

Establishing the Canon: George Ripley and his Alchemical Sources*

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George Ripley, Canon of Bridlington (*ca.* 1415 to *ca.* 1490) was one of England's most famous alchemists, whose alchemical *opera* attracted study and commentary throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and were printed and translated both in England and abroad. Yet Ripley's frequently baffling texts have proved resistant to scholarly interpretation. This paper attempts to unravel some of Ripley's alchemical theories and practice, firstly by identifying his major sources, and secondly by gauging his response to these texts. For instance, although Ripley's interest in the corpus of alchemical texts pseudonymously attributed to Ramon Lull is well documented, it transpires that his best known work, the *Compound of Alchemy*, or *Twelve Gates*, is actually based not on a Lullian work, but on a Latin treatise that Ripley attributed to the little-known alchemist, Guido de Montanor. Further clues to Ripley's alchemical thought can be obtained by considering his handling of a potential conflict between his two authorities, Lull and Guido. The resulting insights into Ripley's alchemy provide an instrument for assessing which of Ripley's pseudoepigraphic works can be truly called "canonical".

Introduction

George Ripley, Canon of Bridlington (*ca.* 1415 to *ca.* 1490), ranks among the most influential alchemical authorities of the early modern period, his works attracting some of the keenest minds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Later practitioners were vocal in their admiration: the Elizabethan alchemist Thomas Charnock praised Ripley in couplets in the sixteenth century, while George Starkey, writing as the adept Eirenaeus Philalethes, constructed new treatises around his works in the seventeenth. Ripley was studied by John Dee, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton, and his principal *opera* circulated vigorously in print and manuscript, both in England and on mainland Europe. The seventeenth-century antiquary Elias Ashmole published

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many of his attributed works, and echoed the praises of Ripley's continental editor: "A worthy *Author* without exception, who is diligently studied by the lovers of *Chimistry*."¹

It is therefore surprising, given Ripley's undoubted impact on later practitioners of alchemy, that little attempt has yet been made to determine his own sources and authorities, or to clarify the nuances of his alchemical thought. For instance, while Ripley's interest in the alchemical corpus of pseudo-Ramon Lull has often been remarked, there has been no systematic evaluation of Ripley's relationship with this corpus, or how he reconciled these challenging texts with other authorities of the period.² Through close reading of archival material, however, it is possible to gain a clearer sense not only of Ripley's own thought, but also of the theoretical and practical problems presented by his sources, which Ripley would attempt to resolve.

George Ripley was a Canon Regular of St. Mary's Priory at Bridlington in Yorkshire, who lived from the first quarter of the fifteenth century and died in or around 1490. The sole contemporary reference to his life, other than the internal evidence of his writings, is from a single papal letter of 1458–1459, concerning "George Ryphey . . . a canon of the Augustinian monastery or priory of Bitzidlington . . . in the diocese of York." Here, Ripley is granted the right to leave his priory "and to dwell for seven years in an university, even without the realm of England, and study theology," while holding *in commendam* benefices, on the proviso that he return to his priory at the end of the period.³ Whether or not he ever returned, Ripley seems to have made good use of his student years. He was to enjoy one of the most successful posthumous careers of any English alchemist, and to receive that highest of chymical compliments — the attribution of a large number of pseudoepigraphic works.

These spurious works, coupled with the accretion of several persistent legends, make Ripley a difficult figure to study.⁴ Few manuscripts survive from his lifetime, and even fewer bear his name. Some of the works for which Ripley is best known, including a short poem, the "Vision," are not found earlier than the sixteenth century, while others (including "The Mistery of Alchemists," and the famous Ripley Scroll verses) appear to have been linked with Ripley as a matter of convenience

¹ Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (London, 1652), 458. In his preface to Ripley's collected works, Ludwig Combach had hailed his author as "Autor procul dubio dignus, qui ab amatoribus Chemiae sedulò evolatur" [George Ripley, *Opera omnia chemica, quotquot hactenus visa sunt, quorum aliqua jam primum in lucem prodeunt, aliqua MS. exemplarium collatione à mendis & lacunis repurgata, atque integrati restituta sunt* . . ., ed. Ludwig Combach [Cassellis: typis Jakob Gentschii, impensis Sebald Köhlers, 1649], fol. 6v).

² Among modern scholars, Ripley's exposition of Lullian alchemy is mentioned by: Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. IV: *Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 351–52; Michela Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull* (London: Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, 1989), 23; and Stanton J. Linden, ed., *George Ripley's Compound of Alchemy (1591)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), xxxii–xxxvii.

³ J. A. Twenlow, *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, vol. XI: 1455–1464 (London: HMSO, 1893), 530–31.

⁴ Legends include Ashmole's assertion that Ripley donated £100,000 per annum to the Knights of St. John on Rhodes, which has since become a staple of Ripley biographies (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 458).

wherever doubts existed over authorship.⁵ As a result, of the fifty or so separate works in the Ripley canon, only a handful can be realistically linked with the historical Canon.

Given these murky questions of attribution, for the purposes of this paper I will treat as authentic only the two texts most consistently attributed to Ripley: his famous poem, printed in 1591 as the *Compound of Alchymy . . . Divided into Twelve Gates*, with its associated prefatory material, and his Latin treatise, the *Medulla Alchimiae*. I will approach these works from two angles: firstly, by identifying Ripley's two major sources; and secondly, by investigating what light these can shed on his alchemical thought, specifically by examining his handling of a potential conflict between these authorities. The resulting insights into Ripley's alchemy can then be directed towards evaluating which of the many pseudoepigraphic works can be truly called canonical.

Ripley and Raymond

Both the *Compound* and the *Medulla* — dated by their colophons to 1471 and 1476 respectively — demonstrate the influence of the body of alchemical texts attributed to the Majorcan philosopher and mystic Ramon Lull (1232–1316). Ripley's fame as an alchemist rests in part on his clear and practical exposition of pseudo-Lull — or, as Ripley calls him, “Raymond.” Although the historical Lull denied the possibility of alchemy, over 120 alchemical texts are pseudonymously ascribed to him, virtually all composed after his death, between the early fourteenth century and the seventeenth, and espousing a variety of alchemical doctrines. As Michela Pereira has demonstrated, some of these works were circulating in England by the start of the fifteenth century, while according to its colophon, the earliest, the *Testamentum*, was translated into Latin in England.⁶

The influence of Lullian alchemy, with its emphasis on contrary qualities — thick and thin, hot and cold, heavy and light — is evident throughout much of the alchemical poetry produced in England during the fifteenth century, including several of those works later attributed to Ripley.⁷ Ripley's own connection with Raymond

⁵ Even Thomas Norton's famous alchemical poem, the *Ordinall of Alchemy*, appears as “George Ripley's Ordinale Secretorum” in Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.38. For the difficulty of attributing authorship to Middle English alchemical poems, including the “Mystery of Alchemists” and the Ripley Scroll verses, see Anke Timmerman, “The Circulation and Reception of a Middle English Alchemical Poem: The Verses upon the Elixir and the Associated Corpus of Alchemica” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2006).

⁶ Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull*, 3, 22–23.

