

An Alchemist's Travels, according to Himself

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MEDIEVAL ALCHEMISTS HAVE SPENT centuries skulking around on the edges of our histories of proper science. With their mistaken theories of physical matter and bogus claims to turn baser metals into gold, alchemists could be easily dismissed as practitioners of a crude form of chemistry by trial and error at best; at worst, alchemy was pseudoscience dressed up in mystical language or practiced in bad faith. After years on the outside, however, medieval alchemists have since been invited in from the cold as deserving subjects of attention by the respectable historian of respectable science. Their readmission has been helped along by the recognition that, even back in the Middle Ages, alchemists often thought and worked experimentally. Their texts show that they took up purposeful “experimental probing,” as William Newman says, in a belief that “their art could arrive at fundamental truths by means of experiment with natural materials.”¹ Where all their experimentation really got them is another question; but this image of a bleary-eyed technician bent over a workbench, devising a way to prove some metallurgical principle with recourse to a repertoire of practical tech-

niques, recasts the medieval alchemist into a more amenable predecessor of the research chemist in the modern laboratory.

Medieval alchemy, however, was not only practiced over the fires of the workshop furnace. Alchemy was a literary endeavor: its texts were pored over by readers and copied out by scribes under candlelight. Alchemists encountered the knowledge of their discipline as it was embedded in a textual culture and expressed through the particular literary conventions of authorship, genre, and character of that culture. Alchemy's textual culture was, in its own ways, experimental. Alchemical writers seemed to delight in concocting new and different ways to communicate knowledge, as they put their doctrine to paper in forms drawn from disparate fields of medieval discourse. Latin writers, for instance, systematized alchemical knowledge as *summae*: thoroughgoing treatises arranged by some overtly rationalizing logic, a favorite genre of scholastic theologians. But readers looking for convenience rather than compendiousness could consult alchemical *florilegia*, collections of short recipes, factoids, and rules of thumb culled from wider reading. By the fifteenth century, one could read alchemy as versified into vernacular lyric poetry or liturgical Latin song. Alchemy occasioned widespread, and often imaginative, literary experimentation across medieval textual genres.²

This essay revisits one such experiment in the literary history of medieval alchemy: a largely overlooked Latin collection of alchemical recipes written by someone calling himself Leonard. His recipe collection is preserved in only one copy, a late fifteenth-century manuscript now held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Its author claims to have gathered these recipes personally, over a lifetime of travel near and far. In proclaiming itself to be a travel narrative, Leonard's alchemical cookbook enrolls itself in the ranks of a medieval genre founded on the authority of firsthand experience. "Leonard's Travels" (as I will call the text here) puts its alchemical knowledge on an experimental foundation in the medieval sense of the word: to

learn *per experimentum* in the Middle Ages was to learn by personal witness and direct observation.³ In this, “Leonard’s Travels” is one more experiment in alchemical genre and invites our consideration, not as a record of alchemical practice as it truly happened but as an exceptional, inventive example of alchemical literary practice.

I

In the year of our Lord 1394, I Leonard have followed the routes written herein with great difficulty, among learned men, with many tiring trials, and with many expenses, *et cetera*.⁴

So Leonard introduces himself as a tireless alchemist-traveler who embarks on his arduous journeys in 1394. Throughout his text, Leonard narrates his itinerary in fragmentary fashion, by means of brief little headings prefacing each alchemical recipe. These headings recount the circumstantial details of each recipe: who gave it to Leonard, and where he happened to learn it. In this manuscript, early readers would have encountered Leonard’s collection of alchemical procedures among a wide variety of other alchemical texts. There “Leonard’s Travels” occupies only about twelve leaves in this 164-folio book (which is known today by its library shelfmark, MS Latin 14005). The other alchemical texts in MS Latin 14005 are many and miscellaneous. Its table of contents reads like a whistle-stop tour of late-medieval alchemical genres. There is the abstractly theoretical tract “On the Four Elements,” and short, practical works of technical instruction, such as “how to reduce mercury to its prime material” for the more pragmatically inclined. Alchemical knowledge is talked over in dialogue texts, like the one between a certain Ademar and his brother William. Or, that knowledge is cloaked in allegory and riddle, as in the “Enigma of the Father and Son.”⁵ There is a “synonymy” for reader’s reference: a glossary of equivalent alchemical terms in Latin,

Greek, Arabic, cipher, and German (evidence that this book's makers and initial readers were German speakers).⁶ Browsers of this alchemical book came to these many genres already familiar with them from other fields of study or practice: recipes and synonymies had long been in use in pharmaceutical texts; the dialogue and the allegorized parable were staple genres of religious instruction. Finally, the texts of MS Latin 14005 exhibit alchemical literature's peculiar taste for invented origins. Much of it is pseudoepigraphic, ascribed to dubiously historical figures such as the monk Morienus, or alchemy's ancient discoverer, Hermes Trismegestes. Alchemical writers very often occluded their authorship of new texts, preferring instead to fabricate some false tale of misty beginnings.

