

DIANE PURKISS

<div>Kathrine Eggert</div> <div>DISKNOWLEDGE</div>
Literature, alchemy and the end of humanism in Renaissance England
368pp. University of Pennsylvania Press. £36. 978 0 8122 4751 0
<div>Theodore Ziolkowski</div> <div>THE ALCHEMIST IN LITERATURE</div>
From Dante to the present
237pp. Oxford University Press. £55. 978 0 19 874683 6

Why bother with a redistribution of wealth when there can be wealth for all at the touch of a stone or from the rays of the sun? For medieval thinkers, mineral resources like gold, silver and tin were not finite. Like plants, they grew under the influence of beams from the sky. The fantasy of endless expansion preceded but was resoundingly confirmed by the discovery of the treasures of the Aztecs and the Incas, and their vast empires. Meanwhile, the world of learning also underwent a sudden expansion, due to the slow collapse of the Byzantine empire; as it crumbled, its scholars fled west, bringing with them Greek literature that had not been known in northern Europe for centuries. It was a heady moment. Anyone could clamber up the great chain of being if the right influences were applied, or so thought Pico della Mirandola, in his state-funded multidisciplinary thinktank in Florence; his plan was to help humanity outdo the angels in every respect.

Ambition was always part of alchemy. Alchemy can be vaguely defined as the art of manipulating the hidden or secret powers of nature, a definition so elastic that it covers everything from simple chemistry experiments to the power to grant eternal life. Fire and air are alike since both are hot. Fire and earth are alike since both are dry. Or rather, drying: none of those four elements is a permanent thing. Everything – including the human body – is slowly changing, and all the alchemist needs to do is speed things along in the right direction.

Any alchemist used a basic process which could be varied depending on need and desired result. First, he took base matter (say, dew, or horse dung) and purified it – confusingly, this was called blackening. Then the purified matter was separated into its constituent parts – via heating, or distilling, or fixing or all three, once or many times, as the substance changed from black to white to red, sometimes via green or yellow, or blue. To do this the alchemist needed a furnace called an athanor, and a still called an alembic that conveyed vapours into a receiver. The vapours might be said to be mercury. They might be said to be just about anything. It was showy. But was it just show?

However hard we try to reimagine the shape of the early modern mentality, most of us still struggle with the centrality of alchemy and alchemical thinking. This is entirely reasonable, because early modern people valued alchemy not only for its promises of good solid material wealth, but for the very malleability and deferral of meaning which make it confusing. For Katherine Eggert in her rich, detailed, subtle and bold-faced book (all puns

intended), alchemy becomes a special language in which to not-affirm, to not-speak. Deriving from Aristotle, refined by Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and by Paracelsus, alchemy liked to claim that it came from ancient Egypt, and a steady stream of hopeful or downright fraudulent claims were made that kept the language familiar. While Eggert sees alchemy’s reputation as in a state of collapse early in the seventeenth century, an analysis of the plethora of alchemical texts churned out by the presses during the English Civil War illustrates the difficulty of showing a steady or simple decline. Like other more-or-less supernatural beliefs, alchemy died hard. Its longevity was helped by its practitioners’ insistence on secrecy. And as a secret, alchemy could also be a metaphor for other secrets, the “Catholic physics” of transubstantiation. The magical, beautiful language in which it clothed itself, the alembics and emerald tablets, the hieroglyphs and *sol niger* and cinnabar and mummy . . . beautiful precisely because meaningless.

As Eggert points out, this made alchemy itself more a thing of words than of deeds. Indeed, the fruit of all this language was often enough to expose *all* words as empty and even duplicitous, a promissory note that failed to deliver. The search for the philosopher’s stone was connected cognitively with the early modern search for a perfect language – the quest for an ancient language cleansed of medieval Catholicism, thus ideally a language the Middle Ages had not known. John Dee, for example, unable – as everyone in his time was – to read Egyptian hieroglyphics, concocted his own. Yet alchemy also committed itself to an idea that language, like matter, was malleable and above all almost deconstructionist, endlessly deferring meaning. This is, to say the least, frustrating for anyone who wants to get to the bottom of what it is *for*; it is a will-o’-the-wisp, leading a walker endlessly on. “They made their bokis to many men ful derk”, wrote Thomas Norton gloomily. The language of alchemy, Eggert shows, is the very opposite of what Jung saw in it; it seeks to force “a newly terrifying physical world” back into the world of words. The lures remained potent. As the Jesuit Martin del Rio remarked, alchemy was a rich man’s hobby, a way of getting still more for those who already had a lot. “Nature, that made us of four elements / Warring within our beasts for regiment / Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds”, says one of Christopher Marlowe’s protagonists. Unfortunately the speaker is the tyrant Tamburlaine, who intends no spiritual transformation, but only “the sweet fruition of an earthly crown”.