⁷ Specific texts and doctrines associated with pseudo-Lullian alchemy are discussed by: Thorndike, *History of Magic*, vol. IV, 3–64; Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull*; Pereira, *L'oro dei filosofi: saggio sulle idee di un alchimista del Trecento* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1992); Pereira, “Prima Materia. Echi aristotelici e avicenniani nel *Testamentum* pseudolulliano,” in *Aristoteles Chemicus. Il IV Libro dei Meteorologica nella tradizione antica e medievale*, ed. C. Viano (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia, 2002), 145–64; and Pereira, “Vegetare seu transmutare. The vegetable soul and pseudo-Lullian alchemy,” in Fernando Domínguez Reboiras, Pere Villalba Varneda and Peter Walter, eds., *Arbor Scientiae: der Baum des Wissens von Ramon Lull. Akten des Internationalen Kongresses aus Anlaß des 40-jährigen Jubiläums des Raimundus-Lullus-Instituts der Universität Freiburg i. Br.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 93–119. For the pseudo-Lullian influence on English alchemical poetry, see Robert M. Schuler, ed., *Alchemical Poetry 1575–1700: From Previously Unpublished Manuscripts* (New York: Garland, 1995), xxix.

was so well established that the editor of his *Opera omnia chemica* (1649), Ludwig Combach, devoted the larger part of his introduction not to Ripley, but to Lull, situating Ripley primarily as an expositor of pseudo-Lullian alchemy.⁸ In the words of Elias Ashmole, translating Combach's encomium, Ripley "hath great Affinity with the Writings of *Lully*, insomuch that the one explaineth the other."⁹

However, Ripley was preoccupied more with the practical dimensions of pseudo-Lullian alchemy than with its complex theory. Unlike another Lullian commentator of the fifteenth century, Christopher of Paris, Ripley seems, for instance, to have been uninterested in the complicated alphabets and circular diagrams found in the *Testamentum* and other Lullian works. The only circular figure associated with the Ripley corpus is the "Wheel" printed in Rabbards' 1591 edition of the *Compound*, which differs from the Lullian figures in several respects, notably in the inclusion of Latin and English verses.¹⁰ Rather, Ripley tends to summarise those elements of Lullian theory that are most practically relevant, presenting them alongside advice apparently gleaned from his own experimental practice.

It is impossible to know exactly what proportion of the Lullian corpus Ripley knew, but the influence of many key Lullian texts can be detected in his work, and the *Medulla* helpfully refers to five of them by name. Two of these, the *Libro Mercurio* and the *Alphabeto practico*, are subsections of the earliest pseudo-Lullian text, the *Testamentum*, while another, the *Quaestiones*, forms part of another influential work, the *Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia*.¹¹ Ripley also cites the *Libro transmutatoriae animae*, an alternative title for the *Compendium animae transmutationis metallorum*, and makes extensive use of Raymond's famous

⁸ Ludwig Combach, "Praefatio ad lectorem," in Ripley, *Opera omnia*, fols. 4r–7r. Combach (1590–1657) was a physician at the courts of Landgraf Moritz of Hessen–Kassel and his son, Wilhelm V. He also composed a work on the *Liquor Alkabeſt* (Venice, 1641), and edited several manuscripts belonging to Nicolaus Maius [Bruce T. Moran, *The Alchemical World of the German Court: Occult Philosophy and Chemical Medicine in the Circle of Moritz of Hessen (1572–1632)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991), 75 and 79; Jennifer M. Rampling, "The Universal Solvent: George Ripley and European Alchemy," forthcoming article]. Combach reports that Maius had translated Ripley's "Twelve Gates" into Latin verse for Emperor Rudolf II (Combach, "Praefatio," fol. 7r).

⁹ Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 458.

¹⁰ Ripley refers to his philosophical wheel at several points throughout the *Compound*, including explicit references in "Exaltation," 9 ("Procede dewly as in the figure I have towght the") and the "Recapitulation," 1 ("Dylygently loke thou, and to thy Fygyure attend") (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 180 and 186). Although I have encountered no dated copy earlier than 1539 (Trinity College MS O.2.16, part III, fol. 127v), the Wheel's presence is detectable in copies of the *Compound* dating from the turn of the fifteenth century or early sixteenth century (the verses alone in Southampton City Record Office MS SC 15/97, fols. 16v–17r; the whole figure in Edinburgh College of Physicians Ab.4.18 (Erskine V), fol. 28v).

¹¹ Stanton Linden equates the *Alphabeto* with the *Liber secreti secretorum* [Linden, *George Ripley's Compound of Alchemy (1591)*, xxxvii]. However, the distribution of surviving manuscripts of this text, as catalogued by Pereira (*The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull*, 80), includes no English copies, and Ripley's reference seems closer in spirit to the practica of the *Testamentum*, with which the *Liber secreti* was sometimes confused.

letter to King Robert of Sicily, the *Epistola accurtationis*.¹² In the *Compound*, Ripley also refers to Raymond's "Reportory," or *Repertorium*, a short practica.¹³ All these texts can be found, often in compendia of Lullian works, in English manuscripts dating from the mid-fifteenth century and earlier.

The impact of pseudo-Lullian alchemy is particularly evident in the Preface to Ripley's *Compound* and throughout the *Medulla*, both of which refer repeatedly to doctrines found in the Lullian *Testamentum* and elsewhere. References to Raymond in the *Medulla* in fact outnumber those to the philosophers Morienus, Guido de Montanor, Roger Bacon, Avicenna and Geber combined.¹⁴ This, coupled with the Lullian tone of the *Compound*'s Preface, might lead us to expect the same level of influence throughout the *Compound*. Yet this work contains relatively few references to Raymond — seven, in fact, of which five occur in the associated prefatory poems. The main body of the text, the "Twelve Gates," contains only two references, one accompanying a piece of practical information on proportions taken from Raymond's *Repertorium*, and one in the final stanza of the "Recapitulation." Throughout these twelve chapters, references to Lull are in fact balanced by those of another authority, Guido de Montanor, whose influence, I would argue, outweighs even that of Raymond in determining the structure and content of the "Twelve Gates." Although few of Guido's works survive, what remains will enable us to evaluate the significance for Ripley of this obscure alchemist, whose reputation has been all but eclipsed by Ripley's own.

Ripley and Guido

Guido de Montanor must rank as one of the most elusive of alchemical authorities, of whom virtually nothing is known, from the country of his birth to the century in which he was born. The principal commentator on this mysterious adept is, in fact, Ripley himself, who cites him in both the *Compound* and the *Medulla*.

Guido de Montanor, also named in manuscripts as Guidonis Magni de Monte, is at times confused with the fourteenth-century theologian Guido de Monte Rocherii (d. ca. 1350), archbishop of Tours and Reims, and author of a popular pastoral handbook.¹⁵ In fact, there appears to be no evidence to connect these persons, and Guido the alchemist remains maddeningly elusive. Ripley describes him in the *Medulla* as a

¹² Unfortunately, William Salmon's English translation of the *Medulla* in his *Medicina Practica* does not provide a reliable guide to Ripley's sources. Salmon omits two of these references (the *Libro Mercurio* and the *Quaestiones*) from his translation, while interpolating the names of various other pseudo-Lullian works, including the *Clavis* and the *Codicilla*, which are not mentioned in Combach's Latin edition, and which I have not found in earlier manuscript copies [William Salmon, *Medicina Practica, or, Practical Physic: Shewing the Method of Curing the Most Usual Diseases* (London: Printed for T. Howkins in George-Yard in Lombard-street, J. Taylor at the Ship in St. Paul's Church-Yard, and J. Harris at the Harrow in the Poultry, 1692), 643–87].

¹³ "Calcination," 9 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 131).

¹⁴ A fact noted by Linden, *George Ripley's Compound of Alchemy* (1591), xxxv.

