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THOMAS NORTON, *The Ordinal of Alchemy*

In English, manuscript on paper

England, 17<sup>th</sup> century (perhaps c.1600-1650?)

*i + 54 + i folios on paper, one watermark, situated in gutter, perhaps a coat of arms featuring a hunting horn and a heart surmounted and maybe a letter 'T' (largely obscured and consequently not identified in Piccard, Heawood, or Churchill, but with distant similarities to Churchill no. 287, Crozier, Basle 1633), 17<sup>th</sup>-century pagination in black ink in Arabic numerals at upper fore-edge, 1-102 (ff. 2-52), 21<sup>st</sup>-century foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals [cited in this description], upper fore-edge recto, 1-54, catchword on verso of nearly every leaf (collation i-iii<sup>16</sup> [followed by 6 singletons]), ruled with a single bounding line in plummet at left of each page plus blind-ruled lineation (justification 150-155 × 60-115 mm), written in two late mixed hands (Secretary in transition to Italic), the first (f. 2) in 26 long lines, the second (ff. 3-52v) in 32 long lines, ff. 1v and 51-52v blank but for brief pen-trial ("A . a . a.a . b.b.b . c.c . d.d.") at f. 1, all in black ink, occasional minor stains throughout, a few modern rice-paper repairs. Bound in a folded wrapper of textured, dove grey modern paper. In very good condition. Dimensions c.185 × 157 mm.*

One of the earliest and subsequently most influential works on alchemy in Middle English, Norton's poem the *Ordinal of Alchemy* (written 1477) set out to educate the uneducated English people in what he considered a "trew science." Its first appearance in print was in 1652, in a collection of English alchemical texts by Elias Ashmole, giving it pride of place. Undated and with deviations from Ashmole's edition, our manuscript may belong to an alternative manuscript tradition, or it may be a copy of the 1652 edition (with some changes to the text made by the scribe). Copies on the market are very rare.

## PROVENANCE

1. Manuscript copied in English and Latin, in England, in the seventeenth century, possibly in the first half of the century based on evidence of the script.
2. Private Collection.

## TEXT

ff. 2-2v, incipit, "Liber iste Clericis monstrat scientiam liber sed laicis auget inscitiam liber honores iuvans per copiam ... Grata Super venient qua non sperabitur hora."

ff. 3-52v, incipit, "The Proheme. To the honour of God one in persons three this booke is made that Laye men should it see and Clerkes also after my decease ... All that have pleasure in this booke to reade pray for my soule and for all quick and dead. In the yeare of Christ a thousand fower hundred [marginal addition by scribe: & seaventy seaven] this worke beganne, honoure to God in heaven. Finis. 1477."

Manuscript of Thomas Norton's *Ordinal of Alchemy* (1477), including opening Latin verse; the text is edited, Ashmole, 1652; Reidy, 1975.

One of the most famous works of English alchemy, the *Ordinal* is a Middle English poem of over 3000 lines, in rhyming couplets, composed by Thomas Norton of Bristol (c.1433-1513) in 1477 (Reidy, 1957). Making overt reference to the works of other alchemists, this broad-based alchemical text discusses the philosopher's stone, transmutation of elements into gold, and even alchemy's medicinal aspects, along with the importance of experimentation, details of furnaces, and the relevance of color, music, and planetary positioning in alchemical processes. Several costly illuminated manuscript copies produced during Norton's lifetime – including a presentation copy for Edward IV, another copy bearing the Neville arms, both now lost, and the sumptuous, late fifteenth-century British Library, Add. MS 10302 – reveal that the poem circulated among elite readers from the outset (Hughes, 2011, p. 111). A number of these early copies were consulted by astrologer and antiquary Elias Ashmole (1617-1692), who published the first English printed edition of the *Ordinal* in his 1652 *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* (Schuler, 1995; Ashmole, 1652, pp. 1-106). The thirty-two manuscript copies both predating and antedating Ashmole's edition testify to the work's enduring popularity in England and beyond (Runstedler, 2023, p. 51). This interest reached at least as far as Frankfurt – an Early Modern hotbed of alchemical activity – where, over a generation previously, the *Ordinal*'s first printed edition had appeared in a Latin translation by Michael Maier, "Thomas Nortoni, Angli Philosophi Crede Mihi seu Ordinale," published in his *Triplus aureus* (Maier, 1618).

Preliminary study reveals small differences in the text of our copy of Norton's poem and the version printed by Ashmole. The nature of these textual variants, together with paleographical evidence that makes a pre-1652 date for this copy possible, suggests that our manuscript was copied from a manuscript exemplar (and thus may be evidence of an alternative manuscript tradition). Further research is needed however (a complete collation of the text would be of interest), and the textual variation may instead represent scribal intervention during transcription from Ashmole's edition – a not uncommon practice in the late medieval and Early Modern periods (Blair, 2015; Lutz, 1975). The act of copying print by hand could enable a scribe to obtain a difficult-to-acquire work, often "customiz[ing] in the process," but was also regarded as possessing "devotional and/or pedagogical value" in itself (Blair, 2015, p. 7).

Various titles have been applied to the *Ordinal*, leading to inaccurate claims that Norton was the author of additional texts. Yet he wrote no other works, instead directing his energies elsewhere. Son of a Bristol merchant, and grandson of the six-times Bristol MP for whom he was named, Thomas Norton was partially disinherited, the bulk of his father's estate falling to a younger son from a later marriage. He thus turned his attention to alchemy – a known interest of Edward IV – and sought "his fortune in royal service" (Gross, 2008). Granted lands of rebels upon Edward IV's 1471 readeption, he became Sheriff of Gloucestershire (1475-1476), then of Somerset and Dorset (1476-1477), and received a commission from the Crown to seize the goods of accused necromancer John Stacy in 1477. Unfortunately, Norton "suffered from an unsavoury reputation," frequently quarrelling with Bristol's Mayor and councilmen (Gross, 2008). As a result, he was widely disliked and his enemies' misleading claims, combined with his own propensity for boastfulness, complicate efforts to distinguish biographical truth from fiction. Nonetheless, no evidence exists to support his supposed 1470 exile with Edward IV, and the assertion that he was chief disciple of England's master alchemist, the Augustinian canon George Ripley (c.1415-1490), arises from misinterpretation of a passage in the *Ordinal* (Gross, 2008).

In addition to its value in elucidating the philosophy of late medieval and early modern alchemy, Norton's work is "foundational for understanding English alchemical literature," a genre which flourished during the late medieval era (Runstedler, 2023, p. 51). With only thirty-two known manuscript exemplars, and most copies held in institutional repositories, appearance of the *Ordinal* on the market are rare; the Schoenberg Database lists only a handful of sales over the past century.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

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<https://archive.org/details/theatrumchemicum00ashm/>

Digital surrogate of British Library, Additional MS 10302  
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add\\_MS\\_10302](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_10302)

Piccard Online  
<https://www.piccard-online.de/start.php>

Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts  
<https://sdbm.library.upenn.edu/>

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