Even though "Leonard's Travels" belongs to a field of literary practice known for such authorial high jinks, its readers in more recent years have taken Leonard's claim to authorship, and his account of his travels, at his word. Rafał T. Prinke, following other historians of alchemy, reads the "Travels" as authentic reporting: he calls it a "fascinating account[] of a medieval errant alchemist's travels in search of the Philosophers' Stone"; for Prinke, the "notebook of Leonard of Maurperg" is a true-to-life telling of events in 1394, which might yield insights into the historical practice of fourteenth-century alchemy in the Holy Roman Empire and beyond its eastern borders.⁷ This essay tries out a different approach, one better supported by the material evidence of the manuscript itself and suggested by a consideration of "Leonard's Travels" as an artifact of late-medieval literary culture.

Can we properly call this manuscript "Leonard's notebook," as has been suggested? Calling it a notebook implies that it was improvisationally prepared in the course of practice for personal reference in the future. In light of the manuscript evidence, we can conclude—rather definitively—that it was not. The only surviving copy of "Leonard's Travels" postdates the events it claims to narrate in 1394 by almost a century: its paper was manufactured in the second half of the

fifteenth century.⁸ This manuscript was a carefully—and professionally—produced compilation of alchemical texts, a much more deliberate production than suggested by “notebook.” Its makers took care to decorate its pages with visual cues to help readers navigate its texts, such as its bright red capitals to signal the start of a new text, red underlining and punctuation, and marginal annotations. For this scribe, alchemical books were apparently good business; elsewhere in the book, he records the sale of two other alchemical compilations in 1486.⁹ So, MS Latin 14005 does not preserve the laboratory notes of a traveling alchemist, recording his recipes as they were gathered and then tried in the fire. “Leonard’s Travels,” as we find them here, was copied in the course of the usual routines of medieval manuscript production. A scribe compiled its collected alchemical knowledge at his writing desk, working from other written sources. Readers of MS Latin 14005, then, encountered this narrative of alchemical adventure in 1394 belatedly, long after Leonard notionally embarked on them, and they encountered it in this manuscript as one more illustration of the diversity and inventiveness of Latin alchemical writers of the later Middle Ages.

Leonard narrates his wandering, with all its “tiring trials and many expenses,” in sparing detail. Very often, he provides only a line or two of introduction, detailing where he learned the recorded procedure or from whom (if that). He calls these procedures by many different names: practices, operations, preparations, augmentations. For a typical example, see how minimally he narrates one episode of alchemical tutelage: “The following manner of operation was given to me, Leonard, in Rome, which I attempted with Master Eustace in that place and I found it to be true.”¹⁰ Leonard abruptly appears in Rome, working in the company of “Master Eustace” about whom we learn nothing beyond the name. There, he says, he found this technique to be true himself; so vouchsafed by Roman experience, Leonard now shares the recipe with his readers. He conjures up scenes of instruction around his other alchemical recipes, and sometimes he very often adds more

details about his fellow alchemists. These elaborations lend his recipes a certain mystique, as with this one: “I tried out this proven operation when I came to Cologne, to a certain monk of the order of Friars Minor, the order of St. Francis, at that time in the faculty of the art of dialectic, which I afterwards dictated to the bishop of Esztergom [Hungary] from memory and together we worked it out there.”¹¹ This recipe is “experimentally” proven in that medieval sense, as Eustace’s was in Rome; it is hard-won, requiring a trip to Cologne to learn, and then to Hungary to corroborate. The backstory gives the recipe some academic cachet, as the work of a dialectician. Leonard shows himself operating within an international network of alchemically active clergy, as a middleman between a philosophical Franciscan on the Rhine and a bishop on the Danube. Other recipes come with royal associations attached, as the work of alchemists well connected to medieval Europe’s grandest courts. One technique to “perfect gold” was the gift of an alchemist to the king of France; another was by a long-dead chancellor to the king of Sicily; still another, by a Frenchman who was chummy with the king of England.¹² Elsewhere Leonard allies alchemical expertise with artisanal knowledge. Even though one given procedure is ascribed to the learned medieval Aristotelian Albert the Great, these instructions were passed on to him by “a goldsmith called, in the vulgar, Hammis von Haws,” and it then was “openly carried out by this very man in the marketplace.”¹³ In “Leonard’s Travels,” the theaters of alchemical success range from the learned corridors of Cologne’s arts faculty to far-flung royal courts and the open air of a market square. Yet wherever he goes and whoever he meets, Leonard will typically certify each recipe by the authority of his own experience. That is, he proves them *per experimentum*: Leonard watches his contacts work and often pulls them off later by himself.