¹⁵ See Dorothy Waley Anderson and Annie Anderson, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts in Great Britain and Ireland Dating From Before the XVI Century*, vol. III (Brussels: Maurice Lamertin, 1931), 941.

philosopher of Greece, although the learned alchemist and physician Michael Maier (1568–1622) would later consider him “without doubt a Frenchman.”¹⁶ Aside from Ripley’s works, only a handful of late fifteenth-century manuscripts survive bearing Guido’s name, suggesting that Guido was at work no earlier than the fifteenth century, and probably not that far in advance of Ripley himself. The difficulty of positioning Guido’s output in relation to Ripley’s seems to have taxed scholars as early as the sixteenth century, to judge by a marginal note in one text, dated 1588, suggesting that the two alchemists were contemporaries.¹⁷ Given the paucity of evidence, Ripley’s encomium in the *Compound*, of “Guido de Montayno whose fame goyth wyde,” strikes modern ears with a hollow ring.¹⁸

However, although scarce, some manuscripts do offer tantalising hints of Guido’s vanished fame. One text, succinctly titled *Notabilia Guidonis Montaynor*, survives in a fifteenth-century manuscript.¹⁹ A longer version of this work was printed by Hermann Condeesyanus as *De arte chymica* in 1625, in the first decade of a curious compound publication, the *Harmoniae imperscrutabilis Chymico-Philosophicae* of Condeesyanus (alias Johann Grasshoff) and the *Harmoniae Chymico-Philosophicae* of Johann Rhenanus.²⁰ Neither the manuscript nor the printed version, however, is complete, each containing lengthy passages missing from the other. The *Notabilia* apparently represents extracts taken from a more substantial work, only part of which was, in turn, available to its seventeenth-century editor.²¹

In addition to *De arte chymica*, a number of recipes and other texts connected with Guido circulated throughout the second half of the fifteenth century, and can be traced through a small number of related manuscripts. The *Notabilia* in MS Sloane

¹⁶ “Guido de Montanor, philos. verus fuit, absque dubio Gallus” [Michael Maier, *Symbola Aurae Mensae duodecim nationum* (Frankfurt, 1617; repr. Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1972), 347]. Condeesyanus went further still in stressing Guido’s French connections: “Guido de Montanor, Philosophus verus, authenticus, & abunde experientia chymica imbutus, quem piu imi Graecum fuisse adserunt falso, sine dubio ex Gallico sol fuit oriundus” [Hermann Condeesyanus, *Harmoniae imperscrutabilis Chymico-Philosophicae, sive Philosophorum Antiquorum Consentientium* (Frankfurt: Conradum Eifridum, 1625), 125].

¹⁷ “Guido erat coetaneus Riplaii” (British Library MS Harley 2411, fol. 13r).

¹⁸ “Conjunction,” 8 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 146).

¹⁹ British Library MS Sloane 3744.

²⁰ Condeesyanus, *Harmoniae imperscrutabilis Chymico-Philosophicae*; Johann Rhenanus, *Harmoniae Chymico-Philosophicae, sive Philosophorum Antiquorum Consentium* (Frankfurt: Conradum Eifridum, 1625). Schmieder’s assertion that another tract attributed to Guido, the *Decreta chymica*, was printed in Rhenanus’s section of the work apparently stems from a misreading of *De arte chymica*, since no *Decreta* is recorded in the second decade or elsewhere [Karl Christoph Schmieder, *Geschichte der Alchemie* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1832), 156]. Schmieder’s error seems to be the source of Ferguson’s later reference to a *Decreta chymica* [John Ferguson, *Bibliotheca Chymica: a Catalogue of the Alchemical, Chemical and Pharmaceutical Books in the Collection of the Late James Young of Kelly and Durris*, vol. 2 (Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1906), 100].

²¹ Although Schmieder (*Geschichte der Alchemie*, 156) claimed that the *Thesaurus chymiatricus, oder lange verborgener Schatz der Chymie* (Halle, 1623), attributed to Guido Magni de Monte, was a translation of *De arte chymica*, the two works are in fact different, the former work being entirely practical in content. However, the German text is evidently translated from a Latin work, and given some similarity in the ingredients used, it is not inconceivable that the *Thesaurus chymiatricus* may constitute a lost practica of Guido, perhaps once associated with *De arte chymica*. If so, I have yet to encounter such an association in manuscript.

3744, for instance, is followed by a macaronic selection of recipes in Latin and Middle English, compiled from other works of Guido, as the title, *De operationibus colaturalibus Guydonis Montaynor*, indicates. Several of these recipes turn up in Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 136, a compendium of alchemical recipes and theoretical extracts, where they still bear Guido's name. In addition to the duplicated recipes, the Oxford manuscript contains fragments of other works attributed to Guido but not found elsewhere, including Latin and English recipes and a short account, in English, of the process of calcination. This codex was later owned and annotated by the Elizabethan mathematician and astrologer John Dee.²²

Several of the items contained in the Oxford manuscript recur in another fifteenth-century compendium at Trinity College, Cambridge, suggesting that the codices are connected, either by a common exemplar, or through some relationship between their respective scribes. Both collections contain a short pseudo-Lullian work, the *Secreta Secretorum Raymundi*; another Lullian text with the incipit "Iste est modus de lapide minerale"; and certain Latin recipes.²³ The Trinity manuscript also offers further links with Guido de Montanor, including a set of anonymous alchemical aphorisms, which, a century later, circulated as "Notes taken from Guido."²⁴ Although these later copies contain over forty aphorisms, the Trinity version — to my knowledge, the earliest copy of this work — is unfortunately truncated by the loss of several folios, leaving only the first sixteen aphorisms intact.²⁵ Even without relying on later copies, however, we can infer that these sixteen were extracted from a complete copy of Guido's *De arte chymica*, since several match material found in the *Notabilia*, while including information found in neither the *Notabilia* nor the printed version of *De arte chymica*.

In spite of the limited evidence, the few surviving manuscripts do confirm that a variety of works attributed to Guido de Montanor were indeed circulating in England in the second half of the fifteenth century. Beyond this, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding the level of Guido's influence prior to Ripley, since the *Compound* and *Medulla*, written in the 1470s, may either reflect contemporary interest in Guido, or themselves have provided the catalyst for it.

Close attention to the content of the Guido manuscripts, however, yields further clues as to the relationship between Guido and his English champion. For instance,

²² See Julian Roberts and Andrew G. Watson, eds., *John Dee's Library Catalogue* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1990), 179. Corpus Christi College MS 136 is Roberts and Watson DM 131.

²³ The *Secreta Secretorum Raymundi* corresponds to the text described by Pereira as the *Tractatus de duabus nobilissimis aquis* (Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull*, 85), and by Thorndike and Kibre as the *Compendium artis magice* (TK 559), although neither catalogues the Trinity copy. The text "Iste est modus de lapide minerale" is discussed as a possible pseudo-Lullian work by Thorndike, *History of Magic*, vol. IV, 62–63, and Pereira places it among "Works Occasionally Attributed to Lull" (*The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull*, 86).

²⁴ "Notabilia excerpta de Libro Guidonis de Montaynor" (MS Harley 2411). English copies of this work exist in several manuscripts of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including British Library MSS Sloane 2175 and Sloane 3667, and London, Wellcome Library MS 7095-3. The compilation of the aphorisms is usually attributed to George Ripley, although, given the strong connection between Guido and Ripley, such an ascription is hardly surprising.

²⁵ Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.8.9, fol. 37v.

both the Oxford and Cambridge compendia include instructions on how to build an alchemical furnace, beginning “Furnus fiat de tegulia” and accompanied by a diagram of the finished edifice. The picture is accompanied in both manuscripts by a set of verses, which, in the Oxford version, the scribe has initialled “G.R.” (Figure 1). In the margin below, a sixteenth-century annotator makes the inevitable link — “by these letters sett by these verses shall seme to be of Georg Riplays.”²⁶ As a further puzzle, the furnace instructions and picture — minus the verses — are sometimes found in manuscripts as an addendum to a longer and far better known work: the *Scala philosophorum*, or “Ladder of the Philosophers.” This proximity should interest us, since the *Scala* is most commonly attributed to Guido de Montanor — and the first writer to make this link appears to have been Ripley himself.

That Ripley believed Guido to be the author of the *Scala* can be inferred from the fact that he twice links Guido’s name in the *Compound* with passages borrowed or adapted from this work. The influence of the *Scala*, however, goes even beyond these references. It is evident not only in the large number of derivative passages in the *Compound* — a common feature of all medieval alchemical texts — but in the very structure of the poem itself: the famous “Twelve Gates.”

