

INVITED TALK:

Cryptology and the Fantasy of Reading

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Abstract

This presentation will explore the central role of cryptology in the history of reading, when literacy became a goal of the masses rather than a special skill reserved only for the educated elite. Beginning in the seventeenth century, instructional cryptography manuals established the foundational terms and methodologies of literacy training. Cryptologers including John Wilkins, Gustavus Selenus, Gasparis Schotti, Noah Bridges, and John Falconer sought not only to educate the public in ciphering and deciphering but to establish multimodal habits of everyday literacy; they had a vision of the future of citizen literacy that resisted the dominance of alphabetic reading and insisted that literacy must encompass alphabets as well as mathematics, algorithms, scientific symbols, musical notation, visual images, and digital technologies (and they did use the term “digital”, as in requiring the use of the digits). Cryptology also provided the framework for teaching audiences how to see the ways in which the habits of printing, page layout, and the physical materiality of books and paper all make meaning in relation to the symbols on the page. Though their methods did not heavily influence eighteenth- and nineteenth-century educational theorists, the revival of cryptologic curiosity during World War I, in particular, brought the seventeenth-century methods to the attention of figures like John Matthews Manly, Edith Rickert, the Friedmans, and others. Riverbank Laboratory even began publishing primers for teaching kindergarteners how to read – by teaching them the bilateral cipher of Francis Bacon.

Bio

Katherine Ellison is co-editor of *A Material History of Medieval and Early Modern Ciphers: Cryptography and the History of Literacy* (2017) and author of *A Cultural History of Early Modern English Cryptography Manuals* (2016) and *Fatal News: Reading and Information Overload in Early Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2006). Professor of English at Illinois State University, she has published widely on cryptology, media history, and literacy in *Games and War*, *Early Modern Trauma*, *Literature Compass*, the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, the *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*, *Book History*, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, *Educational Research*, *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, *Maternal Pedagogies*, and *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. She is beginