

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Katherine Eggert, *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).**

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Katherine Eggert uses the term ‘disknowledge’ to refer to the state of ‘being acquainted with something and being ignorant of it, both at the same time’ (p. 3), and the strategies we use to fend off bodies of information that threaten our preferred ideologies. Her book focuses on the way disknowledge was used in the early modern period as a way of not dealing with inconvenient information about such topics as religious doctrine, Kabbalistic study, and the biology of reproduction. At a higher level of complexity, Eggert discusses the ways in which early modern people theorised this process.

The unifying trope of Eggert’s book is that of alchemy. Despite being widely derided as a con or delusion, alchemy was widely practised and discussed in the early modern period, partly because some people believed in its claims, but also because of its incidental discoveries (such as John Donne refers to in ‘Love’s Alchemy’), the usefulness of its methodology, and its wider influence on esoteric thought. As a knowledge system that could be ‘both true and false, both profound and risible’ (p. 4), alchemy offered a convenient metaphor with which to explore the ambiguous status of obsolescent knowledge systems. Paradoxically, it also offered a set of terms with which to keep threats to those systems at bay.

One example of this appears in the writings of Donne, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, discussed in Eggert’s second chapter. All of these poets inherited a Protestant scepticism about transubstantiation and about the medieval reworking of Aristotelian physics that had been used to theorise it. At the same time, they were unable to discard the doctrine entirely, and alchemy – another set of ideas that presupposes the capacity of matter to undergo extraordinary change – allowed them to engage with it. ‘Love’s Alchemy’ culminates in Donne’s image of ‘mummy, possesst’, simultaneously a

misogynistic epithet, a medicinal cure drawn from Paracelsian alchemy, and an oblique reference to the ingestion of Christ's body. More explicitly, Herbert's comparison of the Eucharist to 'the philosopher's stone "That turneth all to Gold"' (p. 98) simultaneously asserts its transformative power and dodges the question of its physical nature. Eggert ends her chapter with a telling comparison between Herbert and Vaughan, whose use of alchemical imagery to explore religious experience goes hand in hand with a general reluctance to consider the 'precise mechanics' of the Eucharist at all (p. 107).

In her next two chapters Eggert considers the early modern study of the Kabbalah and then developments in the understanding of human reproduction. For non-Jews, the first of these involved a dependence on Jewish scholarship and a knowledge of Hebrew (or access to a translation or translator). Whether out of fear of being associated with Judaism or out of plain anti-Semitism, Christians working with the Kabbalah elided its Jewish origins; more specifically, Eggert argues, they skimmed its content and took what they needed rather than attempting to understand it more fully. Eggert makes good use here of the example of John Dee, who owned 'multiple Hebrew primers' (p. 130) that he uncharacteristically failed to annotate or sometimes, it appears, even open, and productively compares him to Marlowe's Faustus, whose reading of the Bible is notoriously superficial and who is drawn to the 'lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters' of his magical books rather than the meaning of what they contain.

Anatomists, too, could be selective in their reading of the human (especially female) body. When William Harvey rejected the ovaries as 'utterly unconcerned in the matter of Generation' (p. 172), he held to an Aristotelian view of reproductive biology rather than accept the findings of Fallopius and Crooke. Eggert sets this up against a contrast she finds in *The Faerie Queene* between the false Florimell, who deceives the men who see in her what they want to see — an assemblage of fetishized body parts — and Britomart's dream in the Temple of Isis, which Eggert reads as a 'dream of Paracelsian alchemical reproduction in which no element has the upper hand' (p. 188).

Although Eggert compellingly demonstrates the pervasiveness of alchemical imagery in a wide variety of early modern texts, I wasn't sure about all of her assertions of its presence: the 'liquid ayre' that Archimago uses to make another simulacrum, the false Una in the first canto of *The Faerie Queene*, perhaps 'corresponds to the elemental qualities of alchemical mercury' (p. 182), but 'corresponds' is having to do a lot of work here, implying allusion but not actually identifying it. The false Florimell may undergo 'a new round of alchemical processing, in this case melting' when set beside her real equivalent (p. 185), but surely vanishing 'into naught' is not the same as transmutation? While the alchemical focus gives her book shape and drive, some of the

links she identifies between alchemy and other forms of knowledge might have been even more effective if they had been frankly presented as analogies than they are as instances of allusion or influence. In her first chapter, for instance, she argues that early modern humanism, declining in the face of scepticism, religious division, and a nascent scientific worldview, lived on in the discourses of alchemy. I found Eggert's links between these two systems, with their shared veneration for ancient texts and penchant for allegory, extremely telling and thought-provoking, but her statement that 'Alchemy became humanism by other means' (p. 19) seemed rather forced in its teleology.

However, these cavils partly reflect the fact that Eggert's book is so wide-ranging in its scholarship and so ambitious in presenting a bold, provocative and unified argument about knowledge in the early modern period. Eggert offers the fruits of considerable reading in diverse branches of early modern thought, and I learned a great deal from her work. She also unobtrusively but effectively asserts the continuing prevalence of disknowledge in the modern world with allusions to 'intelligent design' (p. 13) and 'U.S. economic policy' (p. 244). Her book feels extremely timely, published as it was the year before the *annus horribilis* of 2016. This is not to say, though, that it presents the academy as immune from disknowledge: I wondered whether Eggert's depiction of sixteenth-century humanism, struggling to deal with the proliferation of texts and with systems of thought that questioned its usefulness or relevance, was meant to reflect obliquely on the modern humanities. More positively, though, in her final chapter Eggert suggests that fiction itself serves as a form of disknowledge — a productive, liberating one that (as in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*) allows the creation of new worlds and new possibilities. Literature may be as fanciful as alchemy, but — as with alchemy in the early modern era — it offers a way of thinking about the world that can be enlightening, transformative or simply pleasurable. It seems fitting, and perhaps not wholly coincidental, that the best-selling book of our times is about the Philosopher's Stone.