

**Katherine Eggert. *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England***

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*Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* is a varied, somewhat eclectic collection of discussions revolving around a complex central tenet. Its lengthy subtitle indicates extensive ambitions, and there is a question whether the book can do everything it sets out to do equally well. As it turns out, despite some weaknesses, *Disknowledge* is largely successful in its enterprises.

The book has – at the very least – a threefold purpose. It attempts to coin a term, “disknowledge” (more about which anon); it claims that in the interim between the dying out of humanism and the beginning of the Enlightenment, alchemy became the leading intellectual and philosophical discourse of its time; and it attempts to explore how the interplay between disknowledge and alchemy emerges and is negotiated in the drama and poetry of the first half of the seventeenth century. Additional goals of the study include assessing – always within a framework of esotericism and epistemology – the status of Jewish texts and identities, of gynaecology and the female body, and of *writing* in a more general sense.

The book’s first chapter proper, “How to Sustain Humanism,” attempts to describe how humanist discourses intermingled with alchemical language from around the turn of the century. More importantly, it sets out to define the term “disknowledge,” and it does so with a great deal of wit, amid a wealth of references. Crudely paraphrased, disknowledge is a kind of knowledge that one actively “forgets” that one possesses, because its implications are somehow intolerable. Examples include the willed ignorance of Hebrew sustained by John Dee (chapter 3) or the similar attitude towards the female anatomy affected (in very different ways) by William Harvey and Helkiah Crooke, as discussed in chapter 4.

Eggert spends much time explaining how disknowledge is especially useful in an early modern context and how it overlaps with or differs from other theories of epistemology, or the negation thereof. The cornucopia of related thinking evoked in this chapter contains references even to modern attitudes towards knowledge, such as Harry Frankfurt’s depressingly apt “bullshit” concept, and what TV satirist Stephen Colbert “has taught us to call ‘truthiness’” (48). “One sure sign that disknowledge is operating in a text,” Eggert says, “is when bad ideas – or nutty ideas, or simply irrelevant ideas – start to look good”. She focuses on “one discipline that literary texts persistently choose as a sign or signal of epistemological digression: the discipline of alchemy,” which, she contends, had a reputation for being “an especially bad idea” (4).

The first chapter argues convincingly that there is a relationship between humanism and alchemy, manifest in a swerve away from the former’s focus on rhetoric, towards the material focus of the latter. Arguably, more could have been done to map alternative perspectives, or to address more clearly how alchemy was transforming during the period where it was ostensibly so important to seventeenth century intellectual life. Francis Bacon, for example, is frequently evoked, but he is not exactly an alchemist (and Eggert does not claim that he is, at least not exclusively). It might have been fruitful to look at what he represented as an

alternative to fully-fledged alchemy, whatever that is. It is not entirely clear whether alchemy is being pursued because it is an alternative to mainstream discourses or because it itself becomes a mainstream discourse of sorts. Whatever is the case, its importance is inevitably amplified by its central position in *Disknowledge*. Although it is sometimes unclear how central alchemy is to Eggert, she does state that “all of humanism’s shortcomings ... were also charges that could be levelled against alchemy” (9), which tends to make her book more rather than less interesting, as it goes on to explore the ambiguous position of alchemy after 1600.

What is being said about alchemy may be debatable, but the first chapter argues authoritatively that disknowledge is a useful term, which may be applied to the transformations and shifting epistemic choices of early modern writings in order to uncover some of the period’s ideas about itself.

One important transformation that was still being felt around the turn of the century was the reformation. In the second chapter, entitled “How to Forget Transubstantiation,” Eggert explores how metaphysical poets like John Donne and George Herbert employ strategies of avoidance that draw on alchemical metaphors to circumvent some of the Roman Catholic implications of transubstantiation and other by then problematic Christian traditions. The second chapter thus becomes the first testing ground for the disknowledge concept and its utility in close reading. At this point the reader wonders if the concept will hold water, and whether it is able to bring out valuable readings that could not have been arrived at or precisely defined without the aid of this concept. In the event, the readings of Donne and Herbert are quite involved and, in contrast to the exuberant and intellectually wide-ranging first chapter, very “close”. It investigates parts of some poems by some poets, and as such is a valuable study, but as this chapter looks only at a detail of detail, as it were, it does little to buttress the claims made at the book’s outset.