While Leonard grounds this text’s credibility on his personal experience, readers learn precious little about the narrator of “Leonard’s Travels” himself. Modern scholars have taken to calling its itinerant

protagonist “Leonard of Maurperg,” because he embarks on two journeys from a city he calls “Maurperg” or “Marburg.” James Corbett speculated that this is an attempt to spell Mailberg, a relatively small Austrian town.¹⁴ But why not “Marburg”? After all, the scribe of this manuscript tends to interchange *p* and *b*, as when he spells *bley* (German for lead) as *pley*.¹⁵ Leonard’s point of departure may have been the west-central German city of Marburg. But in general, our narrator roams more the easterly territory of the Holy Roman Empire. For instance, he says that he sold a gold-like substance called orpiment in Bratislava; he practices alchemy by himself in Poznan, Poland, and later with an astronomer named Liphard. The more eastern situation of Marburg-an-der-Drau (today, the Slovenian city known as Maribor) suggests it as the “Maurperg” imagined as the starting point from which Leonard sets off on his alchemical peregrinations.

Leonard alludes only obliquely to the life he lived before he took to the road in pursuit of alchemical knowledge. For a time, he sold gold of dubious quality, using a technique called “rubification” to upgrade his product.¹⁶ He seems to have come from a family of means; he invests a sizable inheritance in a recipe with a sterling pedigree: “The following ‘practice’ is by Francis Petrarch, the poet laureate, which was given to the cardinal of Bologna after his death, which master Anthony of Toledo planned and carried out before me, Leonard, in Calabria, and I saw him do it like this. Accordingly, I spent two hundred florins for it, which I received for my sister’s small vineyard (blessed be her memory), at the orders of my brother-german.”¹⁷ Apparently Leonard’s brother was supportive of his hobby: so supportive that he sends Leonard a small fortune to pay for a half-page’s worth of technical instructions, bought off a Spanish alchemist hanging around southern Italy. Francis Petrarch’s authorship provides this recipe with rarefied literary prestige. The venerated Italian poet joins the astronomers, goldsmiths, bishops, philosophers, physicians, and kings who all moonlight as alchemical adepts in the text.

Leonard might have known to be a little more skeptical of Master Anthony's sales pitch, however. This fanciful attribution ignores the inconvenient fact that Petrarch inveighed against precisely this kind of alchemical overinvestment in his popular Latin advice book *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, or *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*. According to Petrarch, the aspiring alchemist will only be disappointed by the returns on his expenditures: "I shall predict the profits you will gain from this art. Your house shall be full of weird guests and strange devices . . . smelters, deceivers, and scoffers; bowls, kettles, phials with evil-smelling liquids in every corner, exotic herbs, foreign salts, and sulphur; and stills, and furnaces. Eventually, all this will provide for you needless worries, a stupid dull head, a disfigured grimy face, dim eyes, grindingly painful poverty, and worst of all, the name of a cheat, and a life spent in the darkness of the night and the secret lurking holes of thieves."¹⁸ Petrarch makes alchemists out to be a bunch of weirdos, hoarders, and criminals alienated by their obsession.

This asocial alchemical life is the opposite of the one enjoyed by Leonard throughout his "Travels" by his own account. His life on the road is characterized by camaraderie among true practitioners of alchemy. He fondly calls a certain Anselm "beloved teacher" (*care magister*) and Anselm affectionately calls Leonard "son."¹⁹ The pair spends five productive weeks together "augmenting" gold before Leonard leaves for Poznan. In the university town of Montpellier, Leonard works under a learned figure named James the German for half a year. In the end, James invites Leonard into his private rooms (*in suo comodo*) to share a prized recipe and addresses his pupil intimately as "faithful Leonard" (*fidelis Leonarde*). The narrator extends the bonds of alchemical faith to readers of his text in turn. Leonard solicits the prayers of his future students in the same terms: "Faithful one, who after my death comes across this, pray to God on behalf of me."²⁰ Against Petrarch's portrait of the failed alchemist as a ruinously stubborn dupe,

Leonard models alchemical success as the proper reward for perseverance, financial commitment, and faithful friendship.

These alchemistic virtues are nowhere more apparent than in the course of the protagonist's most arduous adventure: an expedition to the Baltic Sea by land, over the Black and Mediterranean Seas by ship, and through the Levant to the distant Armenian metropolis of Tauris. Whereas most of "Leonard's Travels" describes his movements in brief declarative headings, this journey unfolds in more detail. Leonard begins in Marburg and then meets up with his traveling companion, a priest named Bartholomew, in Prague. They continue to Krakow, where they seek out a famed alchemist named Demetrius only to learn he has moved to "Livonia." They arrive in that Baltic province nine days later, after a holdup in the Polish city of Gniezno. Demetrius accepts Leonard and Bartholomew as students and teaches them a method of augmenting gold. Before revealing that technique, though, Leonard's narration lingers on the smallest details of the alchemical good life:

And when we came to Livonia on Tuesday at the hour of Vespers, we found master Demetrius in the Armenian quarter, who graciously took us in to his lodging. And when it was time to make dinner, there where we were lodged, orders were given for fresh herring for him, which he ate up happily. The next day Bartholomew, my friend the priest, brought back news that there was good reason for our arrival; Demetrius had said this, and he was pleased. And, seeing that the man was happy, I hastened to buy lunch, going from where I joined up with the master over to the Christian Quarter, to the church of the Blessed Virgin. There I went, where I provided for lunch. And I bought two deer for fourteen Krakovian *grosz*, and other game, and great fish—I have never seen game and fish like that in a good market—and I made a rich lunch.²¹

Nowhere is “Leonard’s Travels” as indulgently detailed as here, when Leonard describes a convivial Tuesday and Wednesday in the company of his new friend. His alchemical recipes may be inexact and vague, yet here he meticulously reports on the menu for this meal, and its procurement, as he shuttles between neighborhoods in an unspecified Livonian market town. This life of bonhomie and *bonne cuisine* draws to an abrupt close, however, when Demetrius sends Leonard and Bartholomew away on another arduous journey if they are to advance their alchemical education, saying: “Go abroad as pilgrims [*ita peregre*], and set forth across all of white Lithuania, and find your way to Caffa. And then from Caffa, where you should take a little break, refuse to be asked about anything, saying only that you seek the way to Jerusalem, and thence take to the water.”²² The alchemical travelers must forgo the pleasures of fellowship and feasting and now keep their mission in the strictest confidence (no more rich lunches with new friends).

Their adventure will require a new discipline as it becomes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Leonard and Bartholomew make the overland journey south to Caffa, a port on the Black Sea, in two months. Sailing to Jerusalem takes another two months. As Demetrius had ordered, they talk to no one, only asking about transportation to Tauris (the modern-day city of Tabriz in Iran). After arriving in Tauris, he and his friend study with the three resident master alchemists at a nearby “Greek school.” Their petitions to learn the “philosophical art” are fielded graciously but ultimately rebuffed. The alchemists give them gold and silver for passage home; and Leonard returns via Jerusalem, stopping on the island of Rhodes on the way. Leonard’s most arduous and richly described journey, then, culminates in an anticlimactic dismissal from a Greek school in a far-off city. Months of travel amount to little in terms of technical knowledge that might be recorded in this collection and passed on to the reader. Travel serves other purposes here. “Leonard’s Travels” opens with a promise

to write of tiring trials, huge expenses, and great difficulties moving among learned men; his Eurasian peregrinations deliver on that promise.

II

Previous scholarly interest in “Leonard’s Travels” has focused on the protagonist’s great voyage from Marburg via Livonia via Tauris. When James Corbett published his 1936 summary article about “Leonard’s Travels,” which announced the existence of this text, he appended a transcription of this narrative portion.²³ So presented separately from its context within the recipe collection and in MS Latin 14005 more generally, Leonard’s account of his great adventure to Livonia and Tauris has been understood to be an authentic report of actual events. Scholars have since asked rather direct questions of fact of this medieval travel narrative: Where exactly did Leonard go? Who really was this Demetrius? Most recently, Rafał Prinke studies this text in a tradition of Polish historians who believe “Leonard’s Travels” to be precious evidence of a thriving network of alchemical practice in medieval Eastern Europe. Reading in this way, however, has led historians to cast doubt on a few particulars of Leonard’s account as we have it in order to make sense of his narrative. “Livonia” is assumed to be a textual error, because Livonia is a regional designation, while Leonard clearly ends up in a city with an Armenian quarter, a Christian quarter, and a church of the Blessed Virgin. This presumption prompts speculation about alternatives: perhaps it was Lutsk, with its Orthodox church dedicated to the Virgin and an Armenian presence; or it was Lviv, which could claim the same.²⁴ (I am content to think simply, that an unnamed city in Livonia was the setting for this episode.) Similarly, Prinke presumes that Leonard did not actually take a detour through Jerusalem, as the route between Caffa and Tauris was one plied regularly by Genoese merchants trading over the Black Sea. Leonard’s passage

through Jerusalem, too, is then chalked up to scribal error and disregarded. In this way, studies of “Leonard’s Travels” have chosen which facts of the account to accept as true and which must be mistakes introduced by the copyist and emended. I am skeptical of this as a historical method: it strikes me as an arbitrarily speculative means to revise Leonard’s itinerary according to what seems realistic or plausible from the historian’s perspective, at the historian’s convenience.

