

---

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Erler, Mary C. Reading and Writing during the Dissolution:  
Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530–1558

Kuskin, William. Recursive Origins: Writing at the Transition to  
Modernity

Goran Stanivukovic

---

Volume 39, Number 1, Winter 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087147ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26556>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Stanivukovic, G. (2016). Review of [Erler, Mary C. Reading and Writing during the Dissolution: Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530–1558 / Kuskin, William.

Recursive Origins: Writing at the Transition to Modernity]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(1), 171–176.

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26556>

---

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

---

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

de nombreux compléments quant aux sources utilisées par Érasme pour composer sa *Moria* (sources bibliques, gréco-latines, patristiques, littéraires...). Ce volume rend ainsi parfaitement hommage au chef d'œuvre d'Érasme qu'est l'*Éloge de la Folie* et souligne combien les recherches érasmiennes sont encore ouvertes aux débats, aux découvertes et à l'émerveillement.

MARIE BARRAL-BARON

Université de Franche-Comté

**Erler, Mary C.**

***Reading and Writing during the Dissolution: Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530–1558.***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 203 + 5 ill. ISBN 978-1-107-03979-7 (hardcover) US\$94.95.

and

**Kuskin, William.**

***Recursive Origins: Writing at the Transition to Modernity.***

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Pp. xv, 278 + 24 ill. ISBN 978-0-268-03325-5 (paperback) US\$35.

The two books under review here represent recent examples of the vibrant and growing scholarship on the materiality of text, technologies of writing and printing, and the culture of textual transmission in the early modern period, as well as of formalism in literary analyses.

In her scrupulously researched and lucidly written book, Mary C. Erler focuses on several “written genres,” including “a chronicle, devotional texts, letters” (2). The topic of her book is reading and writing during the reigns of Henry VIII, the boy king Edward VI, and Mary Stuart. Her aim is to provide “a vivid sense of the diverse alternatives that monks and nuns shared with their lay brethren during this complex time” (2). This is a straightforward historiography, solidly based on factual exactness and on an evidently comprehensive mining of the archives.

Five of the six chapters present case studies that explore reading and writing cultures leading up to the end of the monastic era. Here we find records

of the everyday, reflections on politics and faith, and observations about the community where the subjects of the cases studies lived.

The topic of the first chapter is Simon Appulby's religious writing—often translations—in which his loyalty to the rapidly fading tradition of the Catholic church is revealed. The second chapter is devoted to an analysis of the *Greyfriars Chronicle*, starting from an assessment of the hands involved in its composition, ownership, and circulation, and leading to an engagement with Franciscan history and presence in London and the decline of “cultural patterns” (8) that characterized Franciscan life in pre-dissolution London.

The subject of chapter 3 is an overview of the reading and writing contexts of Katherine Bulkeley, Morpheta Kingsmill, Elizabeth Shelley, and Joan Fane (“or Vane,” 79), three abbesses appointed by Thomas Cromwell as heads of larger religious houses towards the end of those houses' dissolution. Letters, wills, and ownership inscription (of the fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*) reveal these women's interest in details of the religious culture in which they lived, in institutional reforms that affected their lives and duties as abbesses, in deep evangelicalism that permeated their lives, and in the tight bond with the religious life of their church and within the religious household more generally. The short sections devoted to each of the four women are more compelling for the fresh evidence and new historical information—accompanied by a clear summary and description—than for the line of argument.

Chapter 4 is an illuminating case study of Margaret Vernon, abbess and friend of Thomas Cromwell. Erker discusses the letters—“intimate, chatty, and thoroughly personal” (88)—left by this nun. Erker focuses on their political, legal, and intimate context, which involves both Cromwell and Cardinal Wolsey, and on the nun's appointment to the headship of a religious house in London. The letters reveal Vernon's attitudes towards external circumstances that affected her life and work as an abbess, and Cromwell's sponsorship of her, but give us little insight into her interiority.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the writing culture of a selection of English Catholic refugees in the Low Countries, focusing on the university town of Louvain. Erker also discusses “the spiritual and devotional milieu” (110) out of which William Peryn, the Oxford Dominican graduate, came to write his *Spirituell Exercises*. Erker devotes most of this chapter to Peryn before she moves onto discussing several minor figures, two of whom were Peryn's dedicatees (117), in intellectual exile.

