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Zachary R. Matus, Franciscans and the Elixir of Life

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Franciscans and the Elixir of Life: Religion and Science in the Later Middle Ages, Zachary A. Matus, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017 (978-0-812-24921-7), 216 pp, Hb \$59.95/£50.

Scholarly treatments of alchemy have frequently focused on the transmutation of base metals into gold and silver. However, this book addresses the other main alchemical enterprise: the distillation of the “elixir of life”. This was the medieval equivalent of what we today recognize as alcoholic spirits. Although beer and wine were then ubiquitous, stronger stuff was far rarer and extremely highly prized. A cure-all medicine, the mysterious elixir was also used to instil virtues and extend the human lifespan. Matus sets his narrative in the context of the current turn to materiality within medieval studies, but wishes to advance beyond previous understandings of alchemy as—at least from the fourteenth century—a product of religious thought alone, to account for the role of religious practice and ritual in shaping it.

Franciscans were attracted to alchemy by their strong sensibility for the giftedness of nature, which is vividly expressed in Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle to Brother Sun* in direct and orthodox opposition to the anti-materialism of the Cathars. This sense of nature as gift was complemented by an apocalyptic outlook, which was inspired by the widely-disseminated writings of the twelfth-century Calabrian abbot Joachim of Flora, who died just seven years before the Franciscan order was founded in 1209. Apocalypticism impelled the order’s controversial “spiritual” wing, which, because the Franciscans admitted new members less selectively than the Dominicans, expanded very rapidly.

Matus demonstrates that alchemy was scripturally grounded, above all in a close literal reading of the opening chapter of Genesis, such as that developed by the exegete and theologian Peter of John Olivi (1248–98). Refuting the traditional allegorical reading established by Augustine, in which creation occurred at a single moment, Olivi expounds a literal interpretation in which the created order is progressively unfolded in stages, onto which are mapped the subsequent phases of salvation history. Matus also emphasizes the fundamentally Aristotelian character of alchemy. Although the Stagirite never discussed transmutation, it was from his philosophy that alchemists developed the identification of the elixir with the fifth essence, element, or substance, out of which the heavens were composed. This cosmology sharply contrasted with that of Plato, for whom the celestial bodies were composed of fire and therefore insubstantial. Awareness of this radical Aristotelianism helps to account for the repeated thirteenth-century condemnations of Aristotle in the university of Paris.

Because alchemy did not become a university subject, its curriculum was never standardized and the whole enterprise retained a Protean character. Partly for this reason, Matus refuses to categorize alchemy either as magic or as prototypical experimental science, seeing its existence as

evidence that, even in the later Middle Ages, no clear boundary could be defined between “science” and “religion.” He explores the conceptions of alchemy developed by three different Franciscans.

The first is Roger Bacon (1214–92), whose “inestimable glory” was an elixir that could bring the material earthly body closer to its perfected, resurrected state. Matus nuances the standard presentation of Bacon as an early adopter of a naturalistic scientific method. Although advocating experimentation, Bacon saw this as a means of distinguishing the natural from the magical, rather than of refounding the whole cosmos along materialistic lines. For him, the abilities to obtain knowledge that could be used to predict the future, and to deploy technology that could influence events to come, were not straightforwardly natural. This is suggested by the tremendous ambition of some of his projects, such as the construction of giant mirrors to burn enemies from afar, and the use of the elixir to alter the complexions of whole races in a process known as “fascination”, thus hastening and maximizing Christian conversions before the coming of the antichrist.

Vitalis of Furno (1260–1327) may have copied from others many of the writings attributed to him. Nevertheless, *aqua ardens*, literally “burning water”, is associated with him. This was highly distilled alcohol that could be ignited without consuming anything apart from itself. However, Matus persuasively shows that Vitalis was not the target of the early fourteenth-century papal pronouncements against alchemy. Rather, their object was the transmutation of metals, and they were designed to limit the circulation of forged coinage, not least in the form of donations to the Church.

The most controversial figure in Matus’s alchemical trio was John of Rupescissa (c.1310–c.1365), who believed that he could distil the quintessence associated with Aristotle, which was identified with the perfected physical nature as it existed in heaven. By means of distillation and condensation, John supposed that the properties of the heavenly substance could be made physically accessible to humans living on earth. Importantly, he stated that the processes necessary to achieve this did not require expensive equipment, and so could be undertaken by those living under a vow of poverty, or simply in poverty. Because the resulting product could heal battle wounds and revive the dying, its wide availability would be invaluable in the impending apocalyptic conflict. John was put on trial for heresy and confined to prison, where he composed most of his alchemical works. He was deemed not a heretic but mad (*fantasticus*). His quest thus became a kind of Calvary in which his suffering, apocalyptic conviction, and faith in alchemy were, as Matus puts it, “subjunctively” entwined.

In the final chapter, more could have been made of the links between alchemy and other Christian rituals. Considerably more space is given to the possible Hermetic antecedents of Franciscan alchemy than to the arguably more obvious associations with the Eucharist. For instance,

different theories of how the elements of bread and wine were converted into Christ's body and blood correspond with different possible interpretations of alchemical transmutation. These include: impanation, with Christ becoming present in his fully physicality; transubstantiation, in which one substance changes into another substance; consubstantiation, whereby a new substance is joined to a persisting substance; and spiritual understandings, which do not require any substantial transformation of the elements. This parallel is significant not least because the Eucharist was, like the elixir, believed to exert a physical influence on its surroundings, such as by preserving crops and animals from disease. Nevertheless, Matus offers a wonderful vista into an enterprise that is frequently misunderstood, and a lucid account of how it was motivated and justified.

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