The number of “gates” in Ripley’s work has long puzzled his commentators. In the absence of any explanation in the poem itself, speculation over Ripley’s choice of

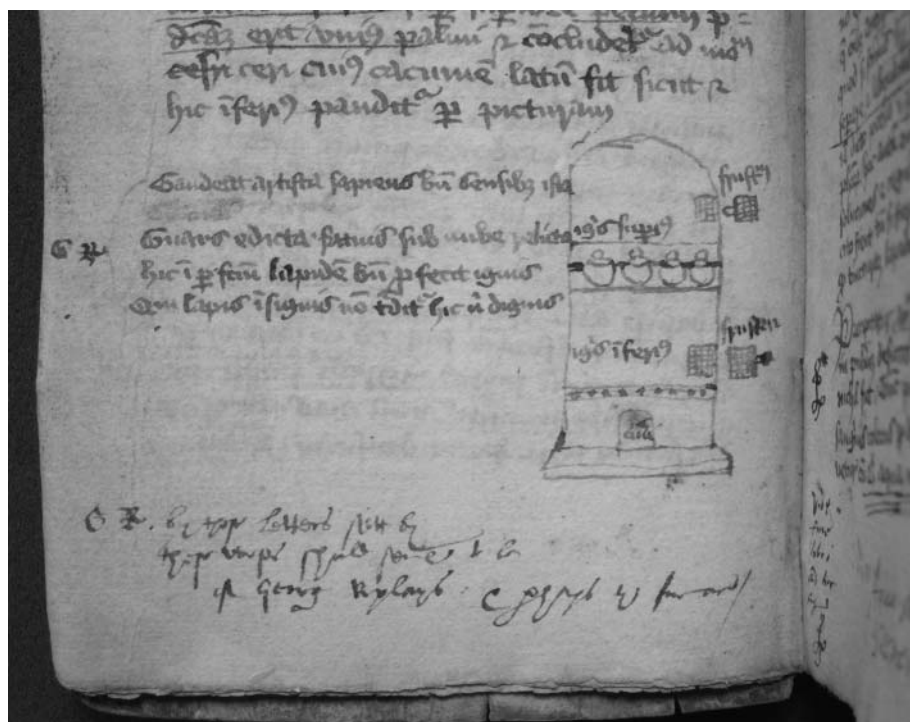


FIGURE 1 Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 136, fol. 4v. By permission of the President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford

²⁶ Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 136, fol. 4v.

twelve could easily run the full gamut of significances from apostle to zodiac. As soon as we turn to the *Scala*, however, the reason for his choice becomes evident.

After a fairly lengthy introduction, the main body of the “Ladder of the Philosophers” is divided into twelve *grados*, with a concluding “Recapitulatio.” The steps of the ladder correlate exactly with Ripley’s gates, from “Calcinatio” through to “Projectio,” and at regular intervals throughout the *Compound* we find Ripley translating chunks of his exemplar’s Latin prose more or less directly into Middle English verse, struggling at times to tailor his text to the straitjacket of rhyme royal.

Thus, the opening of the *Scala*’s “Primus gradus,” on calcination, maps onto the opening stanza of Ripley’s first gate:

Calcination, which is the highest purgation of our blessed and modulated stone, the restitution of heat, the conservation of innate heat, and the induction of solution.²⁷

Calcination is the purgacyon of our Stone,
 Restauryng also of hys naturall heate;
 Of radycall moysture it lesyth none;
 Inducyng Solucion into our Stone most mete.²⁸

This pattern is repeated throughout the *Compound*, Ripley faithfully modelling his work after Guido’s steps. That the *Scala* is the source for the *Compound* rather than the other way around is apparent from Ripley’s convenient and chivalrous habit of citing his sources in those passages where he leans on them most heavily. This can be seen at the Fourth Gate, or Fourth Step, “Conjunction,” where a brief comparison reveals how Ripley managed to shape his rather unpromising source material into verse:

But where I speak of conjunction, which are three kinds of conjoining, namely the Dyptative, as between the agent and patient, thin and thick, masculine and feminine, sulphur and mercury, matter and form . . . The tetraprative conjunction is called the correction of principles, so that each one of them will act on the other: seeing that it is necessary for the most laudable conjunction, that as in our work the four elements should be in a composition that is liquid, fresh, tepid, and duly proportionate.²⁹

But manners there be of thys Coniunccion three,
 The fyrst ys callyd by Phylosophers Dyptative,
 Betwyxt the Agent and Patyent which must be
 Male and female, Mercury and Sulphure viue;
 Matter and forme, thyn and thyke to thryve . . .

²⁷ “Calcinatio,” *Scala philosophorum*. “Quae est lapidis nostri benedicti modulati summa purgatio, caloris restitutio, humoris innati conservatio, & solutionis inductio” [Jean-Jacques Manget, *Bibliotheca chemica curiosa, seu rerum ad alchemiam pertinentium thesaurus instructissimus*, vol. II (Geneva: Chouet, 1702), 138].

²⁸ “Calcination,” 1 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 129).

²⁹ “Coniunctio,” *Scala philosophorum*. “Sed quoad conjunctionem dico, quod tres sunt modi coniungendi, scilicet, Dyptativa, ut inter agentem & patientem, rarum & densum, masculum & foeminam, sulphur & Mercurium, materiam & formam . . . Tetraprative conjunctio dicitur principiorum correctio, ut illorum unum quod perpetretur in altero: quare pro laudabilissima conjunctione necesse est, ut sicut in opere nostro quatuor elementa, in compositione liquida, recenti, tepida, & debite proportionata” (Manget, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, vol. II, 140).

The thyrd manner and also the last of all,
 Fowre Elements together whych joynyth to abyde,
 Tetraptative contently Phylosophers doth hyt call,
 And specyally Guydo de Montayno whose fame goyth wyde;
 And therefore the most laudable manner thys tyde,
 In our Coniunccion four Elements must be aggregat,
 In dew proportion fyrst whych asonder were separat.³⁰

Ripley's reliance on his exemplar accounts both for his adoption of twelve gates, and for the reduced influence of Raymond evident throughout the main body of the poem. Yet the *Scala* is itself compatible with the pseudo-Lullian corpus, in the main because its long preface — which Ripley did not use — begins by quoting *in extenso* from a Lullian text. After the incipit, “Vt dicit venerabilis Raymundus Lulii,” the text launches immediately into chapter 64 of Lull's *Testamentum* in its entirety.³¹ It is thus no surprise that manuscript copies of the *Scala* are frequently attributed to Lull, and in several cases are actually given the title *Raymondi Lulli Scala Sapientiae*, or the “Twelve Steps.”³²

In spite of Ripley's references to Guido, his debt to the *Scala* has gone unnoticed in modern scholarship. Perhaps this should not surprise us, since early commentators, too, seem not to have connected the work with Guido de Montanor. Ripley never mentions the work by name, while surviving manuscript copies of the *Scala* are either anonymous, or, as noted above, are attributed directly to Lull. As far as I have been able to determine, the Guido–*Scala* link cannot be traced back earlier than Ripley's association of Guido's name with material evidently extracted from the *Scala*, although unattributed, in the *Compound*, ca. 1471. The text's first incarnations in print, in 1550 and 1610, are similarly anonymous, while a complete but uncredited version is also incorporated into the *Philosophia reformata* (1622) of Johann Mylius, discreetly trimmed of its opening reference to Lull.³³

The first author to connect Guido specifically with the *Scala* therefore does so solely on Ripley's authority. Michael Maier, who included Guido de Montanor in the seventh chapter of his *Symbola aurae mensae* (1617), admired Ripley and provided translated excerpts from the “Twelve Gates” elsewhere in the same work. Noting that Guido was mentioned several times by Ripley in conjunction with passages matching

³⁰ “Coniunccion,” 6–8 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 145–46).

³¹ Manget, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, vol. II, 134.

