



The Secrets of Alchemy

Lawrence M. Principe

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Alchemy, the “Noble Art,” conjures up scenes of mysterious, dimly lit laboratories populated with bearded old men stirring cauldrons. Though the history of alchemy is intricately linked to the history of chemistry, alchemy has nonetheless often been dismissed as the realm of myth and magic, or fraud and pseudoscience. And while its themes and ideas persist in some expected and unexpected places, from the Philosophers’ (or Sorcerer’s) Stone of *Harry Potter* to the self-help mantra of transformation, there has not been a serious, accessible, and up-to-date look at the complete history and influence of alchemy until now.

In *The Secrets of Alchemy*, Lawrence M. Principe, one of the world’s leading authorities on the subject, brings alchemy out of the shadows and restores it to its important place in human history and culture. By surveying what alchemy was and how it began, developed, and overlapped with a range of ideas and pursuits, Principe illuminates the practice. He vividly depicts the place of alchemy during its heyday in early modern Europe, and then explores how alchemy has fit into wider views of the cosmos and humanity, touching on its enduring place in literature, fine art, theater, and religion as well as its recent acceptance as a serious subject of study for historians of science. In addition, he introduces the reader to some of the most fascinating alchemists, such as Zosimos and Basil Valentine, whose lives dot alchemy’s long reign from the third century and down to the present day. Through his exploration of alchemists and their times, Principe pieces together closely guarded clues from obscure and fragmented texts to reveal alchemy’s secrets, and—most exciting for budding alchemists—uses them to recreate many of the most famous recipes in his lab, including those for the “glass of antimony” and “philosophers’ tree.” This unique approach brings the reader closer to the actual work of alchemy than any other book.

A concise but illuminating history, *The Secrets of Alchemy* is written for anyone drawn to the alchemical arts, those who are fascinated by the science as well as the fantastic stories and mysterious practitioners.

The Secrets of Alchemy Details

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From Reader Review The Secrets of Alchemy for online ebook

Bruno Godinho says

Principe's book is very good, from the standpoint of a history of science. And for this very reason it fails to explain what were the cultural reasons for the belief in alchemy. As we can see, many of the described experiments of the alchemists rest on purely observational things: the "Hermes' Tree" is nothing but a reaction inside a tube that grows in a tree-like shape. This, however, is not sufficient. Principe - as the rest of the authors that follow a strictly "scientific history" agenda - does not get into the historical mental issues that made possible and, more importantly, believable for someone to see a tree where for us there is only a chemical reaction.

The standpoint of the history of science is very good in explaining the main scientific and philosophical strains that alchemy followed from Antiquity to the Modern Age. But they choose to ignore more anthropological and sociological reasons for the belief in alchemy: it is not enough to know what materially happened behind the mystical words of an alchemical text; there has to be an explanation that accounts for what happened mentally too. This has been attempted (and later, shunned by these very historians of science) since Marcel Mauss' and Henri Hubert's "Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie" ("A general theory of magic"). The French social scientists gave way to Mircea Eliade's famous interpretation in "Forgerons et alchimistes" ("The forge and the crucible"), not to mention the relevant - although historically flawed - jungian interpretation.

I was, at first, highly influenced by the history of science perspective and that conflicted very much with the French influence (historians like Marc Bloch, Jacques Le Goff, Georges Duby) I had as a Brazilian historian and medievalist. A rather late re-reading of Eliade, in light of Mauss-Hubert and even Claude Lévi-Strauss, opened up my eyes to the faults of the historians of science. What bothers me is that Principe alongside professor William Newman, from Indiana University, have systematically shunned and closed themselves into a bubble, denying and criticizing cultural approaches. It seems like the history of alchemy can only be written as a history of science. For this, I can only recommend to other readers that this book is very good for one historiographic stream. For a more cultural one, unfortunately there are so many works that can be read: "A general theory of magic" (1902), Marcel Mauss and Henry Hubert (which does not have alchemy as a central issue, but lays a foundation for a sociological/anthropological approach of the subject); "Psychology and alchemy" (1944), Carl Gustav Jung (with reservations regarding historical contextualization); "The forge and the crucible" (1956), Mircea Eliade; although I have not read it completely yet, Leah DeVun's "Alchemy, prophecy and the End of Time" (2009) about John of Rupescissa seems to have a sound cultural background, lining up the history of apocalyptic and escathological movements to contextualize John's thoughts (in a broader sense, Norman Cohn's "The pursuit of the millennium" explains the context in which John of Rupescissa was living).