Eggert is fully alive to the two-faced duplicity of alchemy and its claims. In Prague, alchemists in Golden Lane vowed to find the power to turn base metals into gold, as if they were themselves little suns. Such great golden hopes were successively dashed and scoffed at, and in a thorough, thoughtful analysis Theodore Ziolkowski traces the process. Take the Faust myth – Faust was originally a famous alchemist. Lyly – mere satires. Was there *seri*ousness anywhere? Not in Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* – an anthology of occult fraudulence. Why then did people go on reading Cicero and Aristotle, ignoring Francis Bacon’s calls for a fresh start at everything? Because changing the bedrock basis of education was hardly possible. Eggert thinks – though this ignores the fact that in England humanism itself had been in the saddle for only a bare

hundred years. If anything, the truth might be that it was too soon for another revolution. It is certainly true that alchemy was a flexible metaphor, one that could stand for falsehood or for purification. Both profound (and posh), and also risible, it spun a perpetual set of new clothes for the emperor.

Yet charlatans never tell lies alone. Some alchemy provided genuinely useful techniques and products: transformations by heating, for instance, or Van Eyck’s vermilion and verdigris. More importantly, all kinds of science and magic could turn out to be methods of spiritual enlightenment, especially if they failed in other respects; all failed science becomes the basis for non-scientific faith. Ziolkowski shows how in *The Canon Yeoman’s Tale*, for example, the voluble yeoman exposes his master’s career as a failed alchemist; he tries to explain their occupation, their failed attempts at alchemy, and their elusive search for the philosopher’s stone. He tells of a man who asks Plato the name of the secret stone; Plato explains it is Titanos, which he then glosses as Magnesia, and then as ignotum per ignocius. Ignorance by ignorance; Plato explains that real alchemists can never explain. God and Christ do not wish anyone to find it out except where it is pleasing to them. It follows that the yeoman advises men not to bother.

This is as playful as anything to be found in Donne or Shakespeare, a problem for Katherine Eggert’s thesis that the disknowledge of alchemy characterizes the moment of the Renaissance. Her book is one of a raft which have lately sought to offer an account of the particularity of the Renaissance, partly in response to a previous trend emphasizing continuities between the Middle Ages and the early modern.

We could think of comparisons with Steven Mullaney’s new book *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare*, which begins with a (literally) harrowing account of the removal of a house and carloads of bones from St Paul’s Churchyard into a marsh beyond Moorgate, an act of unknowing, obviation. Usually seen as rebirth – the literal meaning – the Renaissance could also be seen as an abortion. Stephen Greenblatt once said that whatever we dub “subversive” in the past is likely to be that which anticipates us and our orthodoxies, so among the things being forgotten here are older, wiser understandings of the complexity of cultural change. The sudden passion to fuse – or confuse – secularism with the Reformation, and thus to conflate the Renaissance and its humanism with Protestantism, is understood by all to be a simplistic mistake, yet that mistake keeps on being played out as *post hoc ergo propter hoc* gallops recklessly and fallaciously onwards. One book collector taking a book from a shelf: how wonderfully individual that sounds, and how very like our good selves. And how lovely and simple the myth is: learning lost in those dreadful Middle ges, then suddenly, *alohamora*, it’s back.

In one sense, alchemy is the ideal sphere in which such broad brushstrokes can be put under a harder light and examined microscopically. In some respects, Eggert’s book diagnoses a problem where there isn’t one. She wants to glance at transubstantiation as well as the Kabbalah, female anatomy as well as the rise of science. Though very sexy, these topics load their own complexities onto the already diffi-

cult structures being investigated. But the real trouble with locating alchemy as an act of obviation is that its practitioners were often keen to say the exact opposite. Elias Ashmole, for example, wrote in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* in 1652 that previous alchemists such as John Dee had been “so strongly fortunate as to finde a very large quantity of the Elixir in some part of the Ruines of Glastonbury-Abbey”. If this was an effort to “forget” medieval Catholicism, it was a curious way of going about it. Eggert correctly notes that what worried alchemical thinkers was how Christ’s body could be simultaneously present on many altars in a single moment. This was one of those visible stretches that allowed Calvinists to do what they did best: laugh like drains.

