


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Nourishing the alchemical child: metaphors of family life as textual cohesion in the fifteenth-century *The Gracious Work*

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## Abstract

English-language alchemical manuscript texts remain under-studied despite their potential for providing new insights into the textual histories of alchemy. In this article, I use close reading of one such Middle English alchemical text, which I name *The Gracious Work*, to examine how its alchemical metaphors create cohesion among a fragmented whole. This nameless and previously unstudied work, formerly attributed to Roger Bacon (c.1214–92?), is extant in four English-language manuscript witnesses. Three of them are from the late fifteenth century (Cambridge, University Library MS Dd.4.45; Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.45; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1451) and one is from the seventeenth century (MS Ashmole 1452). On the surface, *The Gracious Work* looks like a typically ‘incoherent’ alchemical text; indeed, although exploring this work’s textual history is beyond the scope of this article, it was probably compiled from several sources. However, the coherence in *The Gracious Work* comes from its central metaphors – core alchemical metaphors drawn from family life. Metaphors linking alchemical processes and substances to concepts of daily life such as weddings and parenthood ease information transmission in this fragmentary work; in addition, the vagueness of the language acts as a marker of in-group language use.

An English alchemical work from the fifteenth century instructs us in preparing the philosophers’ stone: ‘in is owyne modir bely nursshe hym forye’, or ‘in his own mother’s womb nourish him’.<sup>1</sup> This kind of metaphorical instruction is common for alchemy, a popular branch of the sciences in medieval Europe; many alchemical texts refer to processes or ingredients using striking metaphors such as a green lion swallowing the sun. These symbols have also been frequently studied, for instance through the lenses of gender or religion.<sup>2</sup> However, vernacular alchemical manuscript texts, even those written in a much-researched language like English, remain under-edited and under-studied, especially

<sup>1</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1451, p. 63. The manuscript is hereafter referred to as Ashmole 1451. My transcriptions are diplomatic; I follow manuscript punctuation and capitalization. Interlinear additions are inserted \thus/. Abbreviations are expanded in italics. The Ashmole 1451 scribe writes <y> and <b> identically, so I have transcribed both as <y> for the sake of consistency. I have not indicated scribal underlining (frequent in this manuscript).

<sup>2</sup> Lyndy Abraham’s *Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, is a useful starting point. Studies on alchemical imagery include H.J. Sheppard, ‘A survey of alchemical and Hermetic symbolism’, *Ambix* (1960) 8, pp. 35–41, Barbara Obrist, *Les débuts de l’imagerie alchimique*, Paris: Le Sycomore, 1982, especially pp. 48–64, on medieval allegorical alchemical treatises; Obrist, ‘Visualization in medieval alchemy’,

when it comes to works in Middle English (c.1100–1500).<sup>3</sup> Such texts present textual challenges, but also provide a rich source for examining topics such as the development of scientific English, alchemy's textual and manuscript context, and alchemical practices.

In the present article, I focus on one such previously unstudied Middle English alchemical work, examining its use of metaphorical language. The above metaphorical instruction is from one manuscript witness of what I call *The Gracious Work*. This work, previously attributed to Roger Bacon (c.1214–92?), is extant in three English-language manuscript witnesses from the late fifteenth century: MSS Cambridge University Library Dd.4.45; Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.45; and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1451, as well as one seventeenth-century witness (MS Ashmole 1452). None of these manuscripts has been studied in much depth, and *The Gracious Work* has long been one of many catalogued but unexamined Middle English alchemical works.

Some such works evince clear textual organization, with divisions into chapters and other paratexts, employing metatext to guide the reader further. For instance, a Middle English version of the widely transmitted *Mirror of Alchemy* is divided into a prologue and seven chapters and gives the reader clear metatextual guidance for navigating the work: 'Nowe þe . 5.<sup>th</sup> Capitulum. schall trete of þe fessell & þe ffurnesse', 'now the fifth chapter will discuss the vessel and the furnace'.<sup>4</sup> *The Gracious Work*, however, exemplifies more 'obscure' and disconnected alchemical texts. Alchemical writings in Middle English are often compilations from several sources with less textual cohesion.<sup>5</sup> Although exploring *The Gracious Work*'s textual history is beyond the scope of this article, it was probably compiled from multiple sources. In addition, the work also has other features common to Middle English alchemical works: it occasionally switches to Latin, its contents are rather obscure, and it uses metaphorical language.<sup>6</sup> The work thus reflects the manuscript reality of Middle English alchemy – even if it is challenging to approach due to its opaque structure and language. By bringing this work to light I hope to show that even complicated Middle English alchemical works are worth approaching.

In this article I examine how alchemical metaphors in *The Gracious Work* create cohesion among a fragmented whole, easing information transmission. My focus is on common metaphors connecting alchemical processes and ingredients with concepts from daily life such as weddings and parenthood. The much-studied 'chemical wedding', as it is conventionally known – a union between the 'opposites' of woman and man, symbolizing the culmination of preparing the philosophers' stone – forms the central metaphorical context for *The Gracious Work*. I focus on the chemical wedding and child rearing in my analysis since they are prevalent in this work; in addition, due to their very commonness, these

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*HYLE: International Journal for Philosophy of Chemistry* (2003) 9, pp. 131–70; Allison B. Kavey, 'Mercury falling: gender malleability and sexual fluidity in early modern popular alchemy', in Lawrence M. Principe (ed.), *Chymists and Chymistry: Studies in the History of Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry*, Sagamore Beach: Chemical Heritage Foundation, 2007, pp. 125–35; Leah DeVun, 'The Jesus hermaphrodite: science and sex difference in premodern Europe', *Journal of the History of Ideas* (2008) 69, pp. 193–218; DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, esp. Chapter 6, 'Metaphor and alchemy', on Rupescissa's religious and eschatological alchemical metaphors; Tara Nummedal, 'Alchemical bodies: discursive and material vision', *Early Modern Women* (2021) 15, pp. 121–32.

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Grund, 'Editing alchemical texts in Middle English: the final frontier?', in Vincent Gillespie and Anne Hudson (eds.), *Probable Truth: Editing Medieval Texts from Britain in the Twenty-First Century*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2013, pp. 427–42.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Norja, 'Alchemy in the vernacular: an edition and study of early English witnesses of *The Mirror of Alchemy*', doctoral dissertation, University of Turku, 2021, at <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-8448-0> (accessed 27 January 2025), p. 353, l. 200.

<sup>5</sup> On the fundamental mutability of medieval alchemical texts see e.g. Robert Halleux, *Les textes alchimiques*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1979, p. 90; with regard to Middle English see Grund, op. cit. (3), p. 435.

<sup>6</sup> On the features of Middle English alchemy see Grund, op. cit. (3).

extended metaphors provide a cohesive framework for *The Gracious Work*. One example of their prevalence comes from *The Mirror of Alchemy*, a work that mainly eschews metaphors but which nevertheless contains an extended metaphor on ‘þ<sup>e</sup> creacioun of manne’.<sup>7</sup> The chemical wedding is a quintessential example of an alchemical extended metaphor, and thus is a useful lens through which to explore a hitherto unknown text.<sup>8</sup> In what follows I argue that the coherence in *The Gracious Work* comes from these central metaphors: verbally evoked core alchemical images drawn from family life. The very commonality of the metaphors aids in creating cohesion for the work. In addition, I suggest that the ‘vagueness’ evidenced in *The Gracious Work* – its meandering structure and unexplained metaphors – is part of alchemical in-group communication.