I would even wager that plausibility is an unsuitable criterion by which to evaluate the narrated events of “Leonard’s Travels.” In its place, I propose to read it as an exercise in literary experimentation, which incorporates its collection of alchemical recipes into the structures of another genre of writing. Here we encounter its practical alchemical knowledge circulating under the sign of travel narrative, and so the text invites a particular mode of reading that is sensitive to the conventions of that popular medieval genre. Such an approach will answer none of the historical questions posed previously about where Leonard actually went. Instead, in taking “Leonard’s Travels” to be a literary exercise in generic invention, I situate this singular text within a broader tradition of medieval travel writing, with its own imagined geography and its own criteria for judging the authenticity of narrated experience and its value. As Paul Zumthor puts it, “[the medieval narrative] hangs on a sequence of successive places, a series of toponymies mapping out a discourse . . . hence the often discontinuous character, with gaps, incomplete.”²⁵ Readers of these travel narratives, then, must acclimate to a disoriented manner of movement across their idiosyncratic geographies.

Indeed, the apparently wayward route to Tauris through Jerusalem described in “Leonard’s Travels” appears much less irregular when read against other medieval travel narratives, like the *Description of the World* of Marco Polo (ca. 1300), the *Account* (or *Relatio*, ca. 1330) of the intrepid friar Odoric of Pordenone, or the hugely popular *Book of John Mandeville* (ca. 1360). All of these works take readers through

Tauris, and each position it as a way station between the more familiar world of the Latin West and the vast and relatively unknown lands to the east. In Marco Polo's account, Tauris is a great and noble city and hugely rich through trade; it is populated, he says, by Armenians, Nestorians, Persians, Muslims, and others.²⁶ The *Description* assigns Tauris to the province of Iraq, placing it near Baghdad (although it lies a good 450 miles to its north). So, too, had Odoric of Pordenone visited this "great and royal city," "so opulent a city that you would scarcely believe the things to be found there." John Mandeville—whose *Book of Marvels and Travels* borrows much from Odoric's *Account*—calls Tauris a "fine, handsome city."²⁷ Both Odoric's and Mandeville's narratives proceed to Tauris after having visited Jerusalem and travel through Iraq and the Levant on the way there. Leonard follows in those narratives' tracks by passing through Jerusalem on his own way and, like his predecessors, lauds the city and its "marvelous greatness."²⁸ Prinke suspects that Leonard's jaunt to Jerusalem was an erroneous "copyist's adaptation," due to "imperfect knowledge of the geography of the region."²⁹ This route, after all, takes him much farther south than if he were to ride along, say, on a ship from Caffa to Tauris piloted by a veteran Genoese captain familiar with Black Sea trade routes. But "Leonard's Travels" navigates via Jerusalem on a route plotted out on a map of the world as imagined by those foregoing travel-narrators. Passing through the Holy Land to Tauris, this alchemical pilgrimage retraces their steps to this "city of marvelous greatness."³⁰

Tauris was the subject of one of the many marvelous reports of Marco Polo, a Venetian whose voyages across the steppe to the court of the Great Khans made for popular reading in Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. John Mandeville writes of visiting Tauris, too, but unlike Marco Polo, he may have never existed. His *Book*, at least, is certainly no original account of a voyage to the Holy Land and beyond; it is, rather, a collage of other pilgrimage texts, travel narratives,

and encyclopedia fare. Mandeville might be better thought of as a “narrator’s persona with which we are invited to engage,” as Anthony Bale aptly puts it, an armchair traveler with a good library at this disposal.³¹ Something similar could be said about Leonard of Marburg: he appears to readers as an authorial personality, whose writing renders alchemical procedure into the marvelous stuff of travel narrative. And by posing as a traveler, this alchemical writer could claim a specific and potent mode of textual authority. Shayne Legassie has described how medieval travel writers presented themselves as worldly wise and world-weary. Travel was “travail,” and that travail, Legassie suggests, endowed the traveler with an “embodied mode of authority,” which the travel narrative then attempted to “translate into textual form” such that it earned readers’ confidence.³² Leonard of Marburg recounts his alchemical travels using the rhetoric of “travail” from the start, when he announces his text as an account of tiring trials and great difficulties. His “travail” continues apace, with his weeks in the workshop with Anselm, his six months in the service of James the German, or his trek to the edge of Christendom and back in search of alchemical enlightenment.

Leonard tells of alchemical successes as marvels to behold, beheld in distant lands. He describes having witnessed a number of alchemical operations firsthand from Calabria and Poznan. As he tells Anselm, “carry [the recipe] out in my presence so I might see it, beloved teacher”;³³ so too does he watch the work of Liphard the astronomer, Henry of Prussia, and Anthony of Toledo himself. In this way, Leonard accredits his alchemical procedures with proof gathered *per experimentum*, by experience. Just such claims underwrite the wondrous accounts of far-off marvels by his travel-narrator counterparts: Mandeville claims to drink from the Fountain of Youth in the Holy Land; Marco Polo surveys the 12,000 bridges of the magnificent Chinese city of Quinsai with his own eyes.³⁴ Indeed, Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone, and John Mandeville all begin their narratives with appeals to