Duke says

Principe's summary and evaluation of hermetic alchemy as understood by occult practitioners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is at best myopic. He conveniently overlooks in this section natural poetical metonymy of language (though he appears to love the term Decknamen), the overt mythological and theological references in dozens of pre-nineteenth-century alchemical plates, paintings, and treatises, and Blake's, Scot's and others' treatments of alchemy years before the occult revival and the popularization of

mesmerism. However, Principe mentions throughout the book that Christ is used to symbolize the Stone - but nothing more - and the alchemical process is often analogized to or allegorized as Christ's passion. Perhaps Principe should take another look through the *Theatrum Chemicum* to see just how closely tied many thought (and still think) alchemy and Christianity were...

On page 182 Principe is quick to suggest that Chaucer "takes a position in his *Canterbury Tales*" on alchemy after quoting a few lines from a modern translation of "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale." Principe shows here his inability to understand the complexity of literature, and especially the personalities of Chaucer's various characters in the *Tales*: The Yeoman's position on alchemy is not Chaucer's position at all. (And in the original *Tales*, Chaucer's Yeoman attributes much of what Principe quotes to Hermes, though I can't speak for Principe's edition.)

And not to mention Carl Jung's life's work refuted in a mere 20 pages! Well done, Lawrence.

Many of the pieces necessary to understand the esoteric side of alchemy are here: Mesmer's animal magnetism/Jung's libido, Christian and Greek mythology, layers of meaning, interconnectedness of all things within and without, above and below (spirit and matter), Chaucer, Jonson, Donne, Shakespeare, Rowling - he even includes Fludd's image of the Great Chain of Being that echoes the Tree of Life on page 197 and Valentine's Azoth on page 120! - but, unfortunately, he doesn't quite come away with the "secrets" of alchemy in the end, and neither do we.

In short, this book contains many of the necessary shells, but Principe does not crack them open - look behind or within them - to discover the common meat. Because of this, at times I felt he was misleading, but I rated *The Secrets of Alchemy* four stars because of the depth of understanding he has of what some call contemporarily exoteric alchemy. Principe would do well to study the layers of language and symbol that to me appear to be lacking in his consciousness yet which he mentions occasionally in his book. The *grammatos* kills, Principe, but the *pneuma* gives life.

Alan Lenton says

The first thing to note about this book is that the title is somewhat misleading. It would be more accurate to call it a history of alchemy. I was nearly put off buying it because of its title, but in retrospect I'm glad I wasn't, because it's a very interesting book.

What the author sets out to do is to restore an understanding alchemy of within its historical and cultural framework. I think he succeeds in this aim. There is in Western society a tendency to think of alchemy as being something vaguely to do with magic - but nothing could be further from the truth. The work of most alchemists would be recognized today as experimentally rigorous, and based on the best theories of the nature of matter that existed at the time.

Take, for instance, the search for the legendary Philosopher's Stone, the secret of turning lead into gold. We know that's not possible to do chemically today. Why do we know that? Because we know that lead and gold are elements. The elements are defined by the number of protons in their nucleus. Chemical reactions only work on the electrons in atoms, and you can't change the make-up of an atomic nucleus by fiddling with its electrons.