In the next few chapters, however, the scope slowly begins to widen, creating an increasingly comprehensive notion of the role disknowledge plays in late humanism. The third chapter, “How to Skim the Kabbalah” presents a powerful account of how early modern philosopher-magicians like John Dee effaced the Jewish content of their middle-eastern sources; Dee went as far as to invent an alphabet that looked like Hebrew, but which he asserted was somehow “better”. This because he was unable to read Hebrew, but also, claims Eggert, because of his antisemitism. This learned and enjoyable account is well argued, and in presenting another facet of disknowledge, makes it easier to see what it can be used to investigate in early modern texts. But this too is a slightly uneven chapter. In its second half, the focus moves on to literature, specifically how the relationship between Western Esotericism and Kabbalah is reflected in the relationship between Prospero and Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. It is implied that this relationship can be viewed as similar to the relationship between Dee and the Jewish world. There is not a great deal of textual evidence for this in the play, so unlike what was the case with the metaphysical poets, the argument does not rest on a close reading (or, it appears, on authorial intention), but for some textual details that remain ambiguous. Clearly, Caliban is of the earth and may be said to represent that element in the play’s alchemical framework, but earth alone does not a golem make.

In the fourth chapter, “How to Avoid Gynaecology,” the pendulum swings again, towards a much more forceful line of argument about alchemical-medical attitudes towards female anatomy and organs of reproduction in early modern medical tracts. Again, utilizing disknowledge as a reading strategy is expressly conducive to revealing how sixteenth- and

seventeenth century medical practitioners and theorists denigrated the role of women in the process of human reproduction. Even though they could and should have known better, these medical writers opted not to know what they knew, for ideological reasons. This is nicely depicted by Eggert, who convincingly demonstrates that their reasons are tied up with a misogynist mode of thinking that really has a lot to do with alchemy, even several decades into the seventeenth century. The ensuing discussion of *The Fairy Queene*, whilst addressing only a small portion of the text, cogently itemizes how the poem negotiates female bodies, purities and impurities, again in an alchemical framework. The discussion of *Love's Labour's Lost*, too, contributes useful perspectives to the greater argument of the book.

The most suggestive and interesting chapter of the book, however, is chapter five, “How to Make Fiction”. Here, Eggert begins to explore tangential points between alchemy and literature, and the manifold ways in which energetic crosspollinations take place between the two linguistic and artistic realms. Both of them, Eggert argues, are places of creative semelfactivity, in which multiple signs and signifiers dance around, creating new connections and new possibilities. This, and the ensuing epilogue, are by far the most suggestive parts of the book, and one almost regrets that it ends here rather than begins.

In sum, then, this is a somewhat uneven book, in which the central tenet of disknowledge is sometimes a little contrived. In most cases, however, the powerful, suggestive and wide-ranging intellectual thrust of the study transcends its potential shortcomings. Its vigour and curiosity are inspiring, and its first and final chapters are especially interesting. Sure, one could nitpick. The book has a very positive attitude to Frances Yates, and says about her works that they were the object of “often sympathetic” rebuttals by people like Brian Vickers, when in fact Vickers rejects Yates’ thesis wholesale (and with some vehemence). In an effort to have her cake and eat it too, Eggert acknowledges the criticism directed towards the so-called Yates Thesis whilst downplaying its gravity. And, sure, the argument can be somewhat sprawling at times, especially in the first chapter. Also, as mentioned, some of the close readings are less than convincing, or perhaps convincing enough but curiously inessential in a book whose larger intellectual project is so much more dynamic. Relatively minor quibbles aside, Eggert’s line of argument is usually stringent, always erudite, and all the while tends to anticipate possible counterarguments. The book is often very funny, without ever seeming less serious for it. In material terms, the hardback copy of the book is a high-quality product too; typographical mistakes are extremely thin on the ground.

Overall, this is a book whose many strengths outweigh its few possible weaknesses; *Disknowledge* is a valuable, rich and frequently thought-provoking addition to its field.