Alchemical language use, including copious metaphors and vagueness of expression, is often seen as a way of gatekeeping alchemy from the uninitiated.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, some alchemical manuscript texts declare this principle of exclusion outright. The seventeenth-century MS Ashmole 1407, for example, lists alchemical cover names such as ‘green lyon’ and ‘mans bloud’ and states that they are ‘named colorably to deceave fooles’.<sup>10</sup> However, even present-day science makes ample use of metaphors such as ‘greenhouse gases’ and, furthermore, Leah DeVun has noted that such metaphors can reveal societal concerns and attitudes.<sup>11</sup> Metaphors in themselves are therefore not only a sign of exclusion. They can also be viewed as a sign of inclusion for the right kind of audience. Considering alchemical metaphors as purely gatekeeping, therefore, may keep us from seeing medieval alchemy from the point of view of the alchemists themselves, who used their writings to communicate with other alchemists and disseminate information as much as they did to conceal knowledge from the uninitiated. As Eoin Bentick remarks, ‘Throughout the history of alchemy, alchemists have been taught to read beyond the literal.’<sup>12</sup>

To show how alchemical in-group communication can be achieved through metaphor and other nebulous means, I approach *The Gracious Work* – as an example of ‘opaque’ alchemical writing – from a linguistic point of view. I suggest that alchemical metaphors can be seen as belonging to ‘vague language’, a concept described by Joan Cutting as ‘language that is *inherently and intentionally* imprecise’.<sup>13</sup> Studies on present-day vague language suggest that non-specificity when discussing a mutual interest is usual for any ‘social group sharing interests and knowledge’.<sup>14</sup> Previous studies on vague language in medieval texts demonstrate that this is also applicable to historical contexts. For instance, Francisco Almeida has recently shown that Middle and Early Modern English culinary and medical recipes use language imprecisely and often omit crucial details, even though such purposeful vagueness can co-occur with detailed information transmission. He suggests that ‘vague

<sup>7</sup> Norja, op. cit. (4), p. 353, ll. 192–6.

<sup>8</sup> Karen Voss discusses *hierosgamos* or ‘sacred marriage’ with regard to the chemical wedding, arguing that the experience of alchemy could be sacralized and the chemical wedding images are a reflection thereof. Karen Voss, ‘The *hierosgamos* theme in the images of the *Rosarium Philosophorum*’, in Z.R.W.M. von Martels (ed.), *Alchemy Revisited: Proceedings of the International Conference on the History of Alchemy at the University of Groningen 17–19 April 1989*, Leiden: Brill, 1990, pp. 145–53. On the chemical wedding in general see Abraham, op. cit. (2), pp. 35–9.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Maurice P. Crosland, *Historical Studies in the Language of Chemistry*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962; Brian Vickers, ‘The discrepancy between *res* and *verba* in Greek alchemy’, in Martels, op. cit. (8), pp. 21–33, 28, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1407, Part IV, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> See DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, op. cit. (2), p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Eoin Bentick, *Literatures of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern England*, Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2022, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Joan Cutting, ‘Introduction’, in Cutting (ed.), *Vague Language Explored*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 3–20, 4, added emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> J. Channell, *Vague Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 193; see also Cutting, op. cit. (13).

or imprecise language appears to have strong interpersonal grounds', with people belonging to a community of practice trusting in each other's shared knowledge, omitting details so that they can 'purposefully avoid explicit and meticulous information in their speech and writing'.<sup>15</sup>

I suggest that such strategies are applicable to an alchemical context and to *The Gracious Work*. After all, secrecy is common to both cooks and alchemists: neither group wants to reveal all of their secrets in writing, whether they be related to a perfect fruit pie or to the philosophers' stone.<sup>16</sup> Ruth Carroll has argued that the vagueness of Middle English culinary recipes cannot always be pointed out in linguistic terms, but is a matter of omitting information.<sup>17</sup> If the audience is assumed to be familiar and experienced with the types of procedure described, culinary recipes can omit specifics; alchemical recipes sometimes do the same.<sup>18</sup> The textual context and vague references in a text should be enough for alchemist-specialists to understand, but not for other users of the texts. While treatises are not the same as recipes when it comes to genre, the borders of the two in alchemical writing are often porous, as treatises can include recipes or recipe-like sections.<sup>19</sup> The two genres also fall under the general category of instructional writing, which *The Gracious Work* can be classified as. At the start of the work, for instance, the text of Ashmole 1451 reads, 'tak hede of yis yat folwith . here after . I . I . couwsell þow so þyf you haue grace to sped of yis werk tak heed of non othir', 'take heed of what follows hereafter, I counsel you; so if you have the goodwill to succeed in this work [of alchemy], take heed of no other [work]'.<sup>20</sup> Instructional writing requires the author to know the amount of detail that their audience needs to comprehend the text, and in alchemical instruction, intended as in-group communication, this can mean deliberately omitting details and obscuring information.

The notion of alchemical 'vagueness' as an in-group marker is echoed in Jennifer Rampling's concept of 'reading alchemically'. She defines this as 'approaching texts on multiple levels, rather than accepting terms at face value', considering it key for medieval and early modern alchemical practice.<sup>21</sup> Rampling notes that obscurity of expression is considered in alchemical writings 'not as a bug, but as a feature', with writers using symbolic, metaphor-laden language – vague language – to make sure that precious secrets did not tumble into unworthy hands.<sup>22</sup> I take a similar position with regard to alchemical metaphors; *The Gracious Work* was written for people skilled at 'reading alchemically' who could tease out the correct meanings from an obscure text.

Part of 'reading alchemically' was reading allegorically; thus the well-informed reader of an alchemical text was already 'primed' or predisposed to view their reading through a metaphorical lens.<sup>23</sup> Concerning 'metaphor' and 'allegory', I would like to note that these

<sup>15</sup> Francisco Alonso Almeida, "As the coke and the physicion wyll agre & deuyse": language cues and potential users of medieval English medical and culinary recipes', in Carrie Griffin and Hannah Ryley (eds.), *Recipes and Book Culture in England, 1350–1600*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2024, pp. 21–40, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Alonso Almeida, op. cit. (15), p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Carroll, 'Vague language in the medieval recipes of the *Forme of Cury*', in Matti Peikola, Janne Skaffari and Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen (eds.), *Instructional Writing in English*, pp. 55–82, 78.

<sup>18</sup> On culinary recipes see Carroll, op. cit. (17), p. 80; on alchemical recipes as a genre see Peter Grund, 'The golden formulas: genre conventions of alchemical recipes in the Middle English period', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* (2003) 4, pp. 455–75.

<sup>19</sup> Grund, op. cit. (18), p. 464.

<sup>20</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer M. Rampling, 'Reading alchemically: guides to "philosophical" practice in early modern England', *BJHS Themes* 5 (2020), pp. 57–74, 61. Eoin Bentick explores some examples of 'reading alchemically'; see Bentick, op. cit. (12), Chapter 4 on metaphorical interpretation.

<sup>22</sup> Rampling, op. cit. (21), p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> On being 'primed' for reading allegorically cf. Peter Crisp, 'Allegory: conceptual metaphor in history', *Language and Literature* (2001) 10, pp. 5–19, 12.

terms tend to be used interchangeably in studies of alchemy. Some linguistic studies have proposed exact distinctions between these terms, but since I focus on the function of alchemical images (evoked verbally) rather than a theoretical distinction – all images conjured up by metaphors or allegories are relevant for creating cohesion in the alchemical work I study – I do not consider this difference crucial for my analysis.<sup>24</sup> In what follows I therefore use ‘metaphor’ to refer to figurative, visual images expressed in words, with ‘extended metaphor’ used for connected sequences of these verbally evoked images.