Chapter 6 is devoted to a discussion of the Catholic Richard Whitford of Syon, presented here as “the most popular English religious author of the sixteenth century” (126). With the force of critical clarity and concision, Erker presses the point about the persistence of the intellectual (also a devotional) labour of the nuns, monks, and friars, who did not stop writing and reading within their faith after the dissolution. Finally, a useful set of appendices concludes the volume, with full transcripts of some of the documents discussed. Erker has given the scholarly community an important book that offers material for further study and scholarly writing, and a compelling and enjoyable read.

In a similar vein, William Kuskin’s *Recursive Origins: Writing at the Transition to Modernity* addresses the relationship between time, literature, and period in historical and symbolic terms. Yet his book is largely concerned with the enduring power of fifteenth-century literature to shape 1590s print, thus establishing literary history as a process of recursion of past text as that history moves towards modernity. Kuskin’s book covers two centuries of manuscript and print, different theories and critical vocabulary, technical analogies (as between literary formalism and science), and philological criticism. It offers a challenge to the linear historiography of scholarly writing about a single historical period—instead presenting a literary history that emerges implicitly in the critic’s theory of evidence that gestures towards, but does not always fully reveal, recursive analogies.

The point that frames the arguments is given at the book’s outset: “every generation inhibits the feeling that it has come to the end of one way of thinking but cannot quite see through to the next, that the forms of the past suddenly offer no clear guidance for the future” (1–2). Critical belief, more than feeling, may be a clearer and more useful way to proceed with finding out how the past can guide us towards a future of critical investment in literature. This appears especially pertinent today, when the humanities suffer attacks from an increasingly corporatized academic sector and when popular media show no interest in intellectual debates and hard thinking. Kuskin does not lament this unhappy situation. Instead, he offers an optimistic and intellectually somewhat idealistic assessment of “two truths” that are “incontestable” (2) regarding the state of literary criticism: first, that literary methodologies are contested and debated, and that the cultural capital of literary study is “depleted” (2); second, that people need “narrative and lyric in their lives” and “seek out objects

representative of these forms” (2) at all costs. These claims are both indisputable and not all that new.

Temporality, which Kuskin proposes as a conceptual frame for his critical method and analytical practice, is offered as a better way to capture the nature of textual transmission within the intellectual environment, which he scrutinizes. Kuskin’s critical voice has a distinct sound, appearing to come out of a personal unease with what literary historiography and criticism have been about for some time, and where they may be headed.

As in Erker’s book, we are given case studies in Kuskin’s five chapters, which begin with the Middle Ages and transition to the modernity of the early sixteenth century. The thesis in the book is framed, Kuskin states, “through the so-called transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period” (6). This is a sound, productive, refreshing, and already-tested thesis. Shakespeare, “free to move around time through books” (7), appears and re-appears at different points in the book’s lively, crisply-written, and exploratory critical narrative.

Addressing manuscript and print cultures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Kuskin centres on Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, and William Caxton as frequent objects of scrutiny by the “intense readers” of the sixteenth century—like William Shakespeare, who “look[ed] back through the editions available to them to its history and poetics as they shape[d] their own” (6). Much of the theoretical apparatus employed in this book depends upon one’s understanding of how rhetorical tropes operate at the level of cognition, especially how synecdoche and metonymy craft meaning through the relationship between part and whole.

Chapter 1 expands upon Martial’s second epigram on authorship, included in Caxton’s “first print” (21) of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. Indebted to a host of critics and critical theorists, the titles of whose works intersperse the pages of this chapter, the author argues that by putting emphasis on how literature of the past was reproduced in new prints later in time, like Caxton’s Boethius, critics tell a story of nascent modernity. Sixteenth-century reprints of medieval poets “copied over” (51) in manuscripts in the fifteenth century are not treated as “static containers” (51). This would have meant not acknowledging the seamless flow of time between the two centuries, and not addressing “a firm distinction” between “precedence and innovation” (51), blocking our understanding of the formation of modernity from its premodern instantiation.