William Prynne said that a Catholic priest who could change the bread to a body should have no trouble changing lead into gold. “Popish chymicks make a thousand Gods”, chortled George Goodwin. Some of Eggert’s readings are huge oversimplifications. When Herbert writes that “God who gives perfumes / Flesh assumes / And with it perfumes my heart”, he doesn’t mean that “God has conditioned us to associate our ingestion of the sacramental bread with an experience of perfumed sweetness”, but that consuming the Eucharist allows the perfume access to his inner self. The perfume is a *metaphor* for grace, especially salvific grace. As the Herbert scholar Elizabeth Clarke would remind us, the poet is thinking of *The Song of Songs*; much that is presented as puzzling in *Disknowledge* is simply Biblical. Eggert’s previous work on female authority showed her to be a clever and able reader of early modern gender; it is a pity that she drops the subject so entirely here, most of all because it seems relevant; the overlap between housewifery, home medicines and the alchemy of food preservation has been noted by many, including Jayne Archer, while the language of alchemy is itself strangely gendered.

Yet as Theodore Ziolkowski shows, any wagon hitched to alchemy in the early modern period was likely to be dragged ignominiously off the road. His collection of lunatics, lovers and poets drawn passionately to alchemy’s powerful symbolism shows that the majority pursued the topic with deadpan irony as recently as the early twenty-first century. By omitting any genre fiction – including that the most famous of all works with a title that alludes to alchemy – he keeps the tone exceedingly serious, even earnest, and this might miss the point comprehensively. It is good to see an explicit effort to ask why alchemy has “a special appeal” suggesting – perhaps erroneously – that alchemy alone offers its practitioners the power to improve the present rather than to predict the future. But both astrology and other forms of divination mostly appeal as mirrors of the enquiring self, a kind of glamourized selfie which offers proof of one’s own endlessly compelling complexity. Alchemy has nothing to say to the self except to offer what every writer has shown to be a handful of fairy gold, doomed to be dead leaves by morning light. If it stands for anything, it stands for the allure of change *in and of itself*, and also for the sheer attraction of a complex system that comes complete with its own terminology. Like falconry, or trainspotting, this carries its own conviction, immune to time. Thus, *talking* alchemy offers a simulacrum of immortality.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

But the real trouble with locating alchemy as an act of obviation is that its practitioners were often keen to say the exact opposite. Elias Ashmole, for example, wrote in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* in 1652 that previous alchemists such as John Dee had been “so strongly fortunate as to finde a very large quantity of the Elixir in some part of the Ruines of Glastonbury-Abbey”. If this was an effort to “forget” medieval Catholicism, it was a curious way of going about it. Eggert correctly notes that what worried alchemical thinkers was how Christ’s body could be simultaneously present on many altars in a single moment. This was one of those visible stretches that allowed Calvinists to do what they did best: laugh like drains.

William Prynne said that a Catholic priest who could change the bread to a body should have no trouble changing lead into gold. “Popish chymicks make a thousand Gods”, chortled George Goodwin. Some of Eggert’s readings are huge oversimplifications. When Herbert writes that “God who gives perfumes / Flesh assumes / And with it perfumes my heart”, he doesn’t mean that “God has conditioned us to associate our ingestion of the sacramental bread with an experience of perfumed sweetness”, but that consuming the Eucharist allows the perfume access to his inner self. The perfume is a *metaphor* for grace, especially salvific grace. As the Herbert scholar Elizabeth Clarke would remind us, the poet is thinking of *The Song of Songs*; much that is presented as puzzling in *Disknowledge* is simply Biblical. Eggert’s previous work on female authority showed her to be a clever and able reader of early modern gender; it is a pity that she drops the subject so entirely here, most of all because it seems relevant; the overlap between housewifery, home medicines and the alchemy of food preservation has been noted by many, including Jayne Archer, while the language of alchemy is itself strangely gendered.