eyewitness experience. Marco Polo swears to have seen everything “himself, with his own eyes” (*oculis propriis ipse videt*).³⁵ The wayfaring friar Odoric of Pordenone affirms his account thus: “I . . . do solemnly declare and attest . . . that all these things hereinbefore written I either beheld with my own eyes or heard from men worthy of credit. . . . And many things I have left out and have not caused to be written lest they should be deemed too hard for belief by such as have not seen them with their own eyes.”³⁶ And like Odoric, John Mandeville claims to “have seen and traversed so many kingdoms and lands and provinces and islands” before writing of them. He doubts that he would believe the grandeur of the Mongolian Khan’s court if he had not seen it himself (never mind that Mandeville lifted this passage from Odoric). He closes his *Book* with a concession: “There are many countries and marvels I have not seen, therefore I can’t describe them correctly.”³⁷ Such warrants *per experimentum* were not the exclusive province of travel literature; many works of medicine and alchemy certified their methods as “tried and true.” But “Leonard’s Travels” narrates alchemical experimentation as a traveler’s venture. Ever on the move, ever swearing to have seen things himself, its narrator conjures before readers an authorial persona which melds medieval traveler and alchemical empiric.

“Leonard’s Travels,” then, offers its alchemical instruction as if it is the product of its narrator’s long experience of travel, observation, and hardship. In so doing, the authorial figure of Leonard introduces one more facet to the already multifaceted persona of the alchemist emerging in the later Middle Ages. Tara Nummedal, in her book *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire*, describes how the medieval alchemical tradition “modeled an alchemical persona on other, more familiar personae of medieval culture.”³⁸ Nummedal draws the concept of a persona from its articulation by Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum: “Intermediate between the individual biography and the social institution lies the persona: a cultural identity that simultaneously

shapes the individual in body and mind and creates a collective with a shared and recognizable physiognomy.” They astutely point out that any persona “presupposes a certain degree of cultural recognition, as well as a group physiognomy that can be condensed into a type.” So it is that in “the emergence of new personae . . . there is an element of cultural cut-and-paste,” assembling old, familiar types into new configurations.³⁹ As Nummedal argues, the alchemical persona was one such composite cultural identity. Individual alchemists could inhabit the various, already legible social roles of the scholar, the prophet, and the artisan, in proportions of their own admixture. The medieval scholar was “learned, focused, committed, somewhat detached from the world”; the prophet was “pious, illumined, with powers of insight that surpass or exceed reason”; artisans were “physically robust, dexterous technicians, initiated together into a tight-knit guild of professionals.” In invoking these resonances, Nummedal argues, alchemists could claim “unique access to nature’s secrets, through mind, body, and soul.”⁴⁰ Her argument illustrates how an emergent alchemical persona was cooked up with these “viable ingredients” at the close of the fifteenth century,⁴¹ as alchemy’s practitioners attempted to shape their cultural identity and define the social and cultural meaning of their activity.

Readers of “Leonard’s Travels” in the fifteenth century, then, came to this text with a set of operative presuppositions about the alchemist as cultural type. Its alchemists variously embody those recognizable ingredients of the alchemical persona. Leonard transacts with scholars, such as the learned James the German in Montpellier who has turned his rooms into a laboratory, the Franciscan dialectician in Cologne, and elsewhere a Navarrese philosopher. The otherworldly alchemical adepts at the Greek school practice an illumined, prophetic alchemy: their knowledge of the “philosophical art” is ultimately withheld as inexpressible and unteachable. Leonard learns from artisans, too. He credits one recipe to a Regensburg goldsmith and another to

the master of the Venetian mint who dictates it to Leonard in his workshop.⁴² And Leonard himself exhibits the very qualities proper to these ingredient personae: he is learned (and Latinate) like a good scholar; pious like the prophet; and physically robust and technically skilled like the artisan.

“Leonard’s Travels” invites its readers to coordinate their presuppositions about the alchemical persona as a social type with their presupposed sense of this alchemical text’s genre, the travel narrative, and along with that, a sense of the travel narrator. The figure of Leonard embodies an alchemical persona emerging at the time, as he typifies the generic travel-narrator’s personality. Leonard casts himself as an eyewitness to wonders of a wider world; he is a loyal companion whose trustworthiness was proved on the road; he is a world-wearied, retired adventurer who has gathered up knowledge that might only be earned through the “travail” of travel. And so, “Leonard’s Travels” intermixes the medieval travel-narrator into the *mélange* of identities composing the late-medieval alchemical persona. It is thus a remarkable specimen of alchemical writing: a witness to how these writers could adapt technical knowledge across medieval genres not merely as so many idle literary exercises but as productive and dynamic ones. We may not be able to trust Leonard’s account of a sprawling international network of alchemical practitioners in the 1390s on the facts, but that is no reason for the historian of alchemy to be disappointed. Again, Paul Zumthor’s understanding about medieval travel narratives points us toward a proper, and better, appreciation of the purposes of “Leonard’s Travels” and other texts in the genre: “Veracity [in the medieval travel narrative] matters little: the main thing is the *voyage*, in the sense heavy with philosophical tradition. . . . Here and there the end of an itinerary (be it Hymen’s palace or Sybil’s den) signifies the identification of knowledge with personal truth.”⁴³ So arranged into a personal itinerary, the recipes compiled into “Leonard’s Travels” take on that weight of the narrator’s movement