Building on previous studies of medieval texts suggesting that vague language can have ‘in-group’ functions, as well as Rampling’s ‘reading alchemically’, I suggest that metaphors could be a helpful part of alchemical language use, and were one sign of belonging to the in-group of alchemical adepts, rather than merely demarcating exclusion. Alchemists used metaphors and other vague language – such as deceptively common terms like ‘stone’ or ‘our mercury’ in senses beyond their everyday meaning – intentionally, partly in order to construct a (textual) community of shared secrets and information. The tradition of ‘cover names’ (*Decknamen*), for instance, has been a part of alchemy since its origins in Alexandria.<sup>25</sup> Understanding a community’s intentionally vague language is therefore an in-group marker. Thus alchemical metaphors should not be viewed merely as difficulties to overcome, but as a neutral part of how alchemists wrote about their craft. Furthermore, in addition to the in-group functions of metaphors and other vague language, in *The Gracious Work* the common metaphors create cohesion in a fragmentary work, as I will demonstrate.

### Manuscript witnesses of *The Gracious Work*

My case study consists of an English-language alchemical work full of metaphors and imagery, a prose treatise extant in four manuscript copies. These witnesses are Cambridge University Library MS Dd.4.45 (fifteenth century); Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.45 (fifteenth century); Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1451 (fifteenth century); and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1452 (seventeenth century).<sup>26</sup> The longest version of this work is around three thousand words. To my knowledge, it has not been previously studied, and lacks any conventional title.

I title this treatise *The Gracious Work* based partly on lines in two witnesses, Ashmole 1451 (‘yis gracious werke of ffayere’) and R.14.45 (‘thys gracyus werk of the fayrey’) and on the fact that the concept of grace recurs throughout the treatise.<sup>27</sup> The manuscript copies

<sup>24</sup> For the differences between extended metaphor and allegory see Peter Crisp, ‘Allegory, blending, and possible situations’, *Metaphor and Symbol* (2005) 20, pp. 115–31; Catherine Wearing, ‘Allegory, metaphor, and analogy’, *Journal of Pragmatics* (2022) 202, pp. 66–79; Crisp, op. cit. (23).

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 18; William R. Newman, “‘Decknamen or pseudo-chemical language’? Eirenaeus Philalethes and Carl Jung”, *Revue d’histoire des sciences* (1996) 49, pp. 159–88. Cover names can be seen as metaphors, since they lack a one-to-one correspondence with their referents and are thus not entirely ‘technical terms’.

<sup>26</sup> Cambridge University Library MS Dd.4.45 (hereafter Dd.4.45), pp. 14–18; Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.45 (hereafter R.14.45), fols. 2r–v, 3r–4r; Ashmole 1451, Part V, pp. 63–7 (see note 1 above); and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1452 (hereafter Ashmole 1452), fol. 74v. I have viewed all manuscript witnesses *in situ* and transcribed them using digital images. The Ashmole catalogue notes the textual connection of Ashmole 1452 to Ashmole 1451: ‘compare No. 1451, v. art. 20’. William Henry Black, *A Descriptive, Analytical and Critical Catalogue of the Manuscripts Bequeathed unto the University of Oxford by Elias Ashmole ...*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1845, at <https://archive.org/details/descriptiveanaly00bodl> (accessed 27 January 2025), p. 1251. The text in Ashmole 1451 includes annotations by the sixteenth-century alchemist and magus John Dee. Early modern alchemists learning from medieval sources is not uncommon; see Rampling, op. cit. (21), p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 63; R.14.45, fol. 2v. Dd.4.45 and Ashmole 1452 are fragments and their texts do not extend to this wording. The words ‘ffayere’ and ‘fayrey’ seem to refer to ‘enchantment, magic’, *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary> (accessed 27 January 2025), s.v. *fairie*, n.,

differ at the start, making it difficult to select a title based on the incipits. Ashmole 1451 starts '[A]ske 3e of yes werkerrys yat holden hem so wyse wat is yat wete whete yat moste be sowyn in ye erthe', R.14.45 starts 'Ask ye comyn verkerys', Dd.4.45 starts 'Aske ye of ye clerkys' and Ashmole 1452 starts 'Aske ye of the Clerkys'.<sup>28</sup> The copies are also all titled differently in the manuscripts: Dd.4.45 and Ashmole 1452 have no title, R.14.45 is titled (in a later hand) 'Tract de Lapide philosophico', and Ashmole 1451 is titled 'Roger Bakoun'. As neither of the latter is particularly distinctive, *The Gracious Work* is an easier way to refer to this work.

I use Ashmole 1451 as my main source when citing *The Gracious Work* because this fifteenth-century witness contains the work in its fullest form. R.14.45 is missing a leaf and lacks part of the metaphorical sequence which I analyse below.<sup>29</sup> Dd.4.45 and Ashmole 1452 are fragmentary; both of them have only a short section of the prose treatise prefacing the poem 'Of Spain take the clear light' (the latter witness copying only the first two lines).<sup>30</sup>

*The Gracious Work* has been spuriously attributed to the Franciscan scholar Roger Bacon, to whom multiple alchemical works were ascribed after his death.<sup>31</sup> In this case, the attribution is also scribal: the copy in Ashmole 1451 is titled 'Roger Bakoun', as noted above.<sup>32</sup> The work in Ashmole 1451 is even written in the 'voice' of Roger Bacon, since within the text it is said that the alchemy discussed in *The Gracious Work* has been tested and found true 'Be . I Roger Bakonne'.<sup>33</sup> R.14.45 also has this in-text attribution, although not in Bacon's voice: 'thys weye. hathe be provyd And. trew fovndyn by one Roger bacon'.<sup>34</sup> However, as Meagan Allen's recent work makes clear through her study of genuinely Baconian works, *The Gracious Work* – like most other English works ascribed to Bacon – was not written by Bacon himself.<sup>35</sup>

Although a full collation of the manuscript copies is beyond the scope of the present study, a brief examination suggests that the copies are textually close, and a further

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2a, or even to 'supernatural or legendary creatures', *MED*, 1b, i.e. fairies; the latter interpretation seems possible considering the definite article in R.14.45, 'the fayrey'. The conflation of alchemy with fairies (and thus, presumably, magic) is intriguing.

<sup>28</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 63; R.14.45, fol. 2r; Dd.4.45, p. 14; Ashmole 1452, fol. 74v.

<sup>29</sup> According to Linne R. Mooney, *The Index of Middle English Prose Handlist 11: Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995, p. 46, there is at least one folio missing between fols. 2 and 3. Mooney is unsure whether the next folios are part of the same text as the one ending (incomplete) on fol. 2v or not. My comparison of R.14.45 to the text in Ashmole 1451 reveals that fols. 3r–4r are part of the same text, since the contents correspond to other witnesses of *The Gracious Work*. However, there is certainly a lacuna between the last line of fol. 2v and the first of fol. 3r in R.14.45.

<sup>30</sup> This poem is number 4210 in the *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*, at [www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=4210](http://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=4210) (accessed 27 January 2025). The copy of *The Gracious Work* in R.14.45 also has this poem following the prose work; however, in R.14.45, the prose section ends complete (i.e. as in Ashmole 1451).

