval alchemy from both historical and literary perspectives. His historical overview neatly integrates the themes of the upcoming chapters. Importantly for his argument, Runstedler addresses alchemy's ambiguity: medieval society was simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the possibilities and dangers presented by the science.

Chapter 3 focuses on Book IV of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which includes a substantial section on alchemy. Runstedler describes *Confessio Amantis* as 'a new style of secular and vernacular alchemical *exempla*' (p. 65). He notes that Gower presents a more positive image of alchemy than Chaucer or Langland: alchemy is unachievable in the present day, but not reviled. Runstedler argues that the alchemical passage is essential for the message of *Confessio Amantis*, exploring themes crucial to the work.

Perhaps the best-known example of ME literary alchemy is *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Runstedler approaches this much-studied work from his unique angle in Chapter 4. He argues that reading the *Tale* as exemplary helps us reconcile the

paradoxical representations of alchemy in Chaucer – alchemy as both a noble science and conman’s game – and indeed, his exemplary reading indicates a more positive attitude. The *Tale’s* exemplum suggests that only God knows the secrets of alchemy, and therefore contemporary alchemists are doomed to fail (p. 116): alchemy is an ideal science, yet unattainable for humans. In Chapter 4, Runstedler also draws parallels to less explicit alchemical themes in some of Chaucer’s other *Tales*, mainly that of St Cecilia in the *Second Nun’s Tale*. I agree with Runstedler that the further examples of ‘alchemical’ interpretations for Chaucer’s writing are not convincing (pp. 118–120).

In Chapter 5, Runstedler moves to less well-known alchemical material. He focuses on an anonymous fifteenth-century alchemical reworking, in the alchemical miscellany Harley MS 2407, of John Lydgate’s *Churl and the Bird*. The shift to fifteenth-century texts is important, since current research indicates that the fifteenth century was pivotal for the vernacularisation of English alchemy. Anonymous alchemical poems were important for transmitting alchemical information, as Anke Timmermann has noted,¹ and thus including anonymous texts represents the manuscript reality. In addition, an anonymous writer adding alchemical stanzas to Lydgate’s poem exemplifies the textual fluidity common for medieval alchemical writings. The moral of Lydgate’s *Churl and the Bird* is that the churl should fit in with his societal role rather than attempt to get wealthy. The alchemical version moralises that ‘ignorant alchemists’ (p. 141) should likewise forgo attempts to pursue the craft.

Chapter 6 goes deeper into anonymous territory; Runstedler examines two alchemical poems from the fifteenth century, in Trinity College, Cambridge MS R.14.44 and Oxford, Bodleian Library Ashmole MS 1445. The former manuscript contains a clearly exemplary dialogue between the alchemical celebrity Albertus Magnus and the Queen of Elves. The latter contains a dialogue between another famed alchemist, Morienus, and none other than Merlin, presented as Morienus’s son. Runstedler argues that these dialogues gain clarity and validity if they are read as alchemical exempla. The Merlin/Morienus dialogue compares transmutation to Christ’s resurrection, a theme that became common in later alchemy. This poem seems more optimistic about the possibility of alchemical success than the others.

The latter part of Chapter 6 concerns a dialogue between Albertus and the Queen of Elves. The poem in question is a version of *Semita Recta*, a prose work attributed to Albertus Magnus (edited by Peter Grund).² Unlike the other works studied in *Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry*, this dialogue is explicitly an exemplum, although this time it is secular. Alchemy is considered “‘elvysshe’ knowledge’ (p. 177), difficult for humans to understand; however, it is the ‘right path’ (p. 178). The poem describes alchemical processes, ending with the hope of joining magic and science. Throughout

¹ Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*.

² The edition can be found in Grund, ‘Albertus Magnus’.

Chapter 6, Runstedler brings forth his analyses from previous chapters, comparing the better-known poems of Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate to the anonymous ones.

Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry is a valuable addition to the study of English alchemical writings, drawing together the major ME literary works on the topic and applying literary criticism to anonymous texts. Those who are unfamiliar with medieval alchemy will find the first chapters helpful; those who have studied major ME poets will find Runstedler's alchemy-focused analysis sheds new light on their works; and those who have delved into alchemy will find Chapter 6 illuminating. I consider Chapter 6 a valuable addition to our knowledge of medieval alchemy through its analysis of anonymous poems. A minor infelicity in the book is listing the references by chapter instead of at the end, which is not always helpful for the reader. Overall, however, Runstedler's clear argument of how these alchemical poems can be fruitfully read as exempla makes for a cohesive book despite the disparate texts studied.

The importance of editing more alchemical writings is implicit in *Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry*. The anonymous Albertus/Queen dialogue, for instance, would not have been accessible to Runstedler without Peter Grund's edition of it.³ Thus, the more alchemical works that are edited, whether poetry or prose, the more material literary critics such as Curtis Runstedler have to work with. *Alchemy and Exemplary Poetry* will be useful to literary scholars wishing to delve into the understudied field of alchemy.

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³ Grund, 'Albertus Magnus'.