

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 11 : An interlude and summary.

After some difficult and lengthy lessons it is time to reflect and take stock of our journey into the world of alchemical texts, so this lesson, you will be glad to hear, will be mercifully short.

We have through the past ten lessons looked at the different types of alchemical texts. These are, however, merely broad categories and we could have looked at other types of text.

For a first example, there are the so called Rosicrucian alchemical works which appeared in the second and third decades of the 17th century. A rush of such texts appeared in response to the publication of the *Fama* and the *Confessio Fraternitatis*, in 1614 and 1615 and to the alchemical allegory the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* which was published in 1616. Many of the Rosicrucian alchemical works which emerged in the 20 years following this, were written in German and have not yet been translated into English so it will be difficult for you to adequately investigate these at present, but you should be aware of this important class of alchemical writings. In essence they are usually works of philosophical alchemy, and so could be studied under that category of texts, but they should be contained within the context of the Rosicrucian publications. These were a tightly knit group of writings, the authors of which were aware of each others work. So in order to read a work of Rosicrucian alchemy, we must always remain aware that it stands in a relationship, a context of interlinked texts. It does not stand alone but was part of a rapidly evolving movement, which just as quickly faded into oblivion. Within a generation these works had disappeared, and though some later writers, say in Britain in the 1650's, or again in the later part of the 18th century, alluded to them, essentially the Rosicrucian alchemical writings burnt themselves out and disappeared from history till the modern period when the esotericists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries revived them. These modern writings and ideas about the earlier Rosicrucian texts are, of course, very contrived and arise out of a twentieth century mindset, often romanticising and elevating the material far beyond its true nature.

Another interesting tightly knit group of alchemical texts appeared in the mid 18th century. These arose out of the Golden and Rosy Cross, a German Masonic group which united freemasonic ideas with alchemy. The members of these specialist lodges were encouraged to see things through an alchemical philosophy, and a number of books appeared to articulate these ideas. Again, as with the Rosicrucian alchemical texts most of these works were written in German and very few have been translated into English. If you are trying to read one of these Golden and Rosy Cross alchemical works, it is important to see them against the background out of which they emerged and also contextualise them with others of their group. This group of texts was short lived and did not survive beyond the end of the 18th century.

We can also consider the books of distillation as a class of works which influenced alchemical texts, though they are primarily works describing the craft and techniques of distilling. You will have no problem understanding these texts as they are entirely straightforward. A fine example is John French's *The Art of Distillation* of 1651, which you will find on my web site. It would be a good idea to read at least a bit of this in order to see what this class of books were about. They dealt entirely with distillation as a craft process, the distilling of oils from plants and so on, and were the basis of the chemical industry of their time. Most of these distillers were not interested in alchemy as such but merely in making various chemical products which they could sell, however, alchemists were interested in such works and the books of distillation certainly influenced alchemical writers in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Again we have not mentioned alchemical poetry as a class of writings. There are many alchemical poems. Few can stand as good or even acceptable poetry. Mostly they are really just prose written in clumsy rhymed verse. It is probably best merely treat these poems as texts rather than put them into a separate class of works. Few of them deal with simple practical alchemy, though some are coded practical alchemical texts. Others are philosophical and theoretical, allegorical or spiritual and it will be best to view them within those broad categories. We will leave it up to the scholars to explore alchemical poetry as a separate class of alchemical material.

There are other small interlinked groups of works, which need to be read as a class of writings rather than individually, but we now have identified sufficient classes of alchemical works in order for us to read almost all alchemical texts in a context. Further classifying is unnecessary for our purposes here.

I have confession to make about these classifications we have been examining. Not all alchemical writings stuck to a single type. Some works clearly describe practical alchemical experiments then suddenly shift into an account of the author's philosophical theory about alchemy. Others could start out as a coded practical work then suddenly insert an allegorical section. So we must become aware that some alchemical authors could use these different and distinct forms of alchemical writing even within the same work. This is confusing at first, but once you have some further experience in reading texts you will find it quite easy to shift gear, as it were, and read a section of a work in a different way than you have the other parts of the book. It is this uninhibited creative exploration of the subject that these alchemists undertook, that makes alchemical writings so fascinating. Alchemists often played games with their material, seeing how far they could push the boundaries.

From this point on our study course shifts into a new format. Now we have some understanding of the different ways that alchemists wrote and the different intentions of their writings, we can move on to explore a number of texts in detail. We will be surgically inspecting a number of texts, by looking at the text paragraph by paragraph. I will present a reading of the text that remains as close as possible to the original and yet tries to reveal the meaning. Here we will be reading the meaning out of the text, almost reading it literally. You will find that this is the most secure and solid way for making any sense out of a work. It is much easier for the modern mind to deceive itself by reading meaning into a text, than trying to tease the original intention of the author out of the text. You will eventually find this to be a powerful discipline, though at first it might seem a bit banal and

prosaic. But unless you are able and willing to do this, you merely read what you want into a text and rather than gaining a new insight into an alchemical text, you just find your own views reflected back to you, probably derived from reading 20th century esotericists, depth psychologists and new age writers. If that is what you enjoy then read and take delight in that modern material, but if you want to penetrate into and appreciate the mysteries that alchemical writers were dealing with in their books, you must read the meaning out of them. The final part of this course will exhaustively demonstrate just how this can be done.

Please now take some time to review what has been presented in the previous ten lessons. Once you have an overview of the nature of alchemical writings, you will be able to proceed into the in-depth look at some of these texts that will be presented in the second half of this course.