³² This title appears in several manuscripts at the Bibliotheca Universitaria di Bologna (BUB): MSS 457, vol. V (part 7) and 457, vol. XIX (part 2); also BUB MS 457, vol. XXXI (part 2), which appears to have been compiled from the other two. All three include the instructions for making a furnace, “Furnus fiat de tegulia,” with the illustration. A copy of the *Scala* in Bern Stadtbibliothek MS 630 is also attributed to Lull.

³³ *De Alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum . . . 2 partes in 1 . . . Rosarium philosophorum. Secunda pars alchimiae de lapide philosophico vero modo praeparando . . .* (Frankfurt: Jacobus, 1550); *Artis Auriferae, quam chemiam vocant, Volumen Secundum. Quod continet Morieni Romani scripta de Re Metallica, atque de Occulta summaque ii, antiquorum Medicina, cum alijs Authoribus, quos versapagina indicat* (Basel: Conrad Waldkirch, 1610); Johann Daniel Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (Frankfurt: Lucas Jennis, 1622). In the last of these, the *Scala* comprises the whole of Liber I Pars IV (at 95–135), accompanied by a famous sequence of engravings of the twelve alchemical processes.

those in the *Scala*, he adds that “one may conclude Guido to be the author of the *Schalee philosophorum*, from which treatise Ripley selects this [saying] and many others.”³⁴ Maier’s observation was subsequently adopted by Condesyanus for the 1625 edition of Guido’s *De arte chymica*, where both Guido’s authorship of the *Scala*, and Ripley’s use of it, are mentioned in the introduction. The connection seems to have been regarded as settled by 1702, when Manget attributed the *Scala* to Guido without further qualification in the *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, and this attribution has since been accepted by later commentators.³⁵ John Ferguson therefore dated Guido to the fourteenth or fifteenth century on the basis of the *Scala*’s references to Roger Bacon and Richardus Anglicus, while the text’s mention of Lull enabled Lynn Thorndike to narrow the dating further, placing Guido in the fifteenth century.³⁶ In her catalogue of pseudo-Lullian works, Michela Pereira, citing Thorndike, in turn dismisses the *Scala*’s occasional Lullian attribution on the basis of Guido’s authorship.³⁷

Was Ripley, indeed, correct in putting Guido’s name to the *Scala*? The evidence remains inconclusive. A fifteenth-century text, unusually attributed to Bernard of Gordon, a medical colleague of Arnald of Villanova at Montpellier, cites Guido as the author of a passage very similar to one found in the *Scala*’s chapter on “Projection,” which Ripley also adapted in the *Compound*.³⁸ In 1528–1529, the alchemist Robert Greene of Welby (born *ca.* 1467) copied out these excerpts, attributing them directly to Guido de Montanor.³⁹ In the absence of Bernard’s exemplar, however, such a connection remains tentative at best.

More important than the question of authorship is the relationship between the group of texts which, as we have seen, were circulating in manuscript during the second half of the fifteenth century, and which often bore some relationship to Guido. The proximity of such texts may explain Ripley’s attribution of the *Scala* to Guido de Montanor. Indeed, it should come as no surprise to find that one of the compendia discussed above, the Trinity manuscript, also contains a full copy of the *Scala*. As usual, the work is anonymous, although it differs from the three printed versions in several particulars. First, this copy includes several passages that never made it to the press. Ripley himself must have had access to the unabridged version, since his chapter on “Solution” uses material from one of the additional passages,

³⁴ “Coniicere autem licet Guid. esse authorem Schalee philaosophorum [sic], ex quo tractatu Ripl. haec & pleraque alia desumpsit” (Maier, *Symbola Aurea Mensae*, 347).

³⁵ Manget, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, vol. II, 134.

³⁶ Ferguson, *Bibliotheca Chemica*, 100; Thorndike, *A History of Magic*, vol. IV, 333.

³⁷ Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull*, 94.

³⁸ Trinity College MS O.2.16, part III, fols. 25v–26r. The attribution is spurious. Aside from the fact that Bernard of Gordon (d. *ca.* 1320) belonged to an earlier century than Guido de Montanor, the historical Bernard seemed to be dismissive of chrysopoic alchemy in his *Lilium medicine*: “the alchemical method is useful in many ways in medicine, but in other instances it is so wretched that countless have perished in its practice” [trans. Luke E. Demaitre, *Doctor Bernard de Gordon: Professor and Practitioner* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 19–20].

³⁹ Cambridge University Library MS Ff. iv.12, fol. 201r.

describing the three dimensions possessed by all bodies, “Altytude, Latytude, and Profundty.”⁴⁰

The Trinity copy also contains a short introduction, not found in other manuscripts, which suggests that the *Scala* was known to at least one member of the Augustinian community at Bridlington — the community to which Ripley, of course, belonged. The passage reads:

But since this great work or great doctrine cannot be completed without errors, I therefore offer the following book in which by the grace of God is compiled in chapters concerning all their parts, obscurities, doubts, and regimens and judgements, according to the authorities of the philosophers . . . to the praise of our lord Jesus Christ and his blessed mother Mary, also of our holy father John of Bridlington, and to the profit of all those faithful to God.⁴¹

John Thwing, later St. John of Bridlington, served St. Mary’s as prior from *ca.* 1362 until his death in 1379, and was subsequently canonised in 1401 — the last English saint created before the Reformation. Popular and royal veneration for Bridlington’s saint contributed to the priory’s subsequent fortune, which included grants and exemptions from every English monarch to reign between Thwing’s day and Ripley’s.⁴² The late fifteenth-century dating of the Trinity manuscript makes it unlikely that the writer of the introduction was in fact the author of the *Scala*, and the passage is more likely to represent an addition by the scribe. The reference to John of Bridlington means that we can, however, speculate that the scribe was himself a member of the Bridlington community.

As we can see, analysis of this body of fifteenth-century manuscripts can greatly add to our understanding even of the period’s more obscure texts and personalities. However, in order to truly evaluate Ripley’s alchemy, it is insufficient merely to have identified his principal sources. It is important that we should understand how he used them, and this can best be illustrated by examining how Ripley responded to a potential crisis in his source material: a disagreement between Raymond and Guido.

The problem of ferments

Obtaining consensus between the pronouncements of the various “philosophers” was an important and necessary enterprise for the alchemical adept. On the one hand, the

⁴⁰ “Solution,” 11 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 137). The *Scala* actually reads “quarum vtraque continet tres dimensiones relatiuas videlicet longitudinem, latitudinem & profunditatem” (Trinity College MS O.8.9, fol. 14r), although Ripley prefers “altitude” to “longitude,” both here and in the “Wheel.” The additional passages are also found in the three Bolognese copies mentioned above.

⁴¹ “Sed quod istud magnum opus siue magna doctrina compleri absque erroribus non poterit, ideo libellum sequentem pono, in quo per dei gracias capitulatum de omnibus suis partibus, obscuritatibus, dubijs, ac regiminibus & iudicijs secundum philosophorum auctoritates compilatur . . . ad laudem domini nostri Iesu Christi & beatissime genitricis sue Marie, sancta quoque patris nostri sancti Johannis Bridlyngtone & commoditates omnium deuotorum deo” (Trinity College MS O.8.9, fol. 5r).

⁴² J. S. Purvis, “St. John of Bridlington,” *Journal of the Bridlington Augustinian Society* 2 (1924): 48–49.

clarification of difficult or conflicting sources was essential to an alchemist's own personal understanding and practice, and hence to the likelihood of success in the work. By interpreting and reconciling the notoriously obscure works of the philosophers, writers on alchemy — particularly those in search of an audience, or patronage — might demonstrate their suitability for the difficult task ahead, situating themselves firmly in the camp of the philosophers, rather than that of the fools who persistently misunderstood their texts. By reconciling the authorities, the adherent of alchemy also defended the truth of alchemy, and the wisdom of the philosophers.

