

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Nummedal, Tara. Anna Zieglerin and the Lion's Blood: Alchemy and End Times in Reformation Germany

Kevin Siena

Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081180ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37097>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Siena, K. (2021). Review of [Nummedal, Tara. Anna Zieglerin and the Lion's Blood: Alchemy and End Times in Reformation Germany]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(1), 289–292.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37097>

locations. By constructing pulpits for their exterior façades, and decorating them with images of patron saints and devotional shrines, churches could extend the reach of their teachings and rituals to broad community audiences. In the final chapter, Nevola advances the idea that Renaissance palaces, as multi-use spaces, were built to integrate with existing surrounding forms. He thus suggests that we consider palaces as architectural constructs that sustained a variety of public and domestic activities within the wider urban ecosystem. Equipped with façade benches, retail and storage space, and shielded windows, palaces offered public amenities, spaces for social encounters, and familial privacy.

This is a wonderful book that astutely captures the before and after life of a variety of Italian Renaissance cities. Nevola's narrative is as lively as the wide net of activities—festivals, mischiefs, pageants, and transgressions—that contributed to the establishment and growth of Renaissance city spaces. At the core of this book is a reminder of the value in looking beyond formal design and toward lived human experiences to understand the ways in which urban spaces take on and reflect various physical and social forms. Bringing together familiar and new Renaissance spaces, Nevola's work illuminates the interconnections among the characters, communities, and events that constitute the civilization of the Italian Renaissance.

JENNIFER STRTAK

Yale University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37096>

Nummedal, Tara.

Anna Zieglerin and the Lion's Blood: Alchemy and End Times in Reformation Germany.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. xii, 288 + 16 ill., 1 map. ISBN 978-0-9122-5089-3 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

In 1574 Anna Zieglerin was executed in Wolfenbüttel, convicted of conspiring with others to commit murder and mayhem at the court of Duke Julius of Brunswick-Lüneburg. Her death was spectacular, her skin assaulted with hot pinchers before being burned alive, a fate thought fitting for someone deemed

a poisoner, fraudster, and sorceress. Tara Nummedal first explored the incident in an article in 2001 and touched on it in her authoritative 2007 monograph on early modern alchemy. Now, she has returned to the case to give it its own study, and in so doing offers a gripping microhistory that situates alchemy within the histories of imperial politics, Reformation culture, Renaissance self-fashioning, courtly patronage, gender, the body, and sixteenth-century eschatology.

Nummedal charts the story of Anna, her husband Heinrich, and their alchemical associate Philipp Sömmering as they moved from the court of Johan Friederich II to that of Duke Julius. The opening chapter details Johan Friederich's failed Gotha Rebellion (1567), a campaign inspired by angelic messages conveyed via a clairvoyant peasant boy prophesizing that the duke would defeat Catholicism and bring about the end of days. Nummedal contextualizes the strange tale in the apocalyptic culture then pervading Lutheran Germany. She shows how Johan Friederich's alchemical interests both secured the alchemists their employment at court but also left them vulnerable to charges of sorcery and political sabotage after the ill-fated campaign. Chapter 2 shows Nummedal's protagonists seeking greener pastures, securing positions at Julius's court to perform alchemical work related to his mining operations. As she so often does, Nummedal here exploits the opportunities that Anna's story presents to explore connected issues, in this case alchemy's importance to early modern metallurgy and alchemists' strategies for negotiating court patronage. Anna's security at court was short-lived. Nummedal shows how the alchemists worked to ingratiate themselves to Julius, who had his own fascination with alchemical processes, but soon found themselves on the wrong side of the duchess who fomented gossip that they were dangerous frauds. Anna thus found herself in a potentially powerful yet quite precarious position.

