



Ca' Foscari
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European Research Council

Established by the European Commission

FARE
RICERCA IN ITALIA

FRAMEWORK PER L'ATTRAZIONE E IL RAFFORZAMENTO
DELLE ECCELLENZE PER LA RICERCA IN ITALIA

December 7th, 2022

h. 4 p.m.

Aula Biral,

Malcanton-Marcorà

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Max Planck Partner Group "The Water City" (Max
Planck Society / MPI for the History of Science -
Berlin)

ERC "EarlyModernCosmology" (Horizon 2020, GA
725883)

Project "EarlyGeoPraxis" (FARE, Italian Ministry of
University and Research)

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Image from *Splendor solis* (1582). British Library Harley
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Crisis and Change in Early Modernity:
Knowledge, Practice, Governance

Matter of State: Experimenting with Alchemical Imagery in Reformation England

Jennifer M. Rampling
Princeton University

Alchemy is famous for its spectacular, allegorical images, in which chemical substances and processes are depicted as human and animal figures, from battling dragons to the famous "chemical wedding." But what can this imagery tell us about how alchemy was actually practiced—and the world in which that practice took place? In this paper, I argue that the meaning of images changed as they were copied over time, often incorporating new political and religious contexts, as well as practical innovations. For instance, the dissolution of English monasteries during the 1530s and 40s was accompanied not only by religious upheaval, but also the widespread dispersal of Latin alchemical material and its conversion into English—a process accompanied by attempts to recast "Catholic" imagery in new, doctrinally acceptable forms. New practical developments also changed how medieval images were interpreted by early modern practitioners. By combining my own research on alchemical imagery with my interest in the modern-day reconstruction of historical recipes and experiments, I seek to show how English alchemists interpreted images in order to support their own experimental results, while also reflecting the changing world of early modern Europe.



Guest hosted by the ERC
EarlyModernCosmology GA 725883
and the FARE EarlyGeoPraxis
project ID R184WNSTWH