<sup>31</sup> George R. Keiser, *Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, vol. 10: *Works of Science and Information*, New Haven, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1998, p. 3805, item 199, classes *The Gracious Work* under 'Works by or attributed to Roger Bacon', in subcategory 'c'. *The Gracious Work* is under number 210 in Dorothea Waley Singer, assisted by Annie Anderson, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts in Great Britain and Ireland Dating from before the XVI Century*, 3 vols., Brussels: Maurice Lamertin, 1928–31, vol. 1, p. 188. For a survey of English pseudo-Baconian writings, see Sara Norja, 'Roger Bacon's alchemical legacy: tracing the English-language witnesses of a "pseudo-author" in manuscript and print', *The Library* (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 63.

<sup>33</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>34</sup> R.14.45, fol. 2v.

<sup>35</sup> Meagan S. Allen, *Roger Bacon and the Incorruptible Human, 1220–1292: Alchemy, Pharmacology and the Desire to Prolong Life*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

investigation of their relationships would be worthwhile. However, a short remark on the two fragmentary witnesses can be made, since they appear to have a very close relationship indeed: Dd.4.45 may have been the exemplar for Ashmole 1452. The latter is in Elias Ashmole's hand, and at the end of the prose fragment he writes,

This I copyed out of M<sup>r</sup> Wiltshires Booke, & it (much like a Preface) was written befor  
the Verses  
Of Spain take the clere light  
The Red quinne *that* is so bright &c[.]<sup>36</sup>

The text of Ashmole's copy is identical, even in much of its spelling, to that of MS Dd.4.45, which breaks into the poem at exactly the place Ashmole 1452 does. Ashmole is faithful in his copying, even following some of the unusual orthography of Dd.4.45, such as *nourished* as 'norsshed' in Dd.4.45, 'norshed' in Ashmole 1452; and *whether* as 'whedere' in Dd.4.45, spelled identically by Ashmole.<sup>37</sup> The beginning of *The Gracious Work* in Ashmole 1452 is 'Aske ye of the Clerkys yat holden hem so wise', identical in spelling to Dd.4.45, including the form 'Clerkys' (the other medieval copies of *The Gracious Work* have different nouns here). This textual evidence leads me to suggest that 'M<sup>r</sup> Wiltshires Booke' may be none other than Cambridge University Library MS Dd.4.45 – unless, of course, an intermediary exemplar was involved.

## Contents of the work

The Ashmolean catalogue calls *The Gracious Work* an '[a]llegorical generation of the elixir'.<sup>38</sup> The work addresses the reader as a 'son' who needs to learn about alchemy, asking them riddle-like metaphorical questions. This eclectic work includes alchemical maxims and advice, metaphorical alchemical processes, theoretical content and a list of alchemical authorities. The work is steeped in Christianity, with 'grace' therefore being intended in a Christian sense throughout.

As this overview suggests, *The Gracious Work* is rather rambling; it contains alchemical maxims and general advice but has no clear argument and does not present its information in an especially coherent manner. Indeed, as noted above, it is probable that this 'work' was compiled from several different sources.<sup>39</sup> Summarizing *The Gracious Work* is therefore difficult. A loose notion of giving advice to the 'son' runs through some of it, but overall it is somewhat of a hodgepodge, sometimes simply listing one alchemical maxim after another. Some of these maxims are vague indeed: 'wat is yis wat is yat . kep yis . kep yat', 'What is this, what is that? Keep this, keep that'.<sup>40</sup> The text is mostly in English, but with plenty of shifts into Latin, especially in quotations; there is even a fragment of a Latin poem.

<sup>36</sup> Ashmole 1452, fol. 74v.

<sup>37</sup> Dd.4.45, p. 14; Ashmole 1452, fol. 74v.

<sup>38</sup> The reference is to Elias Ashmole's own partial copy in Ashmole 1452; Black, op. cit. (26), p. 1251.

<sup>39</sup> For a brief discussion of some textual connections between *The Gracious Work* and a text in Cambridge, Trinity College Library MS R.14.44, Part IV, fol. 12r, see Sara Norja, 'From manuscript to digital edition: the challenges of editing early English alchemical texts', in Peter Boot, Anna Cappellotto, Wout Dillen, Franz Fischer, Aodhán Kelly, Andreas Mertgens, Anna-Maria Sichani, Elena Spadini and Dirk van Hulle (eds.), *Advances in Digital Scholarly Editing: Papers Presented at the DiXit Conferences in The Hague, Cologne, and Antwerp*, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017, pp. 159–64. In addition, short sections of *The Gracious Work* resemble passages in *The Mirror of Alchemy*; exploring these connections requires further study.

<sup>40</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65.

*The Gracious Work* is no alchemical ‘primer’, but rather a work written or compiled by alchemists for alchemists.

The central alchemical notions in *The Gracious Work* seem to correspond to the mercury–sulphur theory of metals, popular in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period.<sup>41</sup> The author or compiler assures the reader that there is a right way to go about alchemy: the ‘son’ should forsake the foolish ways of workers who have not worked according to true teachers and take heed of what follows above any other guidance. Unfortunately for this son, the teachings of *The Gracious Work* do not become clear simply through reading the text in a literal sense.

Some practical instructions appear on how to make the philosophers’ stone; this section of the work is full of metaphors, and I discuss it in detail below. Mention is made of five ‘fair virtues’ and seven ‘gifts of grace’. These gifts appear to be the following processes: dissolving, grinding, drawing, firing, fixing, washing and melting.<sup>42</sup> Three different alchemical gifts turn up near the end of *The Gracious Work*; they should not be given away except to an honourable, impoverished man. The reader is instructed to give their gifts to this man as the author has given gifts to them. Here, the two first gifts are named as fixation and multiplication; the third is not mentioned. *The Gracious Work* says that one should give the gifts of alchemy to ‘aryght tryste frend’ (‘a very trustworthy friend’), and make sure he keeps God’s commandments; if he does so, he will succeed in his alchemical endeavours.<sup>43</sup>

The final words are revealing concerning the whole work: ‘yēn in yis entent gyf hym ye hy way opynli ... ye wich is afore sayd misteli & darkeli’, ‘give him the high (or superior) way openly ... which is before said figuratively and obscuringly’.<sup>44</sup> Figurative and obscure certainly describe *The Gracious Work*. Here, the author may refer to the importance of having an alchemical master or mentor, as the mysteries of the alchemical imagery and maxims may only be opened up once someone well versed in the science reveals their meaning, in person, to an aspiring alchemist.

*The Gracious Work* is therefore complex and often confusing. However, the metaphors and allegories used within it are common and coherent. In what follows, I will discuss these metaphors and how they can aid in textual cohesion, and thus information transmission, even in a work organized this ‘misteli’.

### Metaphors of daily life in *The Gracious Work*

*The Gracious Work* is peppered throughout with alchemical metaphors; they are in themselves commonplace, but the textual form they take, and especially their function in this work, make them worth examining. I focus here on wedding and family metaphors, as they form the majority of the metaphors used in *The Gracious Work*.<sup>45</sup> As I will discuss, the very commonness of these metaphors is why they are useful as cohesion-creating devices in this work.

The witnesses of *The Gracious Work* have plenty of textual variation, as is typical for medieval scribal works in general and English alchemical writings in particular.<sup>46</sup> However, the witnesses are close enough in terms of their information content that they employ the same metaphors. These metaphors do not tell one single alchemical story, as *The Gracious*

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. John A. Norris, ‘The mineral exhalation theory of metallogenesis in pre-modern mineral science’, *Ambix* (2006) 53, pp. 43–65; and William R. Newman, ‘Mercury and sulphur among the high medieval alchemists: from Rāzī and Avicenna to Albertus Magnus and Pseudo-Roger Bacon’, *Ambix* (2014) 61, pp. 327–44.