In practical matters, George Ripley usually adopted a conciliatory position between his sources. In the *Compound*, for instance, he recommends using the proportions of gold and mercury provided in the pseudo-Lullian *Repertorium*, but immediately follows this advice by noting another ratio given by Roger Bacon — “And both be trew take whych you lyst.”⁴³ Alternative methods might also be appropriate for practical considerations. In the *Medulla*, Ripley recommends Lull's choice of a metal-line water in order to make the “Vegetable Stone,” but notes that this material is difficult to find locally, and therefore suggests another “unctuous humidity” of Guido de Montanor.⁴⁴

Disputes over fundamental doctrinal issues, however, could not be so lightly dismissed. Such situations might require the practitioner to adjudicate between rival alchemies, or to otherwise resolve a perceived conflict. Given the importance of both Raymond and Guido for Ripley's thought, it is interesting to examine his response to an issue over which the two philosophers appeared to disagree: the choice of alchemical “ferment.”

To appreciate the nature of the “ferment problem,” it is helpful to start by examining a Middle English work conventionally, although by no means decisively, attributed to Ripley: the *Accurtations of Raymond*. The *Accurtations* is a curious text, sometimes confused with the earlier (and completely distinct) pseudo-Lullian classic, the *Epistola accurtationes*.⁴⁵ Regardless of whether or not the work actually stems from Ripley's pen, its attribution to him is unsurprising, since, unusually for a text of this period, it cites both Raymund and Guido, and also treats on several topics — including fermentation — which Ripley considered in both the *Compound* and the *Medulla*.

The text comprises a *theorica*, which describes two “mercuries,” red and white, and a lengthy *practica*, employing a variety of ingredients ranging from the legendary “Green Lion” to calcined eggshells. The two sections appear as separate items in a manuscript dating from the second half of the fifteenth century.⁴⁶ In this version, the

⁴³ “Calcination,” 9 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 131).

⁴⁴ “Caeterum quia haec res raro reperitur in partibus nostris, aliisque quibusdam regionibus, ideò Guido de Montanor Graecus Philosophus invenit aliam humiditatem unctuosam” (Ripley, *Opera omnia*, 167–68).

⁴⁵ This work is usually recorded as a Middle English version of the pseudo-Lullian *Epistola*. See: Dorothy Waley Singer and Annie Anderson, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Alchemical Manuscripts in Great Britain and Ireland Dating From Before the XVI Century*, vol. I (Brussels: Maurice Lamertin, 1928), 232; George R. Keiser, ed., *Works of Science and Information*, vol. X: XXV of Hartung, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, 3795.

⁴⁶ British Library MS Sloane 3747.

theorica is anonymous, while the practica, found later in the manuscript, bears the title “Reymonds Accurtacions and other experiments.”⁴⁷ These texts would later be combined into a single work, the *Accurtations of Raymond*, attributed to George Ripley, and eventually published in Latin as the *Accurtationes & practica Raymundinae* in Ripley’s collected works.⁴⁸ Some doubt seems to have lingered regarding its authorship, however, which is more likely than any item in the early Ripleian corpus to occur anonymously, or with alternative attributions.⁴⁹

The confusion may stem from the fact that, although many of the experiments are indeed distinctively Lullian, the main citations in the theorica (which, as noted above, may not always have been linked to the practica) are divided between Raymond and Guido de Montanor. While the compiler clearly respects both authorities, his views on the topic of ferments are closer to those of Guido, and actually contradict the Lullian position regarding the use of precious metals as ferments in the alchemical work.

The *Testamentum* and other key works in the pseudo-Lullian corpus argue that the addition of a small amount of a perfect metallic body — gold or silver — is necessary to act as a ferment for the work. Fermentation initiates and abbreviates the preparation of the elixir, enabling it to penetrate base metal more easily, since the gold and silver (or Sol and Luna) are of the same nature as other metals: “And

⁴⁷ British Library MS Sloane 3747, fol. 25r. Although the tract also circulated in Latin, the earliest extant copies are in Middle English, and it is in English that the text seems to have arrived at its final form. This can be deduced from the incorporation into the *Accurtations* practica of several lines of English verse, beginning “first calcyne, After putrefye” (London, Wellcome Library MS 239, 16). These lines are taken from a longer poem, “As the philosopher in methears doth write,” which itself forms the major component of “The Epistle to Edward IV,” a poem attributed to George Ripley and printed alongside the *Compound*. The Latin version of the *Accurtations* printed in Ripley’s *Opera omnia* (1649) must therefore have been translated from Middle English, since the excerpt from the “Epistle” has been put into Latin along with the rest.

⁴⁸ I have found no direct attribution to Ripley earlier than the mid-sixteenth century, notably in British Library MS Sloane 1524. In this version, the text is said to have been “made and compylyd by George Ryplaye translated and correctyd and set fourthe by hym out of Latyne into Englyshe, of the book of the Accourtacions and practices of Raymonde Lullii” (fol. 13r). Like other copies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this version includes several passages either absent from MS Sloane 3747, or present there in a different order. Other copies include: Ashmole 1490 (fol. 6r–v); Ashmole 1492, parts III (45–60) and IX (151–54); Rawlinson B.306 (fols. 1r–26r); Wellcome MS 239 (1–44); Copenhagen Royal Library GKS 1727 (fols. 1r–8v); and Copenhagen Royal Library GKS 3500 (fols. 20v–41v).

⁴⁹ Thus one manuscript copy (dated 1555), although beginning with the usual theorica, is entitled *Practica Raymundi* without mentioning Ripley (Royal Library, Copenhagen MS GKS 1727, fols. 1r–8r), while an abbreviated sixteenth-century version in MS Ashmole 1480 is ascribed to both Guido de Montanor and Ramon Lull (Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1480, part III, fols. 7r–8r). The work was also printed as “Guidonis Magni de Monte Philosophi Graeci Discipuli Anonymi Tractatulus, seu Descriptio Philosophici ADROP. Quae nant sit ejus Species, & quomodo debeat elaborari & praeparari” in Lazarus Zetzner, *Theatrum chemicum, praecipuos selectorum auctorum tractatus de chemiae et lapidis philosophici antiquitate, veritate, iure, praestantia et operationibus*, vol. VI (Strassburg, 1661), 543–668. To complete the confusion, the same text, minus the references to Lull and Guido, also comprises the *Liber de lapide philosophorum* attributed to St. Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, printed in English translation by Lancelot Coelson, as *Philosophia maturata . . . whereunto is added a work compiled by St. Dunstan concerning the philosophers stone . . .* (London: 1668).

the ferment is not extracted unless from Sol and Luna, since we require nothing except that the stone may be converted into his like.”⁵⁰

Like many pseudo-Lullian doctrines, this one demonstrates the influence of pseudo-Arnald of Villanova, particularly the important Arnaldian tract, the *Rosarius philosophorum*. The *Rosarius* argues that, in order to raise imperfect metals to the perfection of gold and silver, the elixir must itself be *more* perfect than the precious metals. It thus makes sense to start one’s work with gold and silver, and then to improve on them, creating a concentrated, “super-perfect” material, of sufficient subtlety to instantly penetrate and perfect base metals.⁵¹

The author of the *Accurtations*, however, takes a different position on how this super-perfection should be attained. Although “petty elixirs” may be made by “meddling” gold and silver with other substances, work on these metals will be fruitless in producing the Philosophers’ Stone, “forasmoch as her vegetatyf is quenched in hem which is bothe cause of lyf and multipliynge of euery thyng in kynde.”⁵² Such an approach treats the metallic elements as a continuum, in which the “impure” metals are slowly digested by subterranean natural processes into the perfect bodies of gold and silver, at which point the bodies, having attained perfection, cease to develop. The philosopher’s aim is to isolate whatever “vegetative” quality is responsible for this maturation, and to create from it an elixir capable of perfecting metals. Common gold and silver are, accordingly, of no use to the alchemist, since in these metals the vegetative process has come to a halt.