from a place of ignorance to places of knowledge, won by experience. Leonard is everywhere arriving at new alchemical knowledge, seeing its true practice with his own eyes and committing it to memory or paper—becoming an alchemical authority himself. This voyage of discovery—in that heavy, “philosophical” sense—elevates that alchemical knowledge into the substance of enlightenment and the ends of pilgrimage. Writing an alchemical recipe collection as if it is the collected wisdom of voyaging in “Leonard’s Travels” invites readers along—as if what has been learned *per experimentum*, narrated in the right form, could be somehow translated into a book.

Notes

1. William Newman, “What Have We Learned from the Recent Historiography of Alchemy?,” in “Alchemy and the History of Science,” special focus issue, *Isis* 102, no. 2 (2011): 313–21, at 315. See also Lawrence Principe and William Newman, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 38–42.

2. On alchemical *summae* and *florilegia*, see Lawrence Principe, *Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 73–74. For alchemy as vernacular lyric, see, e.g., the *Cantilena* falsely ascribed to Ramon Llull, found in Catalan and Latin translation in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT, Mellon MS 12, fols. 160v–161v; for alchemical song, see the *Antiphona* in Mellon MS 5, fols. 2r–3v, ascribed elsewhere to Johannes of Teschen.

3. William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 55.

4. “Anno domini millesimo trecentismo nonagesimo quarto Ego Leonardus has infrascriptas vias cum magna difficultate inter doctos homines fui assecutus plurimis fatigis preuijs pariter et expensis &c.” (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Latin 14005, fol. 119r). All translations of “Leonard’s Travels” are my own. For a complete description of this manuscript, see James Corbett, *Catalogue des Manuscrits Alchimiques Latins*, vol. 1 (Brussels: Union Académique Internationale, 1939), 164–78.

5. These are “De quatuor elementis,” fols. 66r–70r; a short recipe titled “Reductio mercurii in primam materiam,” fol. 100r–v; “Ademarii Dyalogus cum Guilhelmo Germano Suo,” fols. 91r–97v; “Enigma de patre et filio,” fols. 106v–107r, all in MS Latin 14005.

6. For instance, names for gold include the Latin *aurum* and its planetary twin *sol*, Greek *crisos*, the puzzling *effobeb* and *origoma*, all translated by the German *golt*; MS Latin 14005, fols. 98r–99v.

7. Rafał T. Prinke, “Antemurale Alchimiae: Patrons, Readers, and Practitioners of Alchemy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth,” *Early Science and Medicine* 17 (2012): 523–47, at 528, 531.

8. The paper’s crown watermark is of a kind with a very common “imperial crown” or “doge crown” mark seen on paper manufactured in the 1470s and the decades after; see C. M. Briquet, *Les Filigranes*², vol. 2 (Leipzig: Karl W. Hiersemann, 1923), 295–96, nos. 4890–4902.

9. MS Latin 14005, fol. 99r–v.

10. “Modus operationis sequens datus est michi Leonardo Rome quem ibidem cum magistro Eustachio laboravi et inveni esse verum” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 120r).

11. “Hanc probatum operacionem probavi cum veni Colonia ad quedam monachum fratrem ordinis minorum ordinis sancti francisssi studentem tunc temporis in facultate artium dyalectice, quam postea obtuli episcopo Strigonensi pro memoria, et pariter venimus ibidem” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 120r).

12. See MS Latin 14005: “Ista est operatio Magistri Johannis Trichibal ad [aurum] perfectum sine defectu quam donavit Regi Francie” (fol. 125r); “ista est probata practica magistri olem cancelarii antiqui Regis sicilie” (fol. 128v); “Item optimum augmentum lune probatum per me Leonardi quod habui a quodam Gallo familiari regis Anglie” (fol. 121v). The “Trichibal” recipe is also recorded in National Library of the Czech Republic, MS 1984 (X.H.6), fols. 24v–26v, where it is attributed to Johannes Trynchibalk; see Lynn Thorndike, “Alchemical Writings in Vatican Palatine and Certain Other Continental Latin Manuscripts,” *Speculum* 11, no. 3 (July 1936): 370–83, at 380–81. This is the only portion of “Leonard’s Travels” I have found in other manuscripts.

