

Intention to Write, Intention to Teach: Vernacular Poetry and Pedagogy in Thomas Norton's *Ordinal of Alchemy*

Cynthia Masson

Connections made by scholars between language and alchemy generally focus on the enigmatic or obscure technical jargon used by alchemists throughout alchemy's extensive history. Only occasionally do critical studies of medieval alchemical texts examine these works for their contribution to the canon of medieval vernacular literature or literary theory. Not surprisingly, scholarly discussions of alchemical writing in Middle English literature focus primarily on Chaucer. As recently as a 1999 article in the *Chaucer Review*, Mark J. Bruhn in "Art, Anxiety, and Alchemy in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*" discusses alchemy as "a metaphor for Chaucer's poetry."¹ "[W]e should have no difficulty," says Bruhn, in "construing the ground of the metaphor between Chaucerian letters and alchemical multiplication" (p. 309). Jane Hilberry in a 1987 article on the technical language of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* argues that alchemy's "primary attraction lies in the language that surrounds the practice."² She concludes her article: "While Chaucer in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* confirms alchemy's failure to change base metals into gold, he succeeds in transmuting the language of alchemy into poetry" (p. 442). We do find, then, an effort by medievalists to explore the relationship between language and alchemy in English literature, albeit seemingly limited to an interest in Chaucer's poetry rather than in his specific use of the English language.

Yet we have in our body of medieval literature another (and perhaps more interesting) source for the exploration of the use of the vernacular within the context

of alchemical writing in England: Thomas Norton's *The Ordinal of Alchemy*, which comprises over 3000 lines of Middle English rhyming couplets. Norton's *Ordinal*, written in 1477, is one of the earliest vernacular alchemical works written in England after Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.³ Unlike Chaucer's satiric tale, which fits into a larger framework "of best sentence and moost solaaas"⁴ and is not specifically aimed at an audience of would-be English alchemists, Norton's *Ordinal* is "sett owte in englishe blonte & rude, / For this is so made to teche a multitude / Of rude people."⁵ His purpose for using the vernacular, at least as he states it here, is to educate the uneducated English people in what he considers to be a "trew science" (143). This paper, after a brief introduction to the text, will explore the arguably pedagogical agenda of Norton's English *Ordinal* through his references to alchemy in England and his comments on the function of written language in alchemical texts.

The thirty-one known manuscripts of Norton's *Ordinal*, dating from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, attest to the work's popularity over at least two hundred years. Norton is noted in the company of Chaucer, Surrey, and Wyatt in Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (published in 1570), and the *Ordinal* opens Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (a 1652 collection of English alchemical works),⁶ thus receiving "pride of place" over Chaucer, whose work also appears in the volume.⁷ The *Theatrum*'s full title describes the contents as "Severall Poeticall Pieces of our Famous *English Philosophers*, who have written the *Hermetique Mysteries* in their owne Ancient Language." Although "ancient Language" could well refer to alchemical jargon, Ashmole seems to imply the "ancient" language of Middle English. Several collections of Latin alchemical works had been printed beginning in the late 16th century, but Ashmole's *Theatrum* is the first printed collection of such works written in English.⁸ Clearly, Ashmole saw a value (and a potential audience) by the mid-17th century for a collection of alchemical literature based on its national and poetical language—rather than merely its subject matter or intended purpose.

Despite this somewhat prestigious early history, Norton's *Ordinal* is virtually unknown in English medieval literary studies today. Discussions of the *Ordinal* focus primarily on Norton as an alchemist rather than as an English poet writing about alchemy. They outline biographical details of Norton's life and then review, however briefly, his alchemical theory and its techniques. E.J. Holmyard, to take one example, notes that the *Ordinal* is "written in a lively verse" and, furthermore, "contains much about alchemists and a good deal about furnaces, but is typically vague about the procedure to be followed in effecting transmutations."⁹ Although the Early English

Text Society published John Reidy's critical edition of the *Ordinal* in 1975, not a single scholarly article that focuses specifically and primarily on Norton or his work has been published since then.