To defend this position, the author of the *Accurtations* must forcibly reinterpret those authorities — particularly Raymond — who *do* recommend employing the precious metals. Thus, the text argues that when philosophers speak of gold and silver, they must be referring not to common metals but to two tinctures, or “mercuries,” red and white, extracted from an imperfectly digested metal in which the vegetable force remains active.⁵³ These tinctures must be mixed with two “clean earths,” again red and white, which will act as ferments to fix the tinctures, and vice versa. The author reiterates that common gold and silver are not required in the work, even as ferments, and that the alchemist has no need to incur high costs, for the work is available to poor men as well as to the rich. Instead, he hints that the two “earths” are derived from the same metallic body as the tinctures — for “all is but on thyng and all growith out of on[e] ymage.”⁵⁴

As support for his “goldless” product, the author invokes the authority of Guido de Montanor. The Middle English version even cites a specific work, Guido’s *Summa*

⁵⁰ “Et fermentum non exit nisi de sole et luna, cum nos non requirimus quod lapis convertatur nisi in suum similem” [Michela Pereira and Barbara Spaggiari, *Il Testamentum alchemico attribuito a Raimondo Lullo: Edizione del testo latino e catalano dal manoscritto Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 255* (Florence: Sismel, 1999), 172].

⁵¹ Manget, *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*, vol. I, 662–76, at 665.

⁵² British Library MS Sloane 3747, fol. 3v.

⁵³ “[T]he true wey accordyng to the philosophers intente is not in hem, For her gold and her siluer byn two tynctours redde and white hidde withyn a body which by nature were neuer complete in gold or siluer and tharfor they byn seperable from the fowles lutouse substaunce of the said body and commixtable with clene erthes redde and white accordyng to her nature” (MS Sloane 3747, fols. 4r–v).

⁵⁴ MS Sloane 3747, fol. 4v.

to a Greek Bishop, perhaps a reference to *De arte chymica*, although the Latin version records only Guido, “writing to a certain Bishop of Greece.”⁵⁵ In this work, Guido advises that a pure “quicksilver,” left incomplete by nature, can be extracted from a body and used to make super-perfect gold and silver. The alchemical work is further distinguished by three properties, or ingredients: *leo viridis* (the Green Lion), *aza foetida* (stinking water), and *fumus albus* (white smoke).⁵⁶

Guido’s account of the Green Lion, as presented in the *Accurtations*, squares with the idea of a vegetative principle extracted from impure metal. This substance can be called “Sol,” for, like the sun, its attractive power “florisshith and makith grene by attractif power all the worlde.”⁵⁷ Unlike common gold, however, the body from which the Lion is extracted is neither perfect nor fixed in nature — it is green because it is not yet “ripe”:

[T]herfore leo viridis is grene gold, that is to sey quyk gold vnfixe and vncomplete by nature, and therefore he hath power to reduce bodies *ad materiam primam* and to make theym which be fixe for to be spirituel and fugitive, and therefore he may wele be callid leo, for as all bests obeyen the lyon so all bodyes geve stede to the power of this quyk gold whiche is our mercury.⁵⁸

The compiler of the *Accurtations* helpfully offers a clue to the identity of this unclean body from which the vegetable mercury, or Green Lion, is derived. The answer, he explains, lies in an axiom of the legendary alchemist, Maria the Prophetess. According to Maria, the Philosophers’ Stone is engendered between male and female, and between two mountains:

And that the same is engendred betwene male and female, by these two mountaynes, be understod the Sonne and the Moone which byn highe from us . . . Now if you will have the stone, you may: for it is comon enoughe, to poore and ritche.⁵⁹

If the mountains represent sun and moon, then the desired ingredient must represent something midway between them, which is to say between gold and silver. This puzzle must have been familiar to George Ripley, who includes it — together with his solution — in the Preface to his *Compound*.

Ripley’s alchemy, as set out in the Preface, is not entirely compatible with that of the *Accurtations*, adhering more closely to the authority of pseudo-Lull. Rather than the two mercuries, red and white, Ripley describes three mercuries, or “humidities,”

⁵⁵ “[S]cribens cuidam Episcopo Graeco” (Ripley, *Opera omnia*, 370). The existence of such a work may explain Ripley’s belief in Guido’s Greek origin.

⁵⁶ The ultimate source for these three ingredients, at least in Latin alchemy, appears to be the *Liber de compositione alchimiae* attributed to Morienus [Lee Stavenhagen, *A Testament of Alchemy* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Published for the Brandeis University Press by the University Press of New England, 1974), 43–45]. They are also described in chapter 60 of the pseudo-Lullian *Testamentum* (Pereira and Spaggiari, *Il Testamentum alchemico*, 196–200), apparently denoting the manufacture of a mineral acid using vitriol. The author of the *Accurtations*, however, is clearly taking Guido as his source.

⁵⁷ MS Sloane 3747, fol. 5r.

⁵⁸ MS Sloane 3747, fol. 5r.

⁵⁹ Wellcome MS 239, 9.

which Raymond calls “hys Menstrues.”⁶⁰ Of these three, one is to be drawn from “earth,” equating in alchemical parlance to a metal or metalline product. This metal, however, seems to correspond to the body already described in the *Accurtations*, and its “mercury” to the Green Lion:

... one whych usually
 Namyd by Phylosophers the Lyon Greene,
 He ys the meane the Soon and Moone betweene:
 Of joyning Tynctures wyth perfytnes,
 As Geber thereto beryth wytynes.⁶¹

Ripley is referring to the influential thirteenth-century alchemical text, the *Summa perfectionis* of pseudo-Geber, in which the mean between Sol and Luna is identified as “Venus,” or copper. Copper, Geber notes, can be worked similarly to gold and silver, and can be both yellowed and whitened: it therefore falls “midway between sol and luna.”⁶² Furthermore, Geber asserts that copper can be changed into gold by both nature and craft, since flakes of copper washed out from mines and mixed with sand are transformed into gold by the sun’s heat.⁶³ That Ripley identified the Green Lion with a substance drawn from copper is supported in the sixth chapter, “Congelation”:

The seyd Menstrue ys, (I say to the in counsell)
 The blod of our Grene Lyon, and not of Vytrioll,
 Dame Venus can the trewth of thys the tell,
 At thy begynnyng to counsell and yf thou her call:
 Thys secret ys hyd by Phylosophers grete and small;
 Whych blode drawn owte of the seyd Lyon,
 For lac of Hete had not perfynt Dygestyon.⁶⁴

Copper remains incompletely digested, and hence has not attained the perfection of gold and silver. It is this near but not complete proximity to perfect bodies that makes copper appropriate as an ingredient in the work. This metal, being unripe, retains its vegetative powers, which can be extracted and utilised by the alchemist.⁶⁵

So far, Ripley’s account appears to square broadly with that of Guido in the *Accurtations*; both describe the extraction of the Green Lion from an imperfect metalline body. The substitution of copper for precious metals would certainly offer

⁶⁰ Preface, 13 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 124). These three menstrues apparently coincide with the three “waters” described by Ripley in the *Medulla*, which are used to make the mineral, vegetable and animal stones respectively. The menstrue discussed here is the one used in the mineral work.

⁶¹ Preface, 16 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 125).

⁶² Translation by William R. Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 676.

⁶³ Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber*, 671–72.

⁶⁴ “Congelation,” 24 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 167).

⁶⁵ One product of copper sulfate is vitriol, or sulfuric acid, which was used extensively in medieval alchemy. Guido’s description of the “stinking water” and “white fume” might well describe the manufacture of a mineral acid, which would also explain the ability of the Green Lion “to reduce bodies *ad materiam primam*.” Ripley’s comment that his own Green Lion is “not of vitriol” suggests that he had a different substance in mind — although apparently still one derived from copper.

relief to impoverished alchemists, supporting the advice in the *Accurtations* against using gold and silver. However, Ripley appears to disagree on this point. Where the *Accurtations* states, apparently on Guido's authority, that gold or silver are not required in the preparation of the stone, Ripley instead follows Raymond, insisting that the precious metals are necessary as ferments to the alchemical process.

