
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Nejeschleba, Tomáš, and Jiří Michalík, eds. Latin Alchemical Literature of Czech Provenance

Sergius Koderá

Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086055ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29547>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Koderá, S. (2018). Review of [Nejeschleba, Tomáš, and Jiří Michalík, eds. Latin Alchemical Literature of Czech Provenance]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(1), 221–223. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29547>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2018

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Nejeschleba, Tomáš, and Jiří Michalík, eds.

Latin Alchemical Literature of Czech Provenance.

Olomouc (CZ): Centre for Renaissance Texts / Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2015. Pp. 186. ISBN 978-80-244-4851-0 (paperback) 257 CZK.

Writing the histories of esoteric movements requires a penchant for mystery, and the mindset of a Sherlock Holmes. This seems to be especially true with research on the lives and works of early modern European alchemists. Continuously in search of funding and laboratories, these elusive personalities frequently published their texts under pseudonyms; while leading the itinerant lives of early modern scholars, they were crossing confessional divides. They sometimes had to hastily leave their abodes as a result of being vilified as heretics or as charlatans, even by their fellow alchemists. What adds to these difficulties is that the bi(bli)ographies of some east central European alchemists have to be traced in documents that require knowledge not only of Latin, Greek, French, Italian, or English sources and scholarly literature but also profound and admirable (and often all too rare) command of Early High German, Czech, Polish, and Hungarian texts.

In the volume of essays under review it is particularly Rafał Prinke's contribution (published in English) that reveals the special strengths of the collection. For the most part keenly aware of the latest international developments in the field, Prinke leads the reader through a wealth of new material. His micro-historic reconstruction of the details of contributions of Michael Sendivogius (1566–1636) traces the latter's various homes in Prague and Olomouc; here the alchemist in all probability wrote his *De lapide philosophorum* (1604), one of the most influential works on the topic (143–44, 131).

Another outstanding example of detective work in this collection is Jiří Michalík's text on Wenceslaus Lavinius of Ottenfeld (1550–1602). Throughout his life, Lavinius had a strong connection to the Czech brethren; after studying at the universities of Padua, Paris, and Geneva, he eventually graduated as an Oxford doctor in 1587; sometime after 1594, Lavinius opened a pharmacy in Prague. At the same time, he was extremely well connected to the world of politics, diplomacy, and the clergy, that is, to the intellectual élite at the court of Rudolf II. It is thus no wonder that Lavinius became involved in the increasingly harsh religious conflict on the eve of the Thirty Years War. And Lavinius was a practising alchemist (one is tempted to say, on the side of his many other

activities). He was in close contact with Oswald Croll (1560–1609), the leading Paracelsian doctor of his day. Yet, and significantly for our topic, Croll believed that Lavinius was a charlatan (159). Reputation in alchemy thus seems to have been as volatile as the fortunes of contemporary courtiers. The alchemists who are the protagonists of this collection of essays become alive in their efforts to hold a subtle balance between charlatanry and messianic ideas—a mindset generally characterizing the broad and (notoriously vaguely defined) fields of interest of the alchemical endeavour that was embedded in the intellectual and cultural environment in which it was thriving. One need only think of John Dee.

The latter is the protagonist György Szöny's contribution, which is actually framed by a diatribe against Newman and Principe's thesis about the practical and non-esoteric objectives of early modern alchemy; Szöny's polemics thus eclipses what is perhaps the most interesting branch that sprouted from this approach: experimental alchemy (Bruce T. Moran, Pamela H. Smith, Ursula Klein, and Wolfgang Lefevre to name but a few more recent authors). Szöny's polemics only weakly intertwines with his meandering account of Dee's exploits in Poland and the Czech lands, and his discussion of the *Monas hieroglyphica*. On the whole, this contribution would have merited more careful editing. Here is one example of a significant omission and misquote, which in this reviewer's opinion brings the entire debate about practical versus esoteric currents in alchemy to the point: on page 124, Szöny gives a translation of a text by Stephanus Weszprémi, published in Vienna in 1774, in order to corroborate his thesis of the lasting influence and enthusiastic reception of Dee in east central Europe. The quote recounts a series of arduous alchemical experiments that Dee had allegedly conducted in 1584 in the castle of Count Lasky, with the aim to instruct the latter in the art of alchemy; yet Szöny suppresses the last half sentence of the original Latin passage, which he keeps in his own footnote: "et tandem miser novissime omnium turpiter, ut fieri adsolet, delutidur [sic! deluditur]" ("and in [spite of Dee's efforts Lasky was] in the end totally and shamelessly deceived"). The slip of language is understandable (dilute/delude) in the quote, in that it comes from the pen of a well-versed historian of alchemy. Even so, the last half sentence evidences the opposite of what Szöny seeks to prove, insofar as it also evidences the basic conundrum of the history of alchemy and the polemics of this contribution: namely, the ambivalent attitude towards what Pamela Smith has labelled so aptly as "the business of alchemy."

A few more qualifications are due. Readers would benefit from a more detailed introduction to the labyrinthine topics of the seven essays; the editing of the contributions should have been more careful; moreover, some of the texts do not directly address the topic announced by the book's title. This is true of John. A. Norris, who writes on the *Bermannus* (1530) by Georgius Agricola (1494–1500), and of Martin Žemla's contribution on Valentin Weigel (1533–88), who was not an alchemist. In this vein, one also has to insert Jakub Hlaváček's well-informed contribution on the modification of Paracelsian alchemical principles in Heinrich Kunrath's (1560–1605) *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1609), a text that was published in Hanau, Germany, and Ivo Purš's interesting contribution on the meaning of central perspective in the *Amphitheatrum*. Yet the contributions explore an important aspect of early modern alchemy that otherwise is only implicitly on the agenda of this collection of essays: namely, the many and irregular overlaps, interferences, and shared territories between contemporary theosophy, Christian theology, Rosicrucianism, metallurgy, and the arts of distillation and mining. Viewed as a social (and hence political) practice, the boundaries of alchemy seem to have been as porous as the borders of the various European countries between which the protagonists of the volume seem to have moved quite freely and with great dexterity: Italy, France, England, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia. This reviewer believes that one should rather conceptualize early modern alchemy as a European movement; however, in spite of the caveats in this review, he does wish to congratulate the editors for their work.

SERGIUS KODERA
Universität Wien

O'Banion, Patrick J., ed.

This Happened in My Presence: Moriscos, Old Christians, and the Spanish Inquisition in the Town of Deza, 1569–1611.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. Pp. lxxx, 184 + 5 ill., 3 maps. ISBN 978-1-4426-3513-5 (paperback) \$26.95.

Patrick O'Banion's *This Happened in My Presence: Moriscos, Old Christians, and the Spanish Inquisition in the Town of Deza, 1569–1611* makes available