Nummedal explores how she engaged in self-fashioning both to craft an identity and to lay claim to expertise as an alchemist in her own right (and not simply the wife of one.) These form perhaps the richest sections of the book. Anna's claim to have trained under the tutelage of "Count Carl"—said to be none other than the son of Paracelsus himself—may well have been a fabrication. Yet through exploration of her recipes, Nummedal demonstrates that some of Anna's practices were indeed informed by what were then cutting-edge Paracelsian ideas. Anna's lack of Latin suggests that she probably came to these ideas not through learned study but rather through working and communicating within a network of German alchemical practitioners. Anna's

most important recipe was for the titular substance “Lion’s Blood,” an oil said to transmute metals but also to operate powerfully on organic substances, whether to heal or promote fertility. Nummedal’s exploration of the recipe affords her a chance to teach readers about a range of issues related to sixteenth-century alchemy, most notably the gendered, sexual, and reproductive metaphors that informed alchemical discourses. Not unlike female mystics and other sixteenth-century female actors who emphasized the corporeal, Anna drew heavily on such imagery, centring claims on her own body in efforts to claim alchemical authority. For example, she boasted that her premature birth led her to be nourished by alchemical tincture instead of breastmilk and resulted in her bodily purification. This, she claimed, caused her not to menstruate. This allowed Anna to fashion herself as a kind of new Virgin Mary, not merely a skilled alchemist whose bodily purity helped refine substances in her lab, but a woman with the sacred power to generate children who would live until the end of days. Nummedal’s exploration of Zieglerin’s narrative and recipes demonstrates how she crafted her own body as a space to mediate the relationship between matter and spirit and demonstrate alchemy’s potential to intervene in the cosmic.

It was not to be. Nummedal’s final chapters chart how rumours of sorcery and poisoning eventually convinced the duke that the alchemists were too dangerous. Bad timing also played a part, as a series of high profile cases nearby accusing alchemists of fraud and sorcery intensified the situation. Nummedal concludes with a thoughtful exploration of archives and memory, reflecting on how Anna’s tale was told and retold across the centuries that followed. She takes pains to emphasize that Anna was not convicted of witchcraft, a distinction that may seem academic to some given the repeated presence of the devil in Anna’s (torture-induced) confession, but which nevertheless offers a chance to teach about how sorcery and witchcraft differed in the sixteenth century and how issues like class impacted how prosecutions for magic unfolded.

It is precisely in imparting those kinds of lessons that the book has so much to offer. With its intriguing storytelling, *Anna Zieglerin and the Lion’s Blood* is particularly attractive for scholars and students new to the complexities of early modern alchemy. Nummedal maintains a light touch, weaving discussions of sixteenth-century science, magic, religion, and imperial politics into what remains an enthralling tale throughout. She is to be commended for producing a book that does so much to highlight alchemy’s connections to a broad range

of Reformation-era developments and that has a chance to bring its history to a wider audience.

KEVIN SIENA

Trent University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37097>

Pietrzyk-Reeves, Dorota.

***Polish Republican Discourse in the Sixteenth Century.* Trans. Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa.**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. vii, 268. ISBN 978- 1-1084-9323-9 (hardcover) \$114.95.

The history of political thought in Poland-Lithuania has lately been garnering attention in Anglo-American historical study with a stream of important English-language monographs by Benedict Wagner-Rundell, Curtis G. Murphy, Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, Felicia Rosu, and Robert Frost, all published in the last five years—not an insignificant accomplishment for a field that is still often seen as peripheral. Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves's *Polish Republican Discourse in the Sixteenth Century* is the most recent addition to this body of literature, one that aims to provide the first comprehensive analysis in English of republican thought in Old Poland. Both a synthesis and an original contribution, the book is simultaneously attentive to local contexts and comparative in scope, setting Polish republicanism against European counterparts to determine its distinct dynamics and specificities.

Pietrzyk-Reeves does a good job outlining the basic components of Polish republicanism, reminding the reader that what is discussed is not the modern anti-monarchical concept of government but an early modern theory of the *libera res publica*, a free, well-ordered commonwealth. To this end, she surveys the thought of key political theorists of Old Poland who drew on classical and modern models to frame their kingdom as a physical manifestation of *rzeczpospolita* (the Polish translation of *res publica*), a political system embodying the values of liberty and civic virtue. Wawrzyniec Goślicki, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Stanisław Orzechowski, Łukasz Górnicki, Krzysztof Warszawicki, Andrzej Wolan, Sebastian Petrycy of Pilzno, and Piotr Skarga