<sup>42</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>43</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 67.

<sup>45</sup> *The Gracious Work* also has some scattered metaphors in Latin, but I focus on the English metaphors.

<sup>46</sup> On the textual fluidity of Middle English alchemical writings see Grund, op. cit. (3), p. 435.

Work in general does not, but the majority of them can be divided into three categories: the ‘chemical wedding’, family and child rearing, and nature. Brian Vickers notes that alchemical texts have a ‘widespread tendency towards anthropomorphic symbolism’.<sup>47</sup> This is certainly the case for *The Gracious Work*, with its focus on the chemical wedding and the anthropomorphizing connection of male with sulphur and female with mercury.

Before delving into the family-related metaphors, I will give a brief overview of some of the other metaphors used in the treatise. *The Gracious Work* begins with a metaphor embedded in the soil of an agricultural society:

[A]ske 3e of yes werkerrys yat holden hem so wyse wat is yat wete whete yat moste be sowyn in ye erthe & weyer it is nurshyd forye hooete or cold . ffor 3yf it were euer in hette it schuld neuer rote with colde & moster.<sup>48</sup>

The reader is told to ask the workers who consider themselves wise what the wheat is that must be sown in the earth, and whether it should be nourished in hot or cold conditions; if it should be hot, it would not rot with cold and moisture. Wheat, here, indicates the seed of metals which must be sown into the earth of raw material. This agricultural metaphor is fairly common, drawing from the notion of metals growing in the earth like organic matter.<sup>49</sup> As already discussed concerning the titling of *The Gracious Work*, this opening metaphor is different depending on the manuscript copy. R.14.45 adds an adjective, ‘Ask ye comyn verkerys’, whilst Dd.4.45 has a different set-up: ‘Aske ye of ye clerkys’ (Ashmole 1452 follows this).<sup>50</sup> The latter two witnesses, instead of asking (farm?) workers, ask learned clerks.

Although *The Gracious Work* focuses on the human world with its agriculture and societal constructs of marriage and family, there are also some cover names comparing animals with alchemical substances, such as the mention of ‘leo viridis’ or the ‘green lion’ in a Latin and English list of alchemical substances and vessels.<sup>51</sup> This list is followed by alchemical maxims, one of which refers to ‘ye ogle yat flye on lofte & ye tode yat crept softe’, ‘the eagle that flies up high and the toad that crept slowly’.<sup>52</sup> The eagle symbolizes a volatile spirit such as sublimated mercury, while the toad represents the base matter from which the philosophers’ stone is made.<sup>53</sup> An eagle reappears towards the end of *The Gracious Work* in a question echoing the rhetorical structure of the beginning: ‘wat ying is yat . yat flyey in ye aeire & resty3 hym vp on a mountayne & is I fedde with ye flessch & ye blod of a man’, ‘What thing is that which flies in the air and rests up on a mountain and is fed with the flesh and blood of a man?’<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Vickers, op. cit. (9), p. 26. See also John Read, *Through Alchemy to Chemistry*, London: G. Bell and Sons, 1961, pp. 94–5.

<sup>48</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 63. There is an empty space in the manuscript where ‘A’ should be.

<sup>49</sup> Ripley says: ‘without the graine of wheate / Dye in the ground, encrease maist thou none get’. Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *George Ripley’s Compound of Alchemy (1591)*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, p. 46. Metals were thought to grow in the depths of the earth analogically to plants already in early Greek alchemy. See Vincenzo Carlotta and Matteo Martelli, ‘Metals as living bodies: founts of mercury, amalgams, and chrysocolla’, *Ambix* (2023) 70, pp. 7–30.

<sup>50</sup> R.14.45, fol. 2r; Dd.4.45, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65. The green lion symbolizes the stone’s unclean first stages (and is similar in meaning to the toad; see below). Abraham, op. cit. (2), p. 92.

<sup>52</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Abraham, op. cit. (2), p. 64, 201–2. Toad and eagle are frequently paired in alchemy as opposites ‘symbolizing the sublimation of the fixed earth by the volatile spirit’. Abraham, op. cit. (2), p. 202.

<sup>54</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 66.

*The Gracious Work* also has metaphors echoing medieval English society's Christian world view.<sup>55</sup> A substance used for alchemical practice must be 'clenne with autten synne' ('clean without sin'): sinlessness represents the physical purity that will enable alchemical procedures.<sup>56</sup> Organized religion also appears in the description of the chemical wedding, which forms a major part of the metaphorical framework of *The Gracious Work*.

As the chemical wedding has been much discussed in the study of alchemy, I focus on the specific textual forms that its description takes in *The Gracious Work* as a previously unexplored example of Middle English alchemical writing. *The Gracious Work* follows the alchemical trope of a specifically royal wedding, with the wedding's royal nature indicating a powerful transmutation.<sup>57</sup> The main description of the chemical wedding in Ashmole 1451 is as follows:

ffirst tak *hic* & *hoc* . yan make *hoc* *hic* & *hic* *hoc* & wede hem both to gedere be amaryage of an Element yat is here prest . yan tak tow erthis yat on houe yat oyer b neye ye wych yat ben is clarkis to ye feste of yis mariage moste be diuerse metis wich metis moste be seruice alle in on disshe & mad of . vij . sonder yinges.<sup>58</sup>

The sequence starts off like a recipe, telling the reader to 'tak *hic* & *hoc*', 'take this and that'.<sup>59</sup> The switch to Latin is part of *The Gracious Work*'s in-group communication: even though the work is mainly in English – which, in the fifteenth century, was still developing as a language of science – the educated alchemist reader is assumed to understand Latin. The recipe-like beginning with the verb 'take' is opaque, however: 'this and that' is an alchemical veil, and the reader must know what substances are intended before they can begin following the metaphorically described procedure. The vague words may indicate mercury and sulphur. However, the overall meaning is clear enough: two substances must be 'wedded' together in a marriage by a priest, that is, become one through the unnamed 'Element yat is here prest'. The metaphor does not open up completely, as the reader is not told which element they should choose. It is possible that fire is intended in the Aristotelian elemental sense, since it is crucial for alchemical procedures; however, the priest can also indicate the 'green lion', a multifaceted alchemical term.<sup>60</sup> Two 'clarkis' are also part of this priest's entourage. The clerks are 'tow erthis yat on houe yat oyer b neye ye wych yat ben is clarkis', 'two earths, one from on high, the other beneath, which are his clerks'. Again, the clerks are given some clarification – they are earths, which here probably refers to dense

<sup>55</sup> For Christian alchemical allegories see Barbara Obrist, 'Alchimie et allégorie scripturaire au Moyen Age', in Gilbert Dahan and Richard Goulet (eds.), *Allégorie des poètes, allégorie des philosophes*, Paris: Vrin, 2005, pp. 245–65. On alchemy's general relationship with religion see Tara Nummedal, 'Alchemy and religion in Christian Europe', *Ambix* (2013) 60, pp. 311–22; see also DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, op. cit. (2), on religious imagery used to explicate alchemical ideas.

<sup>56</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>57</sup> See Abraham, op. cit. (2), p. 36.

<sup>58</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64. 'First take this and that. Then make that this and this that and wed them both together through a marriage, with an element that is their priest. Then take two earths, one from on high, the other beneath, which are his clerks. This marriage feast must include various foods which must be served all in one dish and made of seven separate things.' Here, 'on houe' may be an error, although the scribal orthography of the Ashmole 1451 copy is generally unusual. The meaning becomes clear through R.14.45, which reads 'one A bove & yat othyre be nethe' (fol. 2v).

