KATHERINE EGGERT. *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 351. $55.00 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2016.129

In *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the Ed of Humanism in Renaissance England*, Katherine Eggert offers a wide-ranging exploration of how modes of thought can be useful even if, or especially when, they are most likely wrong. While Eggert is capacious in her interests, drawing from sociology, the history of science and medicine, cultural theory, and early modern history, she is committed to exploring literary texts for what they say about the processes of belief. For Eggert, questionable modes of thought can be seen as a strategy for solving or avoiding epistemological crises. She coins the term *disknowledge* to describe this practice (3), suggesting that disknowledge helps us consider knowledge as a motion, rather than, "a body, an activity, or an acquisition" (48). Disknowledge involves a conscious choice to embrace one way of understanding the world over another. At the moment of choice, truth or falsity do not, in themselves, matter (41). What does matter, for Eggert and the writers she examines, is how this act models an approach to the world as a whole.

Eggert argues that in the seventeenth century some thinkers repeatedly employed disknowledge at moments when old ways of thinking had been discredited but before they had been replaced by more plausible epistemologies and methodologies. As Eggert demonstrates, disknowledge can be destructive, especially when it serves to fend off unpalatable truths. It can also, however, serve as a way to imagine epistemological practices that do not yet exist. For this reason, Eggert's book, despite its interest in failure, obfuscation, and misreading, remains an optimistic one. She insists that the act of choosing, so central to disknowledge, opens up the possibility of new forms of knowledge, new worlds, in which conscious human choices make all the difference.

Throughout her book, Eggert draws attention to how seventeenth-century humanists and alchemists struggled to reconcile their aspirations with their increasingly obvious failures. As she argues in the first chapter, the pairing of alchemy and late-humanism makes sense because the alchemical and humanistic treatment of the past, and of books, aligned so strongly. Both traditions relied on the rediscovery and circulation of books; both sought to synchronize all learning into a universal theory of how things work in order to refine and perfect the world. Alchemy and humanism also suffered from the same problems: too many books, too many incompatible ideas, and the uncomfortable fact that their promised and desired perfection remained elusive. The strategies humanists and alchemists used to prop up their faltering projects provide the basis for Eggert's subsequent chapters, namely, conscious forgetting, skimming, strategic ignorance, and, finally, defining the world through narrative (49–52).

Eggert centers her second chapter on the purposeful forgetting that allows us to first ignore a problem and then deny the problem ever bothered us in the first place. This form of forgetting is not, Eggert insists, an act of erasure. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that no alternatives yet exist for patently flawed systems. Eggert see this form of disknowledge on display whenever early modern Christians grappled with the vexing question: what, if anything, happens to matter during the Eucharist? Concerns over the physics of matter coalesced in the work of John Donne, William Herbert, and Henry Vaughn, all of whom turned to alchemical imagery when they considered how, when, or even whether, one thing might really become another.

In her third chapter, Eggert focuses on the humanist practice of skimming, a form of "active reading" (127) through which "an entire body of learning is remade so that it may be known in a new and piecemeal fashion" (116). Eggert is particularly interested in how Protestant writers and alchemists such as John Dee Christianized the Kabbalah by discarding anything in it that might hint at Jewishness. The dangers presented by skimming come across in the two literary works discussed in the chapter. For Eggert, Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (1588–1592) shows a poor skimmer, one who's damnation comes when he fetishizes books over the

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strategies of transformation his books might offer. William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), on the other hand, makes visible the violence and ethical cost associated with even properly done skimming.

Eggert details the contortions seventeenth-century anatomists underwent to avoid growing evidence of women's role in reproduction in the fourth chapter. Anatomists found a pattern for avoidance in the work of alchemists, as both groups dreamt of ways to purify and transform matter. She uses Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) and Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (1598) to consider how this avoidance came under critique. For Eggert, Spenser's male characters offer readings of reproduction and women's bodies that privilege nonsense, fantasy, or blindness. When they do, the women of the epic suffer. In Shakespeare's play, male-controlled reproduction "falls flat, its products sometimes distasteful but always untenable" (202). And yet, for Shakespeare's characters, as for seventeenth-century alchemists and anatomists, dreams finally prove more compelling than the world as it is.

In her final chapter, Eggert considers disknowledge in a utopic vein. Alchemy and literature eventually solve the crisis of late-humanism by allowing us to imagine worlds far more satisfying than those of the present (208). To chart this movement, Eggert considers Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600–1), Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), and Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666), three works that she presents in a line from failure to possibility. While Hamlet indulges in destructive forms of disknowledge, ignoring anything or anyone that does not fit his dream of humanistic synchronism, Jonson's characters demonstrate the delight they take in what they know to be false. In Cavendish, Eggert sees the operations of disknowledge as exactly those that make fiction possible and necessary. She argues that for Cavendish everything, from particles to people, can be imagined as creating its own story and its own theory of the way things work. This is disknowledge as world making—the conscious turn away from what is, to what is not, but might be.

Cavendish also serves to bring home one of the most powerful and flexible ideas of Eggert's book—namely that what we choose *not* to know is just as important as what we choose *to* know. Eggert's book should prove invaluable to scholars interested in how the strategies brought to bear on intractable epistemological problems translate into both intellectual stasis and change. Her work presents a fascinating look at seventeenth-century intellectual struggles and insight into how we might move beyond our own contemporary intellectual impasses.

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Peter Elmer. *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 369. $110 (cloth).
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Peter Elmer's painstakingly researched study of demonological beliefs and witchcraft trials in England, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England*, is a tour de force. Digging up an impressive array of archival and biographical information on accused, accusers, judges, preachers, and civic leaders on dozens of local cases over a century and a half, Elmer proves that the ebb of flow of trials and demonological publications in England correlated to the level of religious and political conflict on both the national and local scene. He traces his argument persuasively through the Elizabethan and Jacobean reign, 1560–1625 (chapter 2); the age of rebellion, 1625–49 (chapter 3); the Interregnum, 1649–60 (chapter 4); the Restoration, 1660–88 (chapters 5 and 6); and the Glorious Revolution and Age of Party from c. 1688 to the early decades of the eighteenth century (chapter 7). The result is an inspired

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