

Lawrence M. Principe (1962-)



Lawrence (Larry) M. Principe was born in northern New Jersey in 1962. He fell in love with alchemy while studying chemistry at the University of Delaware (B.S. Chemistry, B.A. Liberal Studies, 1983). A “dual approach” to the history of Chemistry has characterized his work ever since. He obtained a Ph.D. in Organic Chemistry from Indiana University in 1988, but his interests in the History and Philosophy of Science motivated him to earn a second Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University in History of Science, from which he graduated in 1996. His dissertation became the best-selling book: *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and His Alchemical Quest* (Princeton, 1998).

Meanwhile, the Chemistry Department at Johns Hopkins took advantage of the presence of a star organic chemist by hiring him as a Laboratory Instructor. He progressed through the ranks of the non-tenure track faculty in Chemistry, but when an actual tenure-track position in the History of Science opened, he was chosen in 1997 for a joint-appointment between Chemistry and History of Science. In 2006 he was honored as the endowed Drew Professor of the Humanities, with Chairs in both Chemistry and the History of Science. Larry Principe is indeed a HIST unicorn.

Principe continued his Boyle scholarship and joined with Michael Hunter and Antonio Clericuzio to produce the six volume complete *Correspondence of Robert Boyle* (Pickering and Chatto, 1999-2000). Not only is Larry a superb laboratory chemist, but he is capable of the most demanding and detailed scholarship.

One of the ongoing projects that Larry has contributed to the worldwide community of scholars of alchemy is his collaboration with William Newman. They jointly examined the laboratory notebooks of George Starkey and Robert Boyle and discovered the actual chemistry they contained. Their deep insights into the realities of 17th century *chymistry* have revolutionized the discussion of science in this time period. This project produced *Alchemy Tried in the Fire* (Chicago, 2002), which won the History of Science Society's Pfizer Prize (2005), given for the best book in the History of Science in the prior three year period.

Another contribution to the full community was the organization of the 2006 conference on alchemy held at the Chemical Heritage Foundation. One hundred thirty-five scholars of alchemy gathered and both listened to erudite discourses and engaged in intense discussions about all aspects of the scholarship of alchemy. The volume *Chymists and Chymistry* (Science History Publications, 2007; L.M. Principe, editor) is the record of this event. That conference has proved to be a major stimulant to research into alchemy ever since.

Larry Principe has also contributed one of the best works intended for a broader audience interested in alchemy: *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago, 2013). In addition to a nuanced history of the development of alchemy from ancient times to the present, it employs actual laboratory reconstructions of classic recipes for

secret *arcana*. Rather than mythical stories about fictional materials, Principe has used the real materials and discovered just how the laboratory procedures were followed. He produced many classic alchemical substances and presents the visual evidence in his book. This attempt to fully contextualize human activity in chemistry (chymistry) has revolutionized our understanding of the 17th century (and beyond).

Not content to become merely a 17th century specialist, he has struck out in further directions. In 2005, he organized an international workshop at CalTech, which gave opportunity to produce *New Narratives in Eighteenth-Century Chemistry* (Springer, 2007), containing his opening salvo regarding the inadequacies of the historiography of 18th century chemistry. The culmination of this work is his book *The Transmutations of Chymistry: Wilhelm Homberg and the Academie Royale des Sciences* (Chicago, 2020). This book is already poised to produce both many awards and to jump-start a re-appraisal of the narrative of this era. There is much more to discuss than the work of Lavoisier.

Lawrence M. Principe has already received many awards and honors. Among these, he was the recipient of the Franklin-Lavoisier Prize from the Maison de la Chimie and the Chemical Heritage Foundation in 2016. He was the George Sarton Memorial Lecturer of the AAAS in 2011. He received the Francis Bacon Medal for the History and Philosophy of Science in 2004.

The History of Chemistry Division of the American Chemical Society is proud to present the 2019 HIST Award for Outstanding Achievement in the History of Chemistry to Lawrence M. Principe for “his insightful and groundbreaking studies of the actual laboratory chemistry and its documentary presentation in the 17th and 18th centuries.”