<sup>59</sup> 'Hic' and 'hoc' possibly refer to the substance 'clenne with autten synne' and a 'water of wyldernes' mentioned in the previous sentence (p. 64), but the disjointed nature of *The Gracious Work* makes it difficult to be sure. The 'formulaic imperative *take*' is common in alchemical recipes; see Grund, op. cit. (18), p. 461.

<sup>60</sup> For instance, *The Hunting of the Greene Lyon*, collected in Elias Ashmole (ed.), *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* ..., London: Printed by J. Grismond for Nath: Brooke, 1652 (Wing (2nd ed.) A3987), p. 280, connects lion with priest: 'The Lyon ys the Preist, the Sun and Moone the wedd'.

metallic bodies – but the precise meaning is hidden behind vague language. The marriage feast must also include various kinds of food, that must be served all in one dish and made of seven separate things. One dish refers to everything being prepared in a single vessel, and the seven things may mean substances added to the alchemical mixture.

After the passage quoted above, *The Gracious Work* wanders into describing the offspring of the alchemical marriage and parenthood, which I will discuss in more detail below. The text soon returns to the wedding:

ye wich fader & modir mow not be closid to geder in on soule with outte hard spousaile of wedlok yat axit longe trauaile yat is werinesse . to ye prest of yis wedloke afore said & to is clerkis both . ffore yey ben weddid to geder ye kynde of hem \is/ to be closed in a castel in wich castel yay most be schet with . I . element yat is kyng of alle elementes.<sup>61</sup>

The father and mother may not be enclosed together in one soul without ‘hard spousaile of wedlok’ (‘the difficult ceremony/sacrament of marriage’): only through a legitimate marriage ceremony (the right alchemical procedure) can the philosophers’ stone be made.<sup>62</sup> The ceremony is arduous, requiring the priest and his clerks to perform long and weary work, far more so than in a human wedding. Before the father and mother are wedded together, they must be closed into a castle (meaning either a hermetically sealed alchemical vessel, defending its contents from ‘invaders’, or a closed furnace), together with the ‘kyng of alle elementes’ – probably fire, the element seen as the purest and most crucial for alchemical processes.<sup>63</sup> Here, the father and mother require a third ‘partner’ in order to beget an alchemical child.

*The Gracious Work*’s descriptions of the chemical wedding are standard for alchemy. However, their commonness is, I argue, a key part of their textual function in this work. Since the overall contents of *The Gracious Work* are multifarious and ‘jumbled’, the extended metaphors described above are in fact the main source for textual cohesion. Marriage, being a central part of medieval life and considered as indissoluble as the hoped-for philosophers’ stone, makes for a strong metaphor that anchors the nebulous text of *The Gracious Work* into alchemical practice.<sup>64</sup>

Although the importance of celibacy in medieval Christian culture meant that marriage was not always synonymous with procreation, consummation, sexual congress and any resultant offspring were certainly considered a usual part of marriage.<sup>65</sup> Thus they are also a logical part of the alchemical marriage metaphor.<sup>66</sup> Male succession was important in medieval marriage, especially towards the late Middle Ages.<sup>67</sup> In alchemical metaphor, the

<sup>61</sup> Ashmole 1451, pp. 64–5. ‘The said father and mother may not be enclosed together in one soul without a difficult ceremony/sacrament of marriage which asks for a long labour, which is physical exhaustion for the aforesaid priest of this marriage and for both of his clerks. Before they are wedded together, their substance must be closed in a castle, in which castle they must be shut with one element, which is king of all elements.’

<sup>62</sup> The scribe may have miswritten ‘of’ for ‘or’ here, as ‘spousaile’ and ‘wedlok’ are synonymous: *MED*, op. cit. (27), s.v. *spousaille*, *wedlok*.

<sup>63</sup> This collocation also appears in non-alchemical contexts, such as a seventeenth-century sermon: ‘Once more, Fire is the Tyrant in Nature, the King of the Elements’. William Sancroft, *Lex Ignea, Or, the School of Righteousness ...*, London, 1666, p. 14 (Wing S553).

<sup>64</sup> See D.L. D’Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, Chapter 2, pp. 74–130, for a discussion of the indissolubility of medieval European marriage; see also Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 (first published 1989), p. 128.

<sup>65</sup> Brooke, op. cit. (64), p. 130.

<sup>66</sup> Lawrence M. Principe has studied aspects of such sexual metaphors in Latin: ‘Revealing analogies: The descriptive and deceptive roles of sexuality and gender in Latin alchemy’, in Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds.), *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 208–29.

<sup>67</sup> Brooke, op. cit. (64), p. 142.

child born in this alchemical union is usually a son; this may simply reflect garden-variety medieval misogyny, but may also be a symbolic representation of the importance of sons in successful marital reproduction.

Reflecting marriage leading to procreation, *The Gracious Work* includes extended metaphors related to family and child rearing. Most of these are, again, common for alchemy, such as ‘the mother and father of metals’, likely meaning mercury and sulphur.<sup>68</sup> The start of *The Gracious Work* counsels the reader to ‘loke wych yat is fadir & modir of metal’, ‘consider which (thing) is the father and mother of metals’, because if the alchemist uses substances that are not of the same kind, ‘you lesyst ale yi werk’, ‘you will lose all your work’.<sup>69</sup> The work states that these anthropomorphized ‘opposites’ are essential for the work: ‘withoutten fader & moder may no ying be nursshed’, ‘without father and mother may nothing be nourished’.<sup>70</sup> The beginning of *The Gracious Work* includes a short metaphor involving the alchemical child: ‘in is owyne modir bely nursshe hym forye. // And wane he is of age nursshe hym forye with is owyn modir mylk’: the child is grown in his own mother’s womb, and nourished further with his mother’s milk when he is ‘of age’ (here, this must mean ‘born’).<sup>71</sup> This metaphor, intimately connected to bodily functions, refers to the alchemical substance being propagated in its vessel, and later on ‘fed’ with ‘mother’s milk’: mercurial water, necessary for transmutation.<sup>72</sup> Somewhat mystifyingly, the alchemical son or ‘him’ of the text is seemingly given alchemical advice right after being identified as an alchemical substance; *The Gracious Work* is far from clear in its textual referents.<sup>73</sup>

Sometimes the metaphors are explicated: the child is explicitly called ‘lapid’ (Latin ‘stone’) once, following the first description of the chemical wedding.<sup>74</sup> Mostly, though, the metaphorical terms persist. The child must be nourished; indeed, his feeding is one of the work’s major concerns, and his learning ‘to ete & to drynke’ is important.<sup>75</sup> The alchemical child must also ‘do is fader & moder wochip & to encrease hem fro ye begynnyng to ye endyng’: show respect to his parents and increase them, which seems to refer to alchemical multiplication.<sup>76</sup>

The mother and father must be married in order to beget the alchemical child, succeeding with the help of ‘the king of all elements’, as described above. After the wife and husband are brought together,

bi wich nature of yis wyfe & husbonde . wat fore drede of yat element & also be nature of kynde bryngyt forye a clide be twen hem two ye wich child be kynde is wyld of nature & yer fore he most be chastissid in esy maner in ye be gynnyng of is zouye.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>68</sup> On the commonness of parental metaphors in alchemy, see e.g. DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, op. cit. (2), p. 104. The mother and father might also mean silver and gold; as a comparison, MS Ashmole 1451, Part II, fol. 64r–v, has a Middle English description of a father and mother begetting a child, stating that they are ‘ye Sonne and the mone’ (fol. 64r).