For this paper, I have chosen to focus on what Norton says in his *Ordinal* about alchemy in relation to England and to written language and, thereby, illustrate Norton's awareness of himself not only as an alchemist but as an English poet. I believe that although Norton's popularity may have been due in part to his subject matter—who could resist the possibility of obtaining the Philosopher's Stone?—his value as an example of a late medieval writer comes not from the subject of alchemy alone, but from his discussion of language, its potential and its limitations, within the country and language of his people. Norton does not intend to write a book about language, at least not according to his stated intention in the Prologue; he sets out to explain the difficult subject of alchemy in accessible language. Nonetheless, Norton's comments on language and the attention he draws to himself as a poet are inextricably linked with his discussion of alchemy.

The English Prologue to the *Ordinal*, begins as follows: “To the honour of god oon in persones þree / this boke is made þat lay-men shuld it se, / And clerkis al-so aftir my decese” (1-3). Thus within the first three lines, Norton has indicated his belief in his God, his audience, and his text, all of which, he implies, will live on after his death. His intention—“I entende to write”—is to teach the “subtile science of holi Alchymye” to a multitude of “commyn peple” through the vernacular or, as he calls it in his Prologue, “plaync & comon speche” (54-58). In the shorter Latin Prologue, presumably meant for the clerks rather than the laymen, Norton indicates that one purpose of his book is to advise kings.¹⁰ He claims, moreover, that the English throne would be adorned with heavenly gifts if the people had trusted in God and that a king who will do so will arrive unexpectedly.¹¹

This rather cryptic suggestion is developed in Book V of the *Ordinal*, in which Norton suggests that an English alchemist (presumably Norton himself) “shuld honour alle englishe grounde,” doing much good for the land through his work (1400). Norton suggests that the sin of princes will delay the good that this alchemist will do (1405-06); however, someday people will see “[t]he holy crosse honouryde both day & nyght” (1419) and, at that time, “[t]his science shal draw towarde the kynge” (1424). Grace will descend on this king and he will then “make ful secrete serche / For this science” (1429-30). According to John Reidy, these passages were developed in a revised version of the work (now lost) to include specific

references to the kings of England.¹² Norton's ambition, it would appear, is to educate both the kings and the multitudes in a science that will benefit all of England.

Norton makes several additional references to England throughout the *Ordinal*. For example, as part of a warning against foolish behaviour, Norton discusses a man who lives near London and desires to build a magnificent bridge over the Thames for "comone ese" (635). The man uses all his goods in this lavish pursuit and he himself eventually wastes away to nothing. Norton, contending that alchemy is worthless without God, uses this story as a critical example of lewd people who believe the false illusions they read in books. Norton also recounts the story of Thomas Dalton, an English alchemist who is eventually imprisoned for refusing to reveal the alchemical secret when requested to do so by another Englishman, John Delves (lines 917 ff). The setting and characters of the *Ordinal*, though often used to illustrate negative aspects of alchemy, are nonetheless places and people familiar to an English audience. In opposition to these examples of the failure of alchemy in England, Norton maintains, as noted above, that with his help (and that of the *Ordinal*) the alchemical secret will be revealed to an English king. This prospect is outlined immediately after a reference to the change of coinage in England (1383). Norton must realise that England's king and people would gain immeasurable wealth and power from the secret of how to produce gold and, more specifically, gold coins.

Norton's stated intention to reveal the "subtile science of holi Alchymye" to the "commyn peple" in "playne & comon speche," however, is matter for rhetorical trepidation in the text. That is, Norton suggests to his reader on several occasions that his act of writing, his attempt to describe something sacred in common language, is daring, even frightening. In one such instance, he claims that the alchemical secret "was nevir bi-fore this day / So trewly discoverede," immediately prays to God that he will not be subject to a penalty for revealing the secret, and then adds, "For I drede sore my penn goith to large" (1179-82). Later, with even more rhetorical flair, he insists, "[M]y hert quakith, my hond is tremeling, / when I write of this most selcouth þing" (2631-32). These emotive statements work to create the impression, directed toward the reader, that the act of writing (and in particular, the act of writing in "playne & comon speche"), and not necessarily the practice of alchemy, is dangerous and all the more admirable because of the risk taken.