The second chapter is devoted to a discussion of the transition of medievalism to modernity through the medium of print, using the example of E. K.'s "Epistle to Harvey," included in Edmund Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* (1579), and the variation of the same preface in the 1598 edition of the *Workes of Chaucer* printed by Thomas Speght in 1598. The recursion (the author's word throughout this chapter) of the E. K. preface—of a letter about the writing of literary letters—is an instance of modernity associated with the persona of a new poet in line with the related tradition of literary composition. The chapter is richly documented with literary evidence of the "power of old books" (81) that shows how literary history was prevented from loss in reprints.

Following up on the idea that recursion of the past means securing the flow of literary history towards (early) modernity, in chapter 3 Kuskin examines recursion as a principle of composition in Shakespeare's early history play, *Henry IV, Part 2*, working the model of temporality through the familiar argument that Shakespeare's prominence as a playwright of historical drama is part of the "construction of history as a dramatic genre" (93) in the early 1590s. Holinshed's *Chronicles*, printed in 1577, is regarded as a recursive text that helped shape the contemporaneity but also assured enduring modernity of Shakespeare's play. Kuskin traces several versions of the point made of history and poetry and history as poetry, which connect Caxton, Chaucer, Holinshed, and Shakespeare in one "exponential" (113) thread of modernity in the quarto edition of Shakespeare's history play.

Chapter 4 discusses Caxton's version of the story of Troilus and Cressida and Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida*. To recover the writing of literary history as segmented in temporal units that privilege singular authorship and the political organization of literature—over equally powerful formal inflections—Kuskin shows how reproduction of the "textual forms" (128) originating in the fifteenth century in sixteenth-century dramatic narratives assures continuation in the future, in this case, Shakespeare's historical drama via Caxton's *Recuyell of the Histories of Troye* (1473/74), and his translation from Italian of Guido della Collona's ekphrasis of Hector's tomb. To be modern and to imagine the future of literary writing, in Kuskin's theory of literary history, is to look backward to medievalism, not forward.

The last chapter in the book closes with critical recommendations on how to read a collection of nine quarto-size playbooks of ten plays known as the Pavier Quartos, all printed in different forms in 1619. Kuskin interprets

them as suggesting a focus on Shakespeare as a dramatist of the past, and constructing the 1400s as a “consistently literary” period. For Kuskin, the 1623 Folio of complete works of Shakespeare and the Pavier Quartos work toward the same end, which is to “[present] Shakespeare’s authorship in relation to history” (173) and give us a “principle for canon construction” (175). Here and elsewhere in the book, Kuskin is an attentive reader of literary texts, a sharp critic of contacts and overlaps between texts from difference centuries, and an effective synthesizer of a complex and vast body of evidence and arguments about print, bibliography, and textual history of literary texts which he analyzes with great skill in this timely book.

Both Erler’s and Kuskin’s monographs ask new questions, chart new territories, and provide evidence that makes students and scholars—of medieval and early modern studies, textual studies and bibliography, and the history of religion—more aware of the richness, variety, and depth of the protocols of writing, reading, and composing discourses, narratives, and books in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary’s University, Halifax

### **Gabriele, Mino.**

#### ***La Porta magica di Roma simbolo dell’alchimia occidentale.***

Florence : Leo S. Oschki Editore, 2015. 220 p. ISBN 978-88-222-64282 (broché) 24 €.

Mino Gabriele, dont on connaît les remarquables travaux sur Colonna, Alciat, Porphyre, Bruno, et sur l’alchimie, a décidé d’étudier une œuvre très particulière en ce qu’elle est le seul témoignage architectonique de toute l’histoire de l’alchimie occidentale, comme le souligne la préface. Il s’agit de la porte que fit construire le marquis Massimiliano Palombara en 1680, à Rome, sur l’Esquilin. Certes, plusieurs études ont déjà été consacrées à l’œuvre de ce marquis et à sa porte. Mino Gabriele, avec patience, rigueur, précision, reprend l’ensemble à nouveaux frais.

Le premier chapitre est consacré au contexte historique et culturel, et tout d’abord à la reine Christine de Suède qui connut Palombara lors de son premier