13. “Opus magistri Alberti ratisponensis episcopi quod reliquatur cuidam aurifabro dicto vulgariter Hammis won Haws et plene ipsum in forum informaverat. Ut ille michi Leonardo dixit qui fecit et paravit et ab eo Hammis van Haws habuit” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 123v).

14. James Corbett, “L’alchimiste Léonard de Maurperg (XIVe siècle): Sa collection de recettes et ses voyages,” *Bibliothèque de l’École des Chartes* 97 (1936): 131–41, at 132; Prinke, “Antemurale Alchimiae,” 528.

15. MS Latin 14005, fol. 98r.

16. “Modus verus rubificationis [auri] palidi quo usus fui diebus illis quibus cepi vendere aurum” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 121v).

17. “Ista sequens practica Francisci Petracte laureati poete quam reliqueat Cardinali Bononiensi post mortem suam quam paravit et operatus est coram me Leonardo in Calabria magister Anthonius de Toletto et vidi sicut fecit, propter

quam de mandato germani mei fratris expendi ducentos florenos, quos recepi pro parva vinea sororis mee pie memorie” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 127r).

18. Petrarch, *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, trans. Conrad H. Rawski, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 299.

19. MS Latin 14005, fol. 122r.

20. “Tu fidelis qui post mortem meam invenires deum omnipotentem pro me Leonardo exorabis” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 125v).

21. “Et ego videns hominem letum, festinavi pro comparando prandio ubi conduxì magistrum ad vicum Christianorum ad ecclesiam Beate Virginis. Demisso eo, ibi providi de prandio; et emi in principio duos capriollos, per .xiii. grossos cracovienses, et aliis ferinis et piscibus magnis—fere in bono foro numquam ita magnos pisces vidi—et feci prandium dives” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 122v); quoted in Corbett, “L’alchimiste Léonard,” 140.

22. “Et ostendit nobis ubi deberemus sollicitari pro vera facultate, et dixit: ‘Ite peregre, et per totam albam Litwaniam profisciscimini, et inquiratis viam usque Caphum. Et sic de Capho, ubi pausam feceritis, nolite de aliqua re sciscitari nisi queratis viam Ierosolimis; et exinde dabitur vadum’” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 123r); quoted in Corbett, “L’alchimiste Léonard,” 141.

23. Corbett, “L’alchimiste Léonard,” 140–41.

24. On the Polish historiography, I am indebted entirely to Prinke’s account of it in his “*Antemurale Alchimiae*,” 529. Helena Polackkówna proposed Lutsk in 1937; Włodzimierz Hubicki and Yaroslav D. Isaievych advocated for Lviv in 1971.

25. Paul Zumthor, “The Medieval Travel Narrative,” trans. Catherine Peebles, *New Literary History* 25, no. 4 (1994): 809–24, at 812.

26. Marco Polo, *Description of the World*, ed. A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1938), 2: ix–x. See also Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, vol. 2 (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1959), 847–48.

27. Odoric’s narrative from “Odoric of Pordenone,” ed. and trans. Henry Yule, in Henri Cordier, ed., *Cathay and the Way Thither*, Hakluyt Society Second Series 33, vol. 2 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1913), 103–4; Anthony Bale, ed., *The Book of Marvels and Travels* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2012), 71.

28. “De Capho in 2 mensibus pervenimus Ierusalem. Et nichil omnino ibi interrogavimus nisi transitum usque Thauris, civitatem mire magnitudinis” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 123r).

29. Prinke, “*Antemurale Alchimiae*,” 530.

30. MS Latin 14005, fol. 123r.

31. Bale, *Book of Marvels*, xvi.
32. Shayne Aaron Legassie, *Medieval Invention of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 60.
33. “Cui dixi, ‘operemini coram me meis sumptibus ut videam, care magister’” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 122r).
34. Polo, *Description of the World*, 1:327. Quinsai is the modern Hangzhou.
35. Polo, *Description of the World*, 2: v; my translation.
36. “Odoric of Pordenone,” 266–67.
37. Bale, *Book of Marvels*, 123.
38. Tara Nummedal, *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 44.
39. Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum, “Scientific Personae and Their Histories,” *Science in Context* 16, nos. 1–2 (March 2003): 1–8, at 2, 5.
40. Nummedal, *Alchemy and Authority*, 44. This account of the alchemist’s persona joins other recent histories of alchemy that better appreciate alchemists’ indebtedness to the protocols and practices of both prophetic discourse and artisanal life. See, respectively, Leah DeVun’s *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Pamela Smith’s *The Body of the Artisan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
41. Nummedal, *Alchemy and Authority*, 47.
42. “Item aliud probatum per dominum Biurdum de Weneciis qui tenuit monetam ducatorum in sua fabrica. Et docuit me Leonardum per sermone per me sibi factus et cetera” (MS Latin 14005, fol. 128v).
43. Zumthor, “Medieval Travel Narrative,” 820.