Granted, such emotive sentiments can be considered part of medieval convention. Take, for example, these more familiar lines: "And now my penne, allas, with which I write, / Quaketh for drede of that I moste endite."¹³ That is Chaucer, as nar-

rator of *Troilus and Criseyde*, quaking in fear of the need to recount Criseyde's betrayal. On the one hand, such statements create a fictionalised scenario that paints the respective author as constrained by tradition; that is, Chaucer must follow other accounts of Troilus whether he wants to or not, and Norton must (or at least should) follow the protocol of alchemical secrecy. On the other hand, through such conventional rhetoric, both authors draw attention to their writing, and hence to their authorial control over literary tradition, over what is and is not revealed. Thus, even if Norton is merely following convention, that convention is *literary*, and thus he follows in the footsteps of other medieval writers, not just of other alchemists, and thereby draws attention to himself as a writer.

Norton also draws attention to himself as author by signing his work with an acrostic, a rhetorical device whereby, in the case of the *Ordinal*, the initial syllables of the Prologue and the first six books, combined with the first line of the seventh book, form the couplet, "Tomas Norton of Bryseto, / A Perfite Maister ye may hym trowe." Thus even though alchemical tradition commonly found alchemical writers choosing the name of a famous alchemist with which to sign their works (thus contributing to the problem of pseudepigraphy in alchemical literature—that is the problem of works bearing a false title or ascribed to the wrong author),¹⁴ Norton writes himself into his poetry. In unlocking this particular cipher in the *Ordinal*, the reader finds not the Philosopher's Stone, but the poet and his place of residence. The reference to "Bryseto," moreover, specifically links the author and his text with the "englishe grounde" that (as mentioned earlier) is to be honoured.

Other alchemical writers, complains Norton, "hidde this arte that no man fynde it can / Bi theire bokis" (74-5). His focus here is on authors and their books, not on alchemists and alchemy separate from writing. He explains that alchemical tradition involves writing "full darkly":

Al mastirs which write of þis soleyne werke,
Thei made theire bokis to many men ful derk,
In poyses, parabols, & in methaphoris alle-so,
which to scolers causith peyne and wo.... (61-64)

The problem with alchemical books, according to this passage, involves the interpretation of poetry and rhetoric. Again the focus is on poetic language, not on the subject of alchemy per se. But if poems, parables, and metaphors cause "peyne and wo," the reader is left to wonder how Norton's *Ordinal*, which comprises all three,

could shed light on the darkness. Norton, however, claims that his work will compensate for the traditionally “dark” and incomprehensible alchemical works in circulation. He suggests that it is the need for a written vernacular account of alchemy that drives him to write despite the fear and danger:

...[M]y pitee doith me constrayne
 To shew the trouth in few wordis & playne,
 So that ye may fro fals doctryne flee,
 If ye geve credence to this boke & to me. (95-98)

Again, Norton associates himself with his book and demands a privileged position of respect for both author and text in that he sets up a comparison between the *Ordinal* and other written “doctryne,” claiming for the former not only a plain and common language, but truth amidst lies. Indeed, at the beginning of Book IV, Norton states, “To teche yow trouth is myn entent” (1207). As will become clear, Norton blames the failure of the written text, not himself, for the inability to fulfill his stated intentions throughout the *Ordinal*.

The very word “Ordinal” is arguably metaphorical in that its common usage is ecclesiastical, not alchemical. As Norton claims in the Prologue, his *Ordinal* is

The crede michi, the standarde perpetuall;
 For like as the Ordinalle to prestis settith owte
 The seruyce of the dayes as þei go abowte,
 So of al the bokis vnorderide in Alchymye
 Theffectis be here set owte ordirlye. (128-32)