But we didn't find this out until about a hundred years ago. In the golden age of alchemy, which roughly

coincides with the Scientific Revolution (1500-1700), the belief was that matter was a compound, and the properties of any given piece of matter were determined by the proportions of more fundamental substances. Theoretically, if this were the case it should have been possible to change, for instance, lead into gold by altering those proportions in lead until they matched the proportions that defined gold. It was this theoretical view that drove the search for a substance that altered these proportions. (This is a simplified view; the book explains in much more detail.)

The book covers the history of alchemy from its beginnings in the third century AD through to its effective demise at the end of the 19th Century. Along the way it discusses many other aspects of alchemy, including its impact on early medicine, laboratory work, and chemistry. It also looks in more depth at some of the work of famous alchemists, including the attempts of the author to recreate their work in the lab - with interesting results.

Well worth a read if you have any interest in the history of science.

Jeff Lewonczyk says

A brief but rich history of the historical, philosophical and scientific development of alchemy and how it eventually branched off into both chemistry and mysticism. Principe does a great job of bringing out representative texts regarding the discipline from Greek times to the 19th Century and even reproduces a number of alchemical "recipes" in his laboratory in order to determine where science ends and speculation begins. A great introduction.

Atila Iamarino says

Lawrence M. Principe realmente entende do que está escrevendo. O livro passa pelo começo da alquimia até o seu fim, ou declínio, com o começo da ciência moderna. E o autor faz um excelente trabalho de explicar não só o que os alquimistas pensavam, como porque eles pensavam o que pensavam. Ao invés de ficar na exposição das ideias, na linha do "olha que ridículo o que achavam", suas explicações vão na linha do "claro que isso fazia sentido quando a referência que tinham desse processo na época era essa".

Além do detalhamento histórico de alguém que realmente entende do assunto, ele ainda testa algumas das receitas, interpreta, explica o que dá certo ou errado e porque. O que torna a busca pela Pedra Filosofal muito mais compreensível, bem como as ideias a seu respeito foram mudando ao longo do tempo. Um livro bem completo para quem busca a ciência por trás da alquimia.

Acco Spoot says

This was a really fascinating book. I primarily wanted to read it for more cursory knowledge of the 17th and 18th centuries (knowing that Alchemy was in the midst of a golden age at that point) but found so much more.

With a background in chemistry the author (Lawrence Principe) is able to approach the highly overly mysticised subject of Alchemy, not falling into the trap of flippant dismissal or over-exuberant delusions,

instead approaching in rational terms and revealing the true craft and intellect of the Alchemist.

Catarina PB says

An okey book book, with tons of information but I wished it included history until the present day~

Nancy says

Like most modern people, I've thought of alchemy as something more magic than science, but Principe manages to walk us back to a time when science, philosophy, religion (and some slight of hand) were intertwined. Using the term "chymistry" to over-ride our our internal definitions of chemistry and alchemy, he presents an interesting history of the history of alchemy and the infancy of chemistry.

Nick Koss says

A fantastic overview of alchemy as a long-standing tradition rooted in logic, reason, and experimentation, later tainted by quackery (a well-earned status thanks to some practitioners, no doubt), and eventually re-interpreted as pseudo-science, mysticism, and psychological fantasy. Worth the read for the scientist and the mystic alike!

Bethany says

I freely admit that I went looking for books on alchemy after watching Fullmetal Alchemist :)

This is a very interesting, well written, and informative look at the history of alchemy. I had a vague idea that alchemy was a form of magic, with some haphazard chemistry thrown in (aka potions), but this book shows that alchemy was more rational, systematic, and socially productive than I ever would have guessed. The author recreates historical laboratory techniques and tests alchemical recipes, explaining how a list of ingredients procured hundreds of years ago and cooked in old school equipment might differ from the results we'd now expect with our knowledge of modern chemistry. The author also does an excellent job explaining the religious and interconnected worldview of early modern people.

Karla Huebner says

This book provides a remarkably clear and readable history of alchemy from ancient to modern times. That's not to say that everything about alchemy is or can be clarified, but the author does an impressive job of conveying what scholars have learned (he points out that many recent books repeat errors that had long ago been cleared up by scholars writing in other languages) and places alchemical practices within their historical context(s). Rather dazzlingly, he even manages to unravel some of the obscurantist language used for alchemical writings and to duplicate some of the recipes in the lab.

The book is largely but not entirely chronological in organization, and while the author's reasons for discussing recent (19th century to present) beliefs about alchemy before covering Golden Age alchemy do make some sense, by the end I felt it was a mistake to abandon chronology. While the notion that alchemy was really about personal transformation and not chemistry may date to the 19th century, the section on the Golden Age makes clear that by that time ideas of alchemical transformation already extended (at least for some people) beyond the purely chemical.

In any case, this book gets across the science and technology without entirely rejecting other, more metaphorical, meanings.

Amy says

Interesting read providing a scholarly overview of the history of alchemy and its relationship to modern day chemistry. In some of the most interesting parts of the book the author attempts to recreate alchemical experiments in order to understand their reported observations.

T. A. Hampton says

Interesting and informative. It is by no means (as the author himself states), a thorough treatise on the subject of alchemy. What he set out to do, he did very well, I thought. This book provides an excellent overview of a rather broad subject.

Heather Jones says

I've been whining about "where were all these books on alchemy last year when I was doing the primary research for *The Mystic Marriage*? In this case, the answer is "not published yet". There does seem to be a nebulous "interest in alchemy" front passing through, which I can only hope will be positive for the reception of my novel. This is exactly the sort of readable but solidly historical general history of the field that I was searching for. (The best I could find last year was a bit too invested in the mystical aspects for true objectivity.) This goes on my "actually read it through" list.

Ben McFarland says

Is it a paradox to say that a book titled The Secrets of Alchemy is open and brisk? Treatments of alchemy to this point have been either rationalist dismissals of the practice and all it represented, or dense historical works that get as lost in the details as the alchemists themselves did. In this book, Lawrence M. Principe lays out a targeted and clear (at least, as much as is possible!) history of the subject. He actually tried to carry out the described experiments, and when he encountered frustration, he persevered (sounds like normal lab work) and eventually it worked like they said in many cases. Not Philosopher's Stone cases ... but he did make a "Philosopher's Tree", which is quite wondrous in itself. If you want to really know about alchemy and what it was, read this book. I can't recommend it highly enough for answering that question.

Because the alchemists were always not quite trusted, and because they did much work in the sixteenth

through eighteenth centuries as the Enlightenment was emerging and drawing its lines, they have been caught on the wrong side of those lines for a long time. Some deservedly so, but Principe's experiments show that there was some surprisingly sophisticated experimental chemistry going on.

Principe bridges the gap between modern and premodern worlds expertly, and in doing so says some things that align with Owen Barfield about how people literally see differently now than they used to. My favorite part about how premodern or early modern eyes can benefit the scientist comes from this passage about the chymist Paracelsus -- imagine this, the chemist as a co-redeemer, a high calling indeed:

p.128 -129“Paracelsus endeavored to generate an entire world system, embracing the whole of theology and natural philosophy ... For him, chymical processes provided the fundamental model for explaining natural processes in the physical universe as well as within the human body. For example, the cycle of rain through sea, air, and land was for Paracelsus the great cosmic distillation. [Long list] were for him inherently chymical processes. God Himself is the Master Chymist; his creation of an ordered world out of primordial chaos was akin to the chymist’s extraction, purification, and elaboration of common materials into chymical products, and His final judgment of the world by fire like the chymist using fire to purge impurities from precious metals. Paracelsus’s system has been called a ‘chemical worldview’ ... “

"Some Paracelsians even held that all poison and toxicity entered the world only with original sin. Therefore, by using chymistry to purify now-poisonous substances into medicines, the chymist returned them to their wholesome, pristine, prelapsarian state as they were created by God in the beginning. In effect, the chymical process was thus redemptive, and the chymist participated as a co-redeemer of a fallen world."