<sup>69</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 63.

<sup>70</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>71</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> A Latin variant of this metaphor, ‘lac virginis’ or ‘virgin’s milk’, appears in *The Gracious Work* (p. 65); see Abraham, op. cit. (2), p. 211.

<sup>73</sup> On the use of ‘he’ for inanimate referents, see Peter Grund, ‘The science of pronominal usage: *he* and *it* in coreference to inanimate entities in Late Middle English texts on alchemy’, *Journal of English Linguistics* (2011) 39, pp. 335–58.

<sup>74</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>75</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>76</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>77</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65. ‘By which nature of this wife and husband, who through dread (or awe) of that element and also through their innate natures, bring forth a child between them, which child is wild of temperament, and therefore he must be chastised in a gentle manner at the beginning of his youth.’ Here, ‘clide’ should read ‘childe’.

The child – the developing philosophers’ stone – is wild by nature, and must therefore be ‘chastised’ in a ‘gentle manner’ when young. Chastisement refers to the alchemical fire, which must at first be ‘gentle’, or low; the heat is increased as the child grows older, or the substance matures.<sup>78</sup> The references to corporal punishment in this metaphor reflect medieval conceptions of familial discipline, which condone some amount of disciplinary violence.<sup>79</sup> The child should be disciplined when young, but only to a degree: ‘chastes hym weyl & esyle & fare faire with hym’, ‘chastise him well and gently and act decorously towards him’.<sup>80</sup> ‘Chastising’ the fire relates to material aspects of alchemy: glass or clay vessels of the time would not shatter as easily if the alchemist started their work with a less intense flame. *The Gracious Work* does not refer directly to fire to explicate this metaphor, but instructs the alchemist to ‘afterwarde in wexyng more ... make is 3erde euer ye longer smarter & ye gretter of twygges’, ‘afterwards, when it grows more ... make its branches ever longer, hotter, and larger of twigs’: once the fire has started properly, heftier firewood should be added to the furnace.<sup>81</sup>

Once the child has been gently disciplined, he will clothe himself in various colours, a reference to the different stages of the process of making the stone:

he wol cloye him silue in many diuerse colours . & wan he haye on alle is cloyis . on is heed wil rise a croune of worchip & wane 3e se yat yat is crowne is of ye colour of ryal coral yan be glad of yat child yat you hast so worchipful norshid forye . to haue on is heed ye hy crowne of grace.<sup>82</sup>

When the child has gone through all of the alchemical stages, a red crown will rise onto his head: the red philosophers’ stone is complete. The common image of the red crown also occurs in other English alchemical works, such as *The Mirror of Alchemy* (‘þen schall Akyng be crownede with Arede dyademe’, ‘then a king shall be crowned with a red diadem’) and Pseudo-Ripley’s *Mistry of Alchymists* (‘His second Vesture as Gold is Red ... A Diadem set on his head’).<sup>83</sup>

In *The Gracious Work*, the extended metaphor of the chemical wedding and bringing up a child is described in full, giving the reader a complete metaphorical framework of the core alchemical process. These alchemically central concepts of nourishing and feeding are also fundamental to *The Gracious Work*. The alchemist acts as surrogate parent to the alchemical baby or philosophers’ stone during the long process as the alchemical child enters the world after his parents’ royal wedding, and becomes a king himself after being carefully disciplined and nurtured.

After the somewhat fractured but comprehensible extended metaphor of the chemical wedding and alchemical family, *The Gracious Work* declares, ‘Now 3e haue yis sciens yat seculers sekyn after’, ‘now you have this science which the laity [or secular priests/clerks/canons] seek’, proclaiming that its metaphorical description is sufficient guidance for understanding alchemy.<sup>84</sup> The rest of the metaphors in the work do not build

<sup>78</sup> For another Middle English instance, see Norja, op. cit. (4), p. 353, ll. 195–6: ‘þ<sup>is</sup> maystrye & þ<sup>is</sup> werke nedeth ffyrste esye ... fyere & Afterwarde grettere & gretter fyere’.

<sup>79</sup> See, for instance, Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 66.

<sup>80</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65.

<sup>81</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65.

<sup>82</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65. ‘He will clothe himself in many diverse colours; and when he has on all his clothes, a crown of honour will rise onto his head, and when you see that his crown is of the colour of royal coral, then be glad of that child whom you have so honourably nourished that he has on his head the high crown of grace.’

<sup>83</sup> For *Mirror* see Norja, op. cit. (4), p. 357, ll. 253–4; for *Mistry* see Ashmole, op. cit. (60), p. 382.

<sup>84</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65.

a web of extended metaphors in the same way as this section does, although a couple of parental metaphors appear in English and Latin in a section that switches between the two languages, listing alchemical maxims from unnamed sources. These maxims include ‘masculus & femina maky ye game to ga’, ‘masculine and feminine make things work’, iterating the need for two binary alchemical principles; and ‘mater mea gemiit . & de me habuit’, ‘my mother lamented and had me’, probably referring to the labour of producing the alchemical child.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to these references to the alchemical child, the word for ‘son’ appears a good deal in *The Gracious Work*; however, I think a distinction should be made between the alchemical son symbolizing the philosophers’ stone and the rhetorical son being addressed. Addressing a utilitarian or scientific text to a ‘son’ is not uncommon, but is rather a common feature of instructional writing of many kinds, and does not therefore imply an extension of the family metaphor.<sup>86</sup>

### Metaphors as textual cohesion in *The Gracious Work*

The chemical wedding and parental metaphors present in *The Gracious Work* are not obscure if one is familiar with the basics of alchemical imagery. However, the alchemical veil, which might seem tattered at first due to the conventional imagery, is sufficient to prevent ‘bosteres & baddoers’ from reaching the secrets of alchemy through this work alone.<sup>87</sup> The precise meanings of key parts of the metaphors are rarely spelled out, and the work is thus intentionally vague alchemical in-group communication. Alchemists possessing in-group knowledge stemming from careful reading, as well as the oral tradition of medieval alchemy – lost to posterity – would know the meanings of these metaphors, of course. Through not mentioning precise ingredients, the work withholds information. In this vagueness, *The Gracious Work* follows alchemical tradition. The secrets of alchemy, it was thought, could not all be found in a single work: instead, the aspiring alchemist must read widely and through that reading assemble the pieces of the alchemical mystery like a complex jigsaw puzzle.<sup>88</sup> This is part of Rampling’s ‘reading alchemically’; the complexity of alchemical symbolism and metaphors or allegories required an alchemist to read widely to become familiar with the visual language of the craft. *Liber librum aperit*, as the old alchemical saying goes: ‘one book opens another’.<sup>89</sup>

Some of the metaphors of *The Gracious Work* are explained within the text – at least to some degree, such as ‘an Element yat is here prest’, discussed above.<sup>90</sup> However, even in cases where the metaphor is not explicitly laid out, I suggest that the metaphors are meant to aid communication rather than disrupt it.<sup>91</sup> As discussed at the start of this article, many groups – cooks, medical doctors and so on – use vague language to indicate group membership and keep some secrets group-internal. *The Gracious Work*, a challenging text, would seem to be an example of alchemists writing for other alchemists, who may have considered

<sup>85</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65.

<sup>86</sup> For instance, Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe* is addressed to his ‘sone’; on this kind of paternal(istic) writing see Seth Lerer, ‘Chaucer’s sons’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* (2004) 73, pp. 906–16. Alchemical treatises featuring dialogues between father and son include Pseudo-Ripley’s *Mystery of Alchymists*, mentioned above, and part of a sixteenth-century treatise by Humfrey Lock; on the latter see Peter Grund, ‘Misticall Wordes and Names Infinite’: *An Edition and Study of Humfrey Lock’s Treatise on Alchemy*, Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2011, pp. 143–59.