The *Ordinal*, then, is a compilation of, or a complement to, other works. The title metaphor represents the promise of an order within the disorder of alchemical literature. Presumably, he intends his book, albeit written “[i]n poyses, parabols, & in methaphoris,” *not* to cause scholars pain, but to alleviate that difficulty by helping them with the interpretation of other texts. Thus, despite his complaints about alchemy's traditional lack of clarity, he advises his reader to read other works in conjunction with his own. Indeed, he concludes his Prologue with the following recommendation: “But the best thing that ye do shalle / Is to rede many bokis, & then this with-alle” (179-80). This suggestion ensures Norton a place amongst the other authors and within the alchemical literary tradition. However, this suggestion, if it is to be carried out, also requires of his readers the ability to read Latin alchemical works. It would appear

that the *Ordinal*, though written “in englishe blonte & rude” is not written solely “to teche a multitude / Of rude peple” (3089-90), but that Norton values English for pedagogical use by educated English scholars.

He speaks at one point of the works of four other famous alchemists¹⁵ and notes that they did not agree with each other concerning the necessary proportions of alchemical ingredients; nonetheless, “of theym iij. ye shalle / Haue perfyte knowlich, but not of oon haue alle” (1592-94). In other words, no single text provides all the knowledge; one must read each as a complement to the other. As to the role of the *Ordinal* in this ongoing deferral from one text to another, Norton explains,

...whate is necessarie that thei lefte owte
 This boke shewith it withowten dowte;
 wherfore this litille boke, the Ordynalle,
 Is in Alchymye the complement of alle. (1377-80)

The *Ordinal* has moved from being called “the standarde perpetuall” in the Prologue to the “complement of alle” by the end of Book IV. Finally, within twenty lines of the end of the book, Norton again asserts a functional purpose for the *Ordinal* with respect to its relationship to the other books:

The autours fornamede, with this boke of myne,
 Shewith of alchymye all the doctryne,
 If ye complecte their sentencis all
 Not bi opinyon, but aftire this ordynall;
 For in this ordynall, I sett yow from all dowte,
 Is no thyng sett wronge, nothir on poynt lafte owte. (3077-82)

The *Ordinal*, then, must be used to compile (and, presumably, as a consequence, to understand) all of the alchemical doctrine in other works. In this sense, it acts as a vernacular literary critique in its intention to help the reader interpret a body of Latin literature. Thus the privileged status of the *Ordinal* is maintained both in claiming its uniqueness as an English text of “playne & comon speche” and in claiming its practical role within, and contribution to, a multi-lingual alchemical literary tradition.

The would-be alchemist, we learn in Book III, is meant to interpret an author’s written language as a code. Breaking this linguistic code would be the equivalent of understanding an alchemical secret. Norton connects the idea of deciphering a secret

language with that of interpreting the subject through several books:

For gretly downtid euermore alle suche
 þat of þis science thei migthe write to moche;
 Eueryche of þem tagthe but oon poynt or tweyne,
 wherby his felows were made certeyne
 how þat he was to theyme a brodyre,
 For eueryche of þem wel vndirstode þat odir.
 Alle-so thei wrote not euery man to teche,
 But to shew them-silfe bi a secrete speche.
 Truste not therfore to redyng of oon boke,
 But in many auctours werkis ye most loke.... (1089-98)¹⁶

The quest to decipher the written code ensures the perpetuation of alchemical literary tradition. Indeed, this quest even ensures the perpetuation of books, such as the *Ordinal*, that make the claim of aiding literary interpretation. Norton sees his book as one that the reader will turn to repeatedly in this process, advising that the *Ordinal* should not be read once, “But xx. tymes it wolde be ouer-sayne; / For it conteynyth ful ponderose sentence, / Al be it that it fawte forme of eloquence” (176-78). This is one of two places in which Norton says something negative about his own poetic style.¹⁷ Then again, even Chaucer occasionally claims that he does not know how to write well and, in doing so, draws attention to his rhetorical skill.

