

Trial by polemical fire?

History professor ponders the fate of alchemy

Common sense tells us that alchemy cannot be a science; however, Bruce Moran would argue that using common standards is not the best measure of what science is—or was—and he looks past contemporary assumptions and prejudices to determine what alchemists were actually doing in the context of early modern science in his most recently published books: *Distilling Knowledge: Alchemy, Chemistry, and the Scientific Revolution* (Harvard University Press) and *Andreas Libavius and the Transformation of Alchemy: Separating Chemical Cultures with Polemical Fire* (Science History Publications).

Moran, professor of history, wrote the companion volumes almost simultaneously, and the body of work invites readers on a fascinating journey through some of the less well known corridors of the Scientific Revolution.

In *Distilling Knowledge*, Moran examines the ways alchemy and chemistry were studied and practiced between 1400 and 1700 and shows how these approaches influenced their respective practitioners' ideas about nature and shaped their inquiries into the workings of the natural world.

Moran's research documents the dialogue between what historians usually present as separate spheres and, in these pages, we learn how alchemists and early chemists exchanged ideas and methods and shared territory between their two disciplines.

Moran observes that the metaphor of "scientific revolution" can be expanded to make room for alchemy by focusing upon the actual practices of artisans and by discussing those practices within a framework in which "process can count as an object, in which making leads to learning, and in which the messiness of conflict leads to discernment."

In its totality, Moran's work encourages the reader to see alchemy on its own terms and let it stand within the bounds of demonstrative science.

Ultimately, Moran's research drew him to Andreas Libavius, whom Moran describes as one of the best remaining examples in the history of early modern chemistry, forced by some historians to be "modern" and to fit

into descriptive historical spaces that were manifestly not his own.

What many people called chymia in the early seventeenth century was a subject that the physician, alchemist, and schoolteacher Andreas Libavius believed needed to be sorted out. At that time, almost anyone could call himself a "chemist" and the sometimes acrimonious debates about what chymia, or chemistry, should be is the focus of Moran's *Andreas Libavius and the Transformation of Alchemy*.

To Libavius, establishing the essence of chymia required rebuilding its definitions from the theoretical and practical foundations while cutting back the forest of obscure language and private meaning in which it existed.

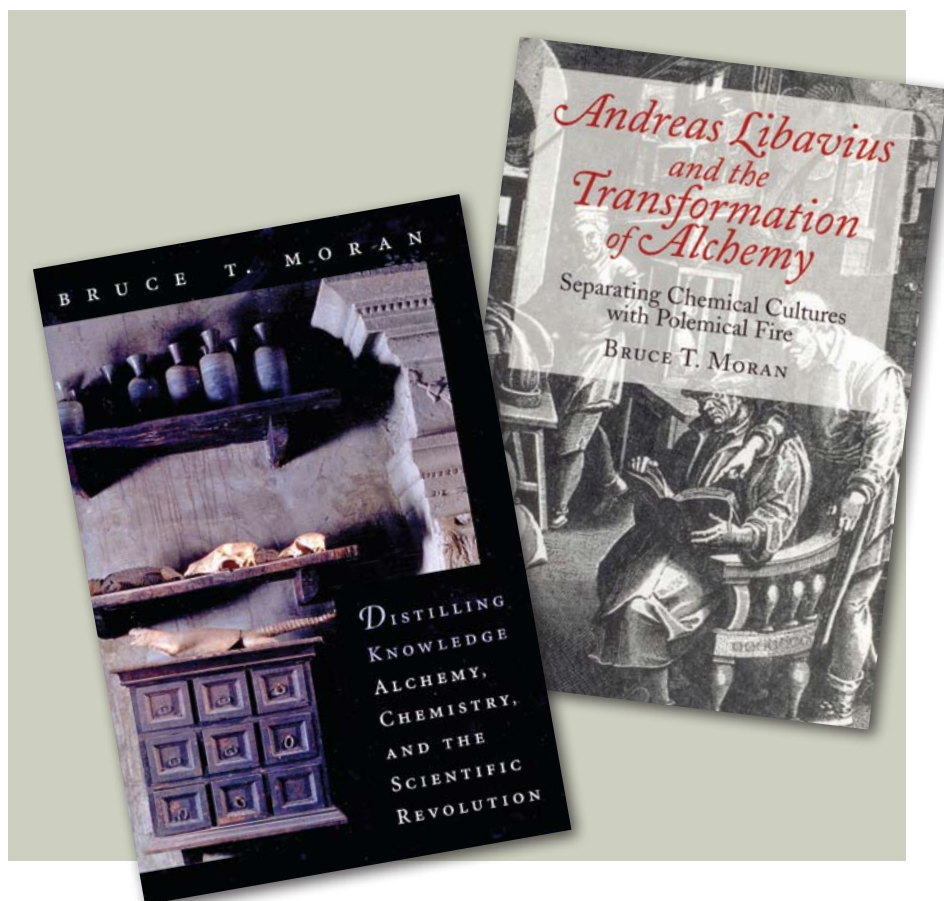
Libavius took on the job, and in thousands of pages of toughly worded criticism, he addressed alchemical, moral, medical,

philosophical and religious topics, wielding a polemical blade to huge effect.

He argued that while philosophers must begin to understand the language and manual operations of craftsmen, artisans needed to understand the causes and principles of natural philosophy and only when reason and practice combined could the two entities share common physical and intellectual space where both played parts in making useful artifacts.

Historical figures, like Libavius, grappled with understanding nature in a variety of ways both new and old, and sometimes accommodating theory to practice made for strange bedfellows.

Moran's meticulously researched body of work offers the reader an essential understanding of that struggle and a deeper appreciation for the complexities of the past—and the present.



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