<sup>87</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> On such ‘dispersion’ see Jennifer M. Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300–1700*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020, p. 44.

<sup>89</sup> Rampling, op. cit. (88), p. 57.

<sup>90</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 64.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Vickers, op. cit. (9), p. 30.

their metaphors an intrinsic part of their in-group communication. Thus even unexplained metaphors can aid communication when they are aimed at an in-group audience.

Ramplng, in her study of obfuscatory, 'philosophical' alchemical manuals, argues that such works could instruct readers on how to decipher obscure writings and uncover the veiled practical procedures: 'practical content can be learned from texts, but only from those that are encoded to the point of illegibility'.<sup>92</sup> *The Gracious Work* is a good example of this kind of 'manual', as it describes alchemical procedures, but uses metaphors to obfuscate and, overall, requires plenty of in-group alchemical knowledge in order to be understood. The reader must practise 'alchemical exegesis' (to use Ramplng's term); that is, interpret the text through their previous in-group knowledge and their reading of other alchemical writings, in order to decode the vague, metaphorical language and disparate contents of *The Gracious Work*.

In addition to metaphors being part of alchemical in-group language use and communication through encouraging alchemical exegesis, I suggest that the common alchemical metaphors in *The Gracious Work* create textual cohesion in a fragmented work; that is, they provide a narrative framework for the reader to navigate through the complex treatise with. One aspect of how the metaphors create such textual cohesion may be due to the metaphors functioning, at least to some extent, as memory aids.<sup>93</sup> As Mary Carruthers has discussed, the medieval conception of memory was visual, operating through mental images.<sup>94</sup> Striking visual images were considered to be remembered best; alchemical imagery, with its dramatic visuals of bleeding pelicans and green lions swallowing suns, certainly qualifies.<sup>95</sup> The dramatics of such alchemical imagery, of course, contrast with domestic metaphors such as the ones examined in this article. However, anchoring obscure and technical alchemical processes in the familiar visuals of daily life, such as families and weddings, may in fact be a cohesion-creating mechanism operating through these images' very familiarity; readers remember the progression of extended metaphors involving familiar life events, and thus keep in mind the alchemical process. In *The Gracious Work*, the narrative of the extended metaphor creates an overall cohesive structure for the otherwise unstructured, multifaceted work.

Cognitively important metaphors often refer to everyday things, such as bodily actions, while the concepts they stand for are more abstract and less basic.<sup>96</sup> This seems to hold true for the alchemical metaphors in *The Gracious Work*. Abstract alchemical processes may be easier to grasp if one links them back to things experienced by almost everyone, if not personally then through their community: people uniting in marriage and taking care of a growing child, for instance. Considering medieval society, the metaphor of nourishing a child might be thought more relevant for women. However, even if most medieval alchemists were men and had no experience of giving birth or participating in child-care themselves, childbirth and care in the abstract would have been familiar concepts to learned male alchemists (some of whom might also be medical doctors).<sup>97</sup> Besides, the metaphors of child rearing in *The Gracious Work* are on an abstract level: all that is mentioned

<sup>92</sup> Ramplng, op. cit. (21), p. 57, 58.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Alonso Almeida, op. cit. (15), p. 22, who notes that culinary recipes act as memory aids in addition to being instructional devices.

<sup>94</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008 (first published 1990), p. 19.

<sup>95</sup> Carruthers, op. cit. (94), p. 91.

<sup>96</sup> Crisp, op. cit. (23), p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Michela Pereira, 'Mater medicinarum: English physicians and the alchemical elixir in the fifteenth century', in Roger French, Jon Arrizabalaga, Andrew Cunningham and Luis García-Ballester (eds.), *Medicine from the Black Death to the French Disease*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, pp. 26–52.

of birth is that the mother and father ‘bryngyt forye a clide [child] be twen hem two’.<sup>98</sup> In-depth knowledge of obstetrics would not be required in order to find the narrative logic and cohesion in a story of a wedding feast followed up by the couple having a baby and rearing them.

Even though medieval notions of memory claimed otherwise, some present-day psychological studies note that metaphors do not have to be visually strange to work as mnemonics.<sup>99</sup> The metaphors used in *The Gracious Work* are not particularly striking for alchemy. What they are, however, is predominantly primary: mothers and fathers, children and family, and the institution of marriage (a key social construct in medieval England). These metaphors draw on basic aspects of medieval life, and thereby create a framework to anchor *The Gracious Work* in alchemical practice and the reader’s mind alike.

## Conclusion

Memorable, simple metaphors help with textual cohesion, especially extended, narrative metaphors that can act as a framework. In *The Gracious Work*, the common, even primary, metaphors of marriage and nurturing a child are what hold the work together. Metaphors are thus an essential part of the information transmission and cohesion of *The Gracious Work*, representing an example of how alchemists wrote for other alchemists. Many of these metaphors require the reader to be steeped in alchemical knowledge, and thus also act as a gatekeeping measure. However, if the reader of *The Gracious Work* understands the metaphors, they can visualize and storify the alchemical processes presented amidst seemingly piecemeal information.

Alchemical metaphors remain sometimes obscure and frustratingly vague, but they were part of professional language use; as Thomas Norton tells us, ‘euery science hath his propre terms’, and although English alchemy also uses plentiful specialized terminology, sometimes the proper terms of the science of alchemy were metaphors.<sup>100</sup> Metaphors were part of the essential toolkit of alchemical writing, and not just because of the appealing aspect of keeping secrets: the metaphors in *The Gracious Work* exhibit the writing of an in-group member for other in-group members, and thus their vague language is also a marker of in-group language use.

Opaque Middle English alchemical works – especially those which, like *The Gracious Work*, seem to be compilations from multiple source texts – still tend to be less frequently analysed than their more cohesive counterparts. However, in order for the landscape of Middle English alchemical texts to be fully explored, this kind of material should not be excluded from textual study, but approached with care and curiosity. I have examined *The Gracious Work* through its metaphors, since they tell an alchemical story in an otherwise non-cohesive text, thereby helping the reader to navigate through a complex set of instructions. The extended metaphors form the only (somewhat) logical narrative in a disjointed text that likely draws on many sources. Vagueness and metaphorical communication of this kind are both features of alchemical in-group communication. One does not need metaphors to organize an alchemical work, of course – for instance, *The Mirror of Alchemy* relies predominantly on scholastic argumentation rather than allegorical explication, although it does describe some stages of the alchemical process through metaphor.<sup>101</sup> However, in *The*

<sup>98</sup> Ashmole 1451, p. 65.

<sup>99</sup> For instance, Henry L. Roediger III, ‘The effectiveness of four mnemonics in ordering recall’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory* (1980) 6(5), pp. 558–67, 558.

<sup>100</sup> John Reidy, (ed.), *Thomas Norton’s Ordinal of Alchemy*, EETS 272, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 55, l. 1730; see Rampling, op. cit. (21), p. 71. On specialized alchemical vocabulary see Norja, op. cit. (4), pp. 261–300, and Grund, op. cit. (86), pp. 86–90.

<sup>101</sup> Norja, op. cit. (4), pp. 229–37.

*Gracious Work*, seemingly written by alchemists for alchemists, metaphors are important not only due to their alchemical content but also because of their textual function: they form a loose narrative framework that helps create cohesion in this fragmented work.

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