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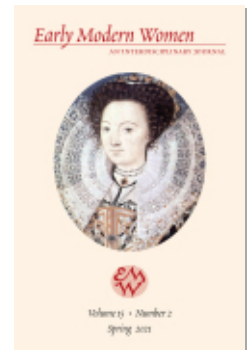
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Introducing Women's Alchemical Cultures

SAJED CHOWDHURY

Over the last few decades, scholars such as Lynette Hunter, Sarah Hutton, Alisha Rankin, and Meredith Ray have turned to the era of the European scientific revolution — the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — to investigate women's contribution to the history of science. This research is important because it has spotlighted women scientists from the past and demonstrated that scientific inquiry is not simply a male phenomenon.¹

There is one area in the history of science that has recently started to develop as a burgeoning field of analysis: women's involvement in alchemy. During the Renaissance, alchemy referred to the craft of chemical transmutation, both physical (the transformation of metals, minerals, and plants) and metaphysical (the conversion of "base" man/woman into a state of spiritual perfection).² Lyndy Abraham and Tara Nummedal have argued that alchemical knowledge was widely disseminated in the early modern period because of the invention and

¹ Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton, eds., *Women, Science and Medicine, 1500–1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 1997); Alisha Rankin, *Panacea's Daughters: Noblewomen as Healers in Early Modern Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

² This definition stems from Peter J. Forshaw, "Subliming Spirits: Physical-Chemistry and Theo-Alchemy in the Works of Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605)," in *Mystical Metal of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (New York: AMS Press, 2007), 255–75, and Robert M. Schuler, "Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41, no. 2 (1980): 293–318. See also the essays by Penny Bayer, Sarah Hutton, and Tara Nummedal in this forum.

flourishing of printing.³ Women's participation in alchemical cultures has started to be uncovered by Jayne Archer, Penny Bayer, and Meredith Ray, but their work is only the tip of the iceberg.⁴

This forum, "Women and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe," a collection of six essays on the topic, aims to push the field of women and alchemy further by addressing several important questions, including: What was it about alchemy that prompted female participation? Were there female alchemical philosophers? What can a comparative pan-European approach tell us about women's involvement in alchemy?

The forum begins with a literature review by Sarah Hutton that outlines what we currently know about women as practitioners of alchemy in the early modern period. Hutton further adds to the history of alchemy a hitherto understudied figure: the woman philosopher. By analyzing the philosophical writings of the Spanish author Oliva Sabuco (1562–1629?) and the Anglophone writers Anne Conway (1631–1679) and Margaret Cavendish (1623?–1673), Hutton situates women's alchemical knowledge in the broader context of the intellectual cultures of women in early modern Europe. The next three essays in the forum — by Penny Bayer, Margaret Boyle, and Tara Nummedal, respectively — unpack the reasons why some women turned to alchemy. Bayer argues that medicine and theology were accepted concerns for many educated gentlewomen and that alchemy's cross-fertilization between the medicinal and the spiritual facilitated women's involvement with it. Bayer elucidates this argument by examining the activities of the English noblewoman Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland (1560–1616), and the pseudonymous women in the circle of the French alchemist Joseph du Chesne (ca. 1544–1609). Jayne Archer had pointed out in 2010 that "kitchen chymistry" — the domestic production of distilled waters, medicaments and cosmetics — was a key aspect of "housewifery" and thus open to women.⁵ Margaret Boyle's essay in this forum pushes Archer's

³ Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xx; Tara Nummedal, *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 19.

⁴ Jayne Elisabeth Archer, "Women and Chymistry in Early Modern England: The Manuscript Receipt Book (ca. 1616) of Sarah Wigges," in *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Kathleen P. Long (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 191–216; Penny Bayer, "From Kitchen Hearth to Learned Paracelsianism: Women and Alchemy in the Renaissance," in Linden, *Mystical Metal of Gold*, 365–86; and Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*.

⁵ Archer, "Women and Chymistry," 192–200, 208–10, 215–16.

proposition further, by examining Spanish women's involvement in the making of ointments, tonics, and perfumes. We currently do not know the exact scale of how many women in Europe engaged with the science of "kitchen chymistry," and Boyle uses a number of previously unstudied archival sources to foreground Spanish women's involvement in alchemical practices, including Inquisition records and oral and written recipes. Tara Nummedal outlines how chemical transmutation was often represented as gendered in alchemical discourses. For example, the chemical element mercury was variously configured as male, female, or hermaphroditic. Nummedal argues, however, that it was not necessarily alchemy's discursive openness to gender that attracted women alchemists, but rather its material power to refashion the body. Nummedal explicates this argument by examining the ideas and practices of the German alchemist Anna Zieglerin (ca. 1545–1575). The final two essays in the forum by Sandy Feinstein and Meredith Ray, respectively, engage with the idea of shared, transnational alchemical female cultures. Feinstein reads two female-authored texts — Margaret Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters* (printed in London in 1664) and Marie Meurdrac's *La Chymie Charitable & Facile, en Faveur des Dames* (first published in Paris in 1666) — alongside one another. As women, Cavendish and Meurdrac faced a similar set of circumstances: both were excluded from the male knowledge communities of natural philosophers. Yet Cavendish and Meurdrac were both at the right place at the right time to be exposed to alchemical debates and public demonstrations, most famously perhaps at the Jardin du Roi in Paris during the 1640s.⁶ Cavendish resided in Paris from 1644 to 1648, and Meurdrac lived on the outskirts of that city. In addition, Cavendish lived in the Netherlands from 1648 to 1651 and again from 1653 to 1660, where the Flemish alchemist Jan Baptist Van Helmont (cited in Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters*) was well known. Feinstein compares the different rhetorical strategies that Cavendish and Meurdrac used to establish their credibility and authority in alchemical debates. Meredith Ray's essay examines the medical-alchemical experiments of Caterina Sforza, Countess of Imola and Forlì (1463–1509); the patronage of the Polish queen of Sforza descent Bona Sforza (1493–1557), which facilitated the flourishing of alchemical medicine at the Polish court; and the alchemical experiments of Bona Sforza's granddaughter Anna Vasa, Princess of Sweden (1568–1625). Ray traces an interconnected

⁶ Antonio Clericuzio, "Sooty Empiricks' and Natural Philosophers: The Status of Chemistry in the Seventeenth Century," *Science in Context* 23, no. 3 (2010): 337–38.

lineage of alchemical women that extends from sixteenth-century Italy into central and eastern Europe and demonstrates how women's alchemical activities could resonate across geographical borders and generations of women.

Read alongside one another, the six essays in this forum demonstrate the vitality of pan-European alchemical cultures in which women were active producers and consumers of alchemical knowledge. If we are to gain a fuller understanding of women's participation in science during the early modern period, we must reinsert into that history women's involvement in the science of alchemy. The forum participants hope to prompt and inspire further research in this area.⁷

⁷ This forum has been made open access due to the funding of the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 839419 — WALCHEMY: Early Modern Women and Alchemy, 1550–1700. Alongside this forum, the major output from WALCHEMY will be my own single-authored monograph, *Women Writers and Alchemy in Early Modern Britain*.