Yet as Theodore Ziolkowski shows, any wagon hitched to alchemy in the early modern period was likely to be dragged ignominiously off the road. His collection of lunatics, lovers and poets drawn passionately to alchemy’s powerful symbolism shows that the majority pursued the topic with deadpan irony as recently as the early twenty-first century. By omitting any genre fiction – including that the most famous of all works with a title that alludes to alchemy – he keeps the tone exceedingly serious, even earnest, and this might miss the point comprehensively. It is good to see an explicit effort to ask why alchemy has “a special appeal” suggesting – perhaps erroneously – that alchemy alone offers its practitioners the power to improve the present rather than to predict the future. But both astrology and other forms of divination mostly appeal as mirrors of the enquiring self, a kind of glamourized selfie which offers proof of one’s own endlessly compelling complexity. Alchemy has nothing to say to the self except to offer what every writer has shown to be a handful of fairy gold, doomed to be dead leaves by morning light. If it stands for anything, it stands for the allure of change *in and of itself*, and also for the sheer attraction of a complex system that comes complete with its own terminology. Like falconry, or trainspotting, this carries its own conviction, immune to time. Thus, *talking* alchemy offers a simulacrum of immortality.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

But the real trouble with locating alchemy as an act of obviation is that its practitioners were often keen to say the exact opposite. Elias Ashmole, for example, wrote in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* in 1652 that previous alchemists such as John Dee had been “so strongly fortunate as to finde a very large quantity of the Elixir in some part of the Ruines of Glastonbury-Abbey”. If this was an effort to “forget” medieval Catholicism, it was a curious way of going about it. Eggert correctly notes that what worried alchemical thinkers was how Christ’s body could be simultaneously present on many altars in a single moment. This was one of those visible stretches that allowed Calvinists to do what they did best: laugh like drains.

William Prynne said that a Catholic priest who could change the bread to a body should have no trouble changing lead into gold. “Popish chymicks make a thousand Gods”, chortled George Goodwin. Some of Eggert’s readings are huge oversimplifications. When Herbert writes that “God who gives perfumes / Flesh assumes / And with it perfumes my heart”, he doesn’t mean that “God has conditioned us to associate our ingestion of the sacramental bread with an experience of perfumed sweetness”, but that consuming the Eucharist allows the perfume access to his inner self. The perfume is a *metaphor* for grace, especially salvific grace. As the Herbert scholar Elizabeth Clarke would remind us, the poet is thinking of *The Song of Songs*; much that is presented as puzzling in *Disknowledge* is simply Biblical. Eggert’s previous work on female authority showed her to be a clever and able reader of early modern gender; it is a pity that she drops the subject so entirely here, most of all because it seems relevant; the overlap between housewifery, home medicines and the alchemy of food preservation has been noted by many, including Jayne Archer, while the language of alchemy is itself strangely gendered.

Yet as Theodore Ziolkowski shows, any wagon hitched to alchemy in the early modern period was likely to be dragged ignominiously off the road. His collection of lunatics, lovers and poets drawn passionately to alchemy’s powerful symbolism shows that the majority pursued the topic with deadpan irony as recently as the early twenty-first century. By omitting any genre fiction – including that the most famous of all works with a title that alludes to alchemy – he keeps the tone exceedingly serious, even earnest, and this might miss the point comprehensively. It is good to see an explicit effort to ask why alchemy has “a special appeal” suggesting – perhaps erroneously – that alchemy alone offers its practitioners the power to improve the present rather than to predict the future. But both astrology and other forms of divination mostly appeal as mirrors of the enquiring self, a kind of glamourized selfie which offers proof of one’s own endlessly compelling complexity. Alchemy has nothing to say to the self except to offer what every writer has shown to be a handful of fairy gold, doomed to be dead leaves by morning light. If it stands for anything, it stands for the allure of change *in and of itself*, and also for the sheer attraction of a complex system that comes complete with its own terminology. Like falconry, or trainspotting, this carries its own conviction, immune to time. Thus, *talking* alchemy offers a simulacrum of immortality.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.

Alchemists were still trying almost up till the reign of Victoria. In 1783, an alchemist named James Price claimed to be able to transmute base metal into gold, and performed this before an elite audience, including Lord Palmerston. However, when the Royal Society insisted he perform the act again before a scientific committee, Price drank acid and died before their eyes. If history begins as tragedy and returns as farce, alchemy begins as just about everything admirable and returns as fantasy. It exerts a marked influence on both J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman because of its interstitial position between science and imagination. If you want to make imagination *look like* science, alchemy is by far your best bet.