Norton advises near the beginning of his Prologue that the reader “wisely con-sydire þe flowris of this booke” (16). This must be a reference to Norton’s use of rhetorical “flowers” or figures. He thereby suggests the importance he places on rhetorical construction and the necessity, on the part of the reader, to investigate the language of the *Ordinal* in order to discern its secrets. Thus, despite making contentions that he writes for “commyn peple” in “playne & comon speche” and despite the ongoing promises that the *Ordinal* will assist with an understanding of alchemical texts, Norton does not absolve the reader from all responsibility for interpretation. Indeed, he admits throughout his work that certain elements of language can only be understood by certain people. Knowledge often remains privileged because of the language in which it is written, and the vernacular is just as capable as Latin of being accessible to only a certain, educated segment of the population. In the case of Norton’s *Ordinal*, however, the knowledge is privileged and accessible to those people who can read English, rather than only to those who can read Latin.¹⁸

In the midst of Book V, the longest and most technical section of the *Ordinal*, Norton feels the need to apologise for his use of unfamiliar technical language:

I pray yow lay-men haue me excuside
 Thofe such wordis be not with you vside;
 I most vse them, for alle Auctours affermys
 how euery science hath his propre termys. (1727-30)

Thus although the book is written “þat lay-men shuld it se” (2), Norton again acknowledges that, in fact, it will not be understood by all laymen. He asserts his right, as author, to use technical vocabulary where necessary. But as Jane Hilberry says of Chaucer, Norton also “succeeds in transmuting the language of alchemy into poetry” (442). And again, as with Chaucer, the “propre termys” for this pursuit are enumerated in English; Norton thereby acknowledges the suitability of English for both poetic and “scientific” discourse. As Lee Patterson has argued, “What alchemy provided, in short, was a way to be an intellectual. And with the translation of these texts into the vernacular...we can see alchemy as one of the forces that undermined the clerical monopoly upon learning.”¹⁹ In his acknowledged and specific use of technical language in the vernacular, Norton calls for an English intellectual readership.

Is it possible, then, that with the help of Norton’s *Ordinal* the educated reader could understand alchemy, even if the layman could not? To answer this question we need to look at Norton’s emphasis on the direct relationship between precise language and the inherent usefulness of the *Ordinal*. He insists, “for drede of goddis curs” that no one “[c]hange my writyng” since “changing of some oone sillable / May make this boke vnprofitable” (170-74). This passage eliminates the possibility that any translation of the book out of English could reveal or help to reveal alchemical secrets.²⁰ It also means, however, that a single scribal error would immediately diminish the book’s effectiveness. Since scribal errors are inevitable or, at least, always possibly present in any copy of this text, the possibility that the text is flawed and therefore worthless for its intended purpose is written into the text. Even an educated reader has no guarantee that the written text is not flawed. Norton, in acknowledging a failure of writing into his written text, displaces the blame for the failure of the *Ordinal* to accomplish his stated intention of revealing the alchemical secret.

Norton also acknowledges the possibility of the failure of writing in terms of its potential misinterpretation: “Many men ween which doith them rede / That thei

vndirstond, when thei [do] not in dede" (1675-76). He states unabashedly his belief that some alchemists are deluded and then adds, "Els thei seid so that scolers shulde not fynde / The secrete mixtions of Elementalle kynde" (2359-60). In other words, they lie to protect the alchemical secret. Moreover, he criticises people who take everything they read as fact:

Thei lewdly beleve euery conclusion,
Be it nevir so fals Illusion;
If it in boke writen thei may fynde,
Thei weene it trew þei be so lewde of mynde. (687-90)

Writing, then, can be deceptive on multiple levels. Not only is the reader apt to misinterpret the author's meaning, but the author might purposely mislead the reader. Thus Norton's intentions as stated in his Prologue ("I entende to write") and in Book IV ("To teche yow trowth is myn entent") cannot be trusted. That is, the reader can neither assume a proper understanding of the intention nor assume that Norton, as author, is telling the truth. As the *Ordinal* progresses the authenticity of these stated intentions is undermined by Norton *as author*.