This process is discussed, appropriately enough, in the *Compound's* chapter on "Fermentation." Unusually, Ripley here makes little use of the corresponding step in the *Scala*, but starts by critically surveying current practice. The difficulty for practitioners is in finding a way to introduce the ferment into the prepared elixir, or "medicine." It is not enough simply to dissolve gold and silver and congeal them with the medicine, or even to dissolve the precious metals in mercury and sublime the whole.⁶⁶ A better approach is to grind your ferments with mercury "like pap," to make an amalgam, which is then added to the elixir. However, even this method will be unsuccessful, as the precious metals remain fundamentally unaltered from their vulgar state. Ripley here reminds his audience to "Looke how thou dydyst wyth thy unparfyt Body" — a reference back to his sixth chapter, where he warned, "Nether Congele, wythout thow fyrst yt Putrefye." The perfect bodies must therefore also be putrefied, "Her prymary qualytes destroying utterly."⁶⁷ Only then can the ferment be added to the alchemical compound, in a ratio of one to three, and heated in a sealed flask until the elixir is fixed and ready for use.

It should here be noted that, while Ripley follows Raymond in insisting on the use of precious metals, his solution does not seem to match the Lullian method either, since the gold and silver he employs have been altered from their vulgar state by putrefaction. Nor, for that matter, does his account directly contradict that of Guido, who only argued against using *common* gold and silver.

The significance of this issue, and Ripley's handling of it, is underlined by the existence of another item in the Ripley corpus, the *Concordantias Guidonis et Raimondi*.⁶⁸ As the title suggests, this work attempts to find agreement between Ripley's two favourite authorities, with the specific aim of resolving the ferment problem. It therefore provides a link between the problem described in the *Accurtations*, and George Ripley's treatment of fermentation in the *Compound*. The *Concordantia* also provides a useful test case to determine whether knowledge of Ripley's alchemy, as gleaned from his known works, can be used to establish the authenticity of other texts in the corpus.

On the surface, the *Concordantia* looks like an authentically "Ripleian" work, with its discussion of Raymond, Guido, and ferments. Ripley's name also appears in the

⁶⁶ Ripley's comparison bears some similarity to the list of fermentation techniques given in the *Repertorium*: "Uno modo per dissolutionem in aquam lapidis, & per reductionem: alio modo per calcinationem & lavationem cum argento vivo, & elevationem ejus substantiae mediae. Deinde per dissolutionem lapidis, & aquarum conjunctionem, & per istum modum est faciliter conversivus. Alio modo per incerationem calcis, & per dissolutionem ejusdem . . ." [Lazarus Zetzner, *Theatrum chemicum*, vol. III (Ursel: 1602), 734]. If this passage is Ripley's source, then he seems to have been unimpressed by Raymond's suggestions.

⁶⁷ "Fermentation," 5 (Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 174).

⁶⁸ This is the title given by Bale (see below). The text was later printed as the *Concordantia Raymundi Lullii & Guidonis philosophi Graeci per Georgium Riplaeum* by Combach (Ripley, *Opera omnia*, 323–36). The printed version includes a short practica, comprising recipes using copper.

explicit of manuscript copies: “And it shall so be says George Ripley, whose theorica this is.”⁶⁹ Unfortunately, if the work is genuine, then no fifteenth-century copy survives. I can identify no reference to the *Concordantia* prior to 1557, when its title and incipit were recorded in the *Catalogus* of the antiquarian bishop John Bale.⁷⁰

The *Concordantia* opens by presenting the apparently contradictory statements of Raymond and Guido. First, we are reminded of Raymond’s assertion that common gold and silver are necessary ferments, since the stone cannot be made using “vegetable mercury” alone. Second, Guido’s argument — familiar from the *Accurtations* — is reiterated: the philosophers’ gold and silver are not the common metals, but tinctures drawn from the imperfect metalline body, Adrop. The *Concordantia*, unlike the *Accurtations*, supports this argument with evidence from a recognisably Guidonian source, *De arte chymica*.⁷¹ The text then engages directly with the Lullian argument, suggesting that when Raymond recommends “common” gold, he is merely playing with words — he actually means the altered gold extracted from the body, which is, of course, far more “common” than real gold!⁷²

The author of the *Concordantia* at last proposes a solution. The stone is indeed made from a single body, Adrop, without adding gold and silver, but in order to transform the stone into an elixir, precious metals must be used. The gold and silver should, however, be treated in the same way as the impure body — they should be mixed with their own extracted oils until they lose their original properties and become *fermentum fermentorum*, a “ferment of ferments.” Only then, in their altered form, should they be used to ferment the stone. This argument means that everybody’s authority is preserved. Raymond was right to recommend common gold and silver, as these metals will yield the eventual ferment, while Guido is also correct to say that common gold should *not* be used, since it should of course be altered first.⁷³

⁶⁹ “Et erit quod Georgius Ripley; cuius est haec theorica” (MS Harley 2411, fol. 49r). The text was widely diffused in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in English translation, and exists in numerous manuscripts, including: British Library MSS Sloane 319, Sloane 1423, Sloane 1842, Sloane 2175, Sloane 3667, and Sloane 3732; Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.2.33; and Oxford, Bodleian Library MSS Rawlinson B. 306 and MSS Ashmole 1424, Ashmole 1479, Ashmole 1487.

⁷⁰ John Bale, *Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytanniae . . . Catalogus* (London: 1557), 622. Bale records two copies of the work in the possession of one John Bushe, of whom no more is known, except that he seems to have been an avid collector of alchemica, owning works by John Dastin and Thomas Norton, as well as several other texts by Ripley. These include the *Practicam ceremonialem vel artem breuem*, *Dictata aegri*, and *Dialogus quoque*; (none of which survive, at least under the titles and incipits listed by Bale), besides a *Theoricam quandam*, recognisable from its incipit as the *Medulla*, and *De putrifactionibus*, identifiable as a Latin version of the “Mystery of Alchemists.”

⁷¹ Guido’s belief that stone could only be fermented using a tincture drawn from itself, rather than from another body, is enigmatically set down in *De arte chymica*, one chapter of which is devoted to fermentation (Condeesyanus, *Harmoniae imperscrutabilis Chymico-Philosophicae*, 134).

⁷² “Quae Raymundi assertio debet intelligi de auro alterato, quod est aptius auro vulgari. Et sua alia assertio debet intelligi de argento vivo, communi, de quo alibi dicit: Cum loquor de Mercurio, intellege [sic] Mercurium magis communem, quàm communem” (Ripley, *Opera omnia*, 326–27).

⁷³ “Ed ideò dixit Raymundus: cum auro vulgari fermentamus ad declarandum de qua re verum fermentum debet sumi. Et Guido dicit, nostrum aurum non est aurum vulgi, ad significandum, quòd pro fermento aurum alteratum debet accipi” (Ripley, *Opera omnia*, 329).

When we recall Ripley's handling of this issue in the *Compound*, we now see that he was in fact proposing exactly this solution, albeit in a more compressed format. His advice to treat the precious metals as "thou dydyst wyth thy unparfyt Body" in order to destroy their original qualities duplicates the advice of the *Concordantia*, and likewise resolves the contradiction between the two philosophers. While it cannot be proven that Ripley wrote the *Concordantia*, we can certainly conclude that its author had a remarkable grasp of Ripley's alchemy.

Without a detailed knowledge of the arguments employed by Ripley's sources, however, we would be unable to appreciate the subtlety of the Canon's alchemical thinking on a fairly complex topic, and unable also to assess how accurately the *Concordantia* reflected this approach. In all likelihood, we would not even be conscious that a conflict existed. Such results justify continued attention to alchemical texts, including the works of such little known figures as Guido de Montanor. A deeper understanding of these works may enable us not only to reconstruct the thinking of an individual practitioner such as Ripley, but also to offer insight into the endeavours of those later students of alchemy who would study his work; for whom Ripley had, in his turn, become the authority.

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