

ANTOINE CALVET, *L'ALCHIMIE AU MOYEN ÂGE: XII<sup>E</sup>–XV<sup>E</sup> SIÈCLES*, VRIN, PARIS 2018 (ÉTUDES DE PHILOSOPHIE MÉDIÉVALE, 107), 282 PP., ISBN 9782711628384.

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*L'alchimie au Moyen Âge* is a scholarly book written in French aiming at providing a solid introduction to the discipline of medieval alchemy (12<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> cent.). Yet, the word 'introduction' should not mislead any prospective reader, since the book contains a profound richness of knowledge which could also satisfy an expert of the field. Antoine Calvet, being a well-known and experienced scholar on medieval alchemy, vouches for the undisputable quality of his book, which is comprised of six chapters – introduction and conclusion included.

In the introduction, Calvet provides us with the appropriate background for entering the world of medieval alchemy. At the very beginning, he states the objective of his book, which concerns the history of the practitioners and the theorists of medieval alchemy. Subsequently, Calvet describes basic concepts and theories pertinent to the alchemy of that period, such as the theories of sulphur-mercury and of the two natures of metals, which are necessary for understanding alchemical procedures. In the last part of the introduction, Calvet deals with the techniques of translation acquired during the twelfth century, the pre-alchemical texts, the connection between alchemy and social and historical factors, and the manuscript tradition of alchemical texts.

The first chapter is dedicated to the reception of Arabic alchemy in the Western World during the twelfth century. Therefore, the main protagonists of this chapter are *Morienus* and the texts of Hermes Trismegistus. The author offers a rich and up-to-date account of *Morienus*, adducing a detailed description of its content and its impact on other works, as well as trying to draw connections between this text and the *Responsiones Aros philosophi ad Nephes regem*. Then, he considers the texts of Hermes Trismegistus by laying a focus on the *Tabula Smaragdina*, the *Septem tractatus*, and the *Liber Hermetis*. Finally, he presents the *Secretum secretorum* – a text which had a great impact on medieval alchemical literature – through the lens of Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, and Hortulanus.

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The second chapter brings to the foreground the Arabic authors who were translated into Latin. The chapter is divided in two sub-chapters – the first entitled « practical alchemy », and the second « mytho-poetical alchemy ». In the first context, Calvet places the Latin Geber, Rhazes, and Avicenna, whereas in the second one finds the *Turba philosophorum*, *Tabula chemica*, *Liber quartorum Platonis*, and the texts of Artefius. In the first set of texts, Calvet rightly distinguishes between the genuine and the pseudo-texts of Rhazes and Avicenna.

The third chapter is the heart of the book, since it focuses on the most important period of medieval alchemy – that is, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The chapter is comprised of three sub-chapters: the first dealing with the alchemy of the thirteenth century, the second with that of the fourteenth, and the last one with what Calvet calls « diversified » alchemy.

In the first sub-chapter, Calvet exposes his material through the lens of scholasticism. At the beginning he shows the relation between alchemy and medieval universities and scholars; then, he deals with individual alchemical authors of the thirteenth century. In particular, he presents the cases of Michael Scot, Albert the Great and pseudo-Albert, Vincent de Beauvais, Thomas Aquinas and pseudo-Thomas, Constantinus of Pisa, Roger Bacon and pseudo-Bacon, and lastly pseudo-Geber with his *Summa perfectionis*.

Next, the author considers the alchemy of the fourteenth century. He provides an introduction to Franciscan alchemy, arguing that Franciscans favoured and fostered medieval alchemy. Then, he analyzes the cases of (pseudo-) Arnald of Villanova, (pseudo-)Raymond Lull, John Dastin, Johannes de Rupescissa, and Petrus Bonus. Afterwards, he offers an insight into the adversaries of alchemy by presenting individual authors (Pietro d'Abano, Gilles of Rome), religious bans, and the position of the Canonists.

The chapter ends with what Calvet has named « diversified » alchemy, in which he includes alchemists whose work was of an experimental character and diverged from traditional sources like those of pseudo-Arnald and pseudo-Lull. Following this line of thought, he discusses the cases of Walter of Odington, Philippe Elèphant, and Guillaume Sadacer.

In the fourth chapter, Calvet takes into account the last period of the Middle Ages, treating the alchemy of the fifteenth century. He starts his *exposé* with the subject of iconography and how it evolved in alchemical manuscripts from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Subsequently, he touches upon the matter of alchemical translations into the vernacular, explaining how alchemy was diffused and portrayed through Italian, French, and English literature. In this respect, he analyses the cases of George Ripley and Thomas Norton. At the end of the chapter, he introduces us to liturgical alchemy through the text of Melchior de Sibiu, in which alchemy is associated with the sacraments.

Finally, in the conclusion, Calvet draws connections among the aforementioned chapters and highlights the main points of each chapter.

When it comes to the evaluation of the book, one cannot but praise it, due to the richness of its virtues. First of all, this work does not belong to a certain historiographical tradition – that is, it is not coloured by a historiographical approach like that of history of science or of psychoanalysis – and therefore Calvet has indeed succeeded in presenting an unbiased historical account. In order to preserve the historical character of the book, the author offers detailed descriptions of the content of the works, a very up-to-date account of the state of the art, and lastly he provides much information on the manuscript tradition of the texts he takes into consideration. All this makes the volume suitable to be read not only by students but also by advanced scholars. In the same strand, it helps that the author provides many footnotes with the aim of either defining or clarifying alchemical concepts and ideas – whereas, on the other hand, he adduces Latin excerpts of many alchemical texts for those who want to immerse themselves into a deeper level of the study of the sources. As far as the bibliography is concerned, the author is perfectly informed and makes good use of all the European and American research that has been conducted thus far on this topic.

Before I close this review, I would like to stress three points of this book which are of great value. Firstly, Calvet makes a sharp distinction between the genuine and the pseudo-texts – which is extremely important in the cases of Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Arnald of Villanova, and Raymond Lull. In this way, a reader who has no prior experience in medieval alchemy does not fall into fallacies or misconceptions when it comes to the actual opinion and alchemical approach of each medieval writer.

Secondly, I find it very interesting that Calvet implicitly distinguishes between Dominican and Franciscan attitudes towards alchemy. Of course, he does not speak of two different ‘schools’ of alchemy, but he makes it clear enough that the two mendicant orders had a different approach and ‘use’ of alchemy.

Finally, I would like to stress the way through which Calvet presents the state of the art of each alchemical author or case. Calvet does not try to settle cases which are ambivalent when it comes to matters of authenticity or interpretation. This attitude adds more value to the book, since the reader is not influenced by Calvet’s position and is allowed to create his/her own’s opinion.

To sum up, I find Calvet’s volume an excellent read and a fundamental introductory work to medieval alchemy studies. Calvet presents his material in a historical way and this makes his book suitable for scholars of all different kinds of disciplines. The only problem with this work could be that it is only available in French: an English translation would result in its reaching a larger audience and therefore receiving greater credit.