Norton discusses an additional linguistic problem through reference to Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*:

And chawcer rehersith how titanos is þe same,
In þe Canon his tale, saynge: whate is thuse
But Quod Ignotum per magis ignocius?
That is to say, whate may this be
But vnknow bi more vnknow named is she? (1162-66)

This passage is particularly interesting in that it quotes a Latin saying from a predominantly vernacular text. Norton does not excerpt an English quotation from the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, but a Latin one, thereby emphasising his own vernacular in the translation of the Latin saying (and, incidentally, associating himself with Chaucer). The excerpt is part of a section near the end of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in which Plato and a disciple are discussing the name of the "privee stoon" (line 1452). The disciple wants to know the name of the Stone, but Plato informs him that philosophers are sworn not to reveal it: "Ne in no booke it write in no manere" (l. 1466). Both the names "Titanos" and "Magnasia" are apparently "'cover names,' intended to conceal the identity of the materials."²¹ Immediately after the passage in

which Norton quotes Chaucer, he gives examples of names for Magnesia in other languages (*Ordinal*, ll. 1167-72). The idea here is that the same term—one that really cannot be explained since it is “unknown”—is called various things in various languages. Thus neither the use of Latin nor of “playne & comon speche” can guarantee that the reader will receive enough accurate knowledge in a written text to understand alchemical secrets.

It is perhaps not surprising then that, along with the emphasis put on the importance of reading other texts and writing his own, Norton also suggests that alchemy should not be written at all. Alchemical secrets, ironically (or perhaps inevitably), are not to be written down. Norton’s master explains this aspect of the alchemical code:

Wherefore it is nede that with-in shorte space
 We speke to-gedire, & see face to face;
 If y shuld write I shulde my foialte breke,
 Therefore mowthe to mowthe I most nedis speke. (849-52)

Here (and in a similar passage earlier in the *Ordinal*²²) Norton privileges speech over writing for the transference of alchemical knowledge; yet he is privileging writing over speech in writing his book. It is this privileging that works to entice the reader, but it is also this privileging that allows Norton to escape the necessity of ever revealing the alchemical secret in writing. That is, the reader is lured by Norton’s apparently daring intention to write the alchemical “trouth” in English for the multitudes, but Norton remains secure in his knowledge as a poet that he will never need to reveal that truth since, even if he knows it (or thinks he does), written language can never reproduce the ultimate truth of the Philosopher’s Stone. And, in light of Norton’s earlier comment on alchemists writing “ful derk,” his “face to face” may be a biblical allusion to Paul’s, “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face” (I Corinthians 13:12). Norton, whose first and last words of the *Ordinal* are “To the honour of god” and “honour to God of hevyn” respectively, could well be stating his belief in one true master and one ultimate truth beyond the written language.

In Norton’s discussion of the replication in above-ground vessels of the under-ground conditions that enable minerals to grow, he admits, “this is no parfite simylitude” (392). That is, human invention cannot perfectly replicate nature. Norton recognises that the same is true of language: the Stone cannot be reproduced in poetry because there is no “parfite simylitude” between sign and signified. Phillip

Pulsiano in his article "Redeemed Language and the Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*" argues that the poem functions as "Chaucer's...workshop for exploring the breakdown of language as a vehicle for truth and the acquisition of knowledge."²³ He contends that in ending *Troilus and Criseyde* with "the verbal icon of the Trinity," Chaucer reminds his audience of Christ as Word and thus of the possibility in Christ of "a true correspondence" between sign and signified, "between word and intention."²⁴ In the *Ordinal* we find the following lines amidst a discussion of the Philosopher's Stone:

Of all kyndis contrarie brogth to oon accorde,
 Knytt by ye doctrine of god oure blesside lorde;
 Wherbie of metallis is made transmutacion
 Not only in colour, but transsubstanciacion. (2517-20)

John Reidy in the introduction to his edition of the *Ordinal* points out that, in this passage, "Norton goes further than other alchemists" in describing the effect of the Stone as transubstantiation (p. lxxiv). Certainly, further exploration of Norton's work, along the lines of that granted to Chaucer by Pulsiano, is warranted. We have in the *Ordinal* another source for the exploration of the relationships among writing, truth, and knowledge.

Thomas Norton contends in the *Ordinal* that even an English text cannot reveal the ultimate truth; only God can do that. This conclusion, however, does not diminish Norton's status as an English poet and intellectual. He has still managed to make accessible a complex technical subject to the English people for their analysis. His vernacular text, though failing in its stated intention to reveal alchemical truth, nonetheless works in its practice to teach an English audience to appreciate alchemy as an intellectual and spiritual discipline to be pursued with the help of God. The *Ordinal* is, after all, the "crede michi, the standarde perpetuall," an order to be followed until "[t]he holy crosse" is "honouryde both day & nyght" and alchemy "shal draw towarde the kyng" (128, 1419, 1424).

University of Western Ontario

Notes

1 Mark J. Bruhn, "Art, Anxiety, and Alchemy in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 33.3 (1999): 288-315, p. 308.

2 Jane Hilberry, "And in oure madnesse everemoore we rave': Technical Language in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 21.4 (1987): 435-43, p. 435.

3 George Ripley's *The Compound of Alchemy* was written in 1471.

4 Geoffrey Chaucer, *General Prologue, Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), line 798.

5 Thomas Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy*, ed. John Reidy, Early English Text Society o.s. ** 272 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3089-91. Subsequent line references to this work appear in parentheses after the text.

6 See John Reidy's introduction to Norton's *Ordinal*, p. xli. Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* is available in facsimile from Kessinger Publishing's Rare Esoteric Books (Kila, Montana).

7 E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (London: Penguin, 1957), p. 185.

8 For further information on printed collections, see Andrea De Pascalis, *Alchemy: The Golden Art, The Secrets of the Oldest Enigma* (Rome, Italy: Gremese International, 1995), p. 75.

9 Holmyard, 189. For another example, see Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 41-42.

10 The Latin Prologue reads: "Regibus consilium, doctrina prelatis" (6). This line is translated in Ashmole's 1652 edition as "Instructing priests, advising kings."

11 The Latin Prologue reads: "Propter peccata tardantur munera grata. / Sepe reges anglie decorasset hec res, / Firma si in domino fuisset eorum spes" (28-30) and "Tunc regi iusto fulgenti mente decora, / Grata superuenient qua non sperabitur hora" (39-40). These passages are translated in Ashmole's 1652 edition as "For sin protracts the gifts of heaven. / These had adorn'd the English Throne / If they had trusted God alone" and "So to a just, and glorious king, / Most goodly graces shall descend, / When least look'd for: to crown his end."

12 See Reidy's Introduction, pp. xxxviii-xl. Reidy bases his theories on an alchemical text of Norton's great-grandson, Samuel Norton, who discusses his grandfather's work.

13 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 4.13-14.

14 For further information about pseudepigraphy, see De Pascalis, pp. 76-77.

15 Raymond, Bacon, Albert, and Anaxagoras (1592-93).

16 See also, "As I seid bifore, the mastirs of this arte / Euerych of theyme disclo-side but a parte; / wherfore thofe ye perceuyd theym as ye wolde, / yet ye can not ordre & Ioyn theyme as ye shuld" (1213-16).

17 See also Norton's comment that his book "appere in homly wise compiled" (136).

18 Reidy (in his Introduction, p. xxvii) quotes a passage from Ashmole's *Theatrum* in which Ashmole explains that Michael Maier, from Germany, specifically learned English in order to translate Norton's *Ordinal* into Latin.

19 Lee Patterson, "Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 25-57, p. 54.

20 I note here that, ironically, the first printing of Norton's *Ordinal* in 1618 was a Latin translation. See Reidy's Introduction, pages xxvi-xxviii. The first English edition was Ashmole's in 1652.

21 See Larry Benson's footnote to lines 1454-55 of Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

22 "Al-so no man cowde yet this science reche / But if god sende him a master hym to teche, / For it is so worshipfulle & so selcowth, / That it most nede be taght fro mouth to mouth" (215-18).

23 Phillip Pulsiano, "Redeemed Language and the Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (New York: Syracuse UP, 1989), pp. 153-74, p. 154.

24 Pulsiano, p. 168. Pulsiano moves through a discussion of Augustine and the possibility of the redemption of language through the Incarnation.