

‘entertaining’? How were visual effects, particularly those involved in experimental work, made available to thousands in a lecture theatre? The maps, charts and some of the portraits are useful, but in a book stressing the multi-sensory nature of science, it would have been helpful to have more illustrations – for example of lantern slides, projection equipment, lectures in progress or the *Angelus* by the French painter Jean-François Millet that is discussed over several paragraphs.

Among the many strengths of the *Voice of Science* is the attention devoted to what Finnegan terms the ‘intimate ecology that bound together success in print and on the platform’ (p. 173). Connections between the written and the oral worked at many levels in the making of celebrity. Most lecturers came to cash in on the success of their books, which although widely read in the United States had often been pirated and hence brought limited royalties. Lectures were usually reported in newspapers and other periodicals, sparking further controversy and conversation among a wider range of readers, who might go on to purchase new works informed by the lectures they had just heard. Celebrity was never preordained – and certainly not through original discovery alone – but was forged through relations with the mass-circulation press. This was particularly true for visitors who offered the attraction of being familiar through their writings but entirely unknown in their persons. It is no accident that Huxley noticed on his arrival that the Manhattan skyline was dominated by the towers of the *New York Tribune* and Western Union Telegraph Office rather than the steeples of churches. There could be no better omen for a consummate communicator and ‘apostle of science’.

doi:10.1017/S000708742200005X

Jennifer M. Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300–1700*

**Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020.
Pp. 416. ISBN 978-0-2267-1070-9. £28.00/\$35.00 (hardback).**

Richard Dunn

Science Museum, London

The history of alchemy offers huge challenges to any researcher, not least due to the deliberate obfuscation of authors who considered the quest for the philosophers’ stone – or rather a trinity of animal, vegetable and mineral stones – to be a secret art. What Jennifer Rampling shows in *The Experimental Fire*, however, is that the best historians can overcome these challenges and tell us something genuinely new and refreshing.

Rampling’s book tells the story of alchemy in England from the fourteenth century to the late seventeenth. Or, rather, it tells the story of a distinctively English form of alchemy, which she calls ‘sericonian’ after its prime matter, sericon, a mercurial substance somehow drawn from base metals. The narrative is in three sections (each comprising three chapters) that look in turn at the tradition’s medieval origins during the reign of Edward III, its golden age in the sixteenth century and the legacy still evident through the seventeenth century. What interests Rampling is how textual learning interacted with practical experience and the extent to which practitioners sought either to

innovate or to recover the practices of their alchemical predecessors. These overarching questions inform a set of interconnected themes: the ongoing quest for patronage; notions of lineage and national history; and the active use and exchange of manuscripts, revealed as continually evolving texts.

The tradition Rampling traces derived from texts ascribed to the Catalan author Ramon Llull (c.1232–c.1316), known in England as Raymond Lull. Although the attribution proved to be incorrect, the pseudo-Lullian corpus of over a hundred works provided a rich basis for the work of generations of alchemical practitioners, chief among them George Ripley (c.1415–90), here considered the originator of the English sericonian tradition. The work involved what Rampling terms ‘practical exegesis’, the cyclical process of translating, reconstructing and thus interpreting and transforming earlier texts, with authors applying their own experimental experiences as part of this process of (re)interpretation. Terms remain endlessly slippery in this context, with evident tensions between literal and figurative readings. Complicating matters further is what Rampling calls ‘dispersion of knowledge’, requiring one to read across several texts by a particular author to extract true meaning.

What emerge are the different contexts in which alchemy might be practised and the varying attitudes towards it. In periods when the shortage of bullion was a concern, alchemists offered a practical solution to a national problem. But this brought with it the possibility of prosecution for counterfeiting. Thus by the end of the fourteenth century, ‘alchemy was simultaneously hailed as an elevated form of philosophy and damned as a fraudulent practice that threatened the integrity of English coin’ (p. 31). Through the sixteenth century, alchemy relied on the exchange and compilation of manuscripts, as well as master–pupil relationships. While the dissolution of the monasteries dislodged alchemical practice from one of its homes and simultaneously dispersed many manuscripts, medicinal alchemy flourished under Henry VIII. Nevertheless, there was also growing concern that alchemists might be involved in conjuration, which proved particularly problematic in the wake of the Witchcraft Act of 1542. By the end of the century, Edward Kelley, and to a lesser extent John Dee, had a significant role in disseminating elements of Ripley’s alchemy across Europe (at least until Kelley’s luck ran out). Further transformations occurred in the seventeenth century, typified in the work of Elias Ashmole and George Starkey, yet the dream of a universal stone had largely died by that century’s end, and with it the English tradition that Rampling traces.

This is an extraordinary piece of scholarship that explores a notoriously difficult subject in detail and with impressive clarity. Rampling exposes her own techniques as a historian and those of the authors of the myriad texts she has consulted in order to understand and uncover the complexities of reading, in the past and for the historian today. As she notes, ‘changes in interpretation and practice have to be inferred from relatively minor alterations to manuscript copies’ (p. 340). She has clearly become an expert in this. Many texts are newly attributed and previously unknown authors brought to light. There is real detective work at play here, with Rampling careful to explain the extent to which attributions are certain or more speculative. In this respect, the book is a model of first-class historiography that shows the value of deep immersion in texts and practices. It is no surprise that the footnotes are extensive and thorough.

As Rampling notes, this book tells only part of the story of alchemy in England. I relish the prospect of the larger account that will emerge as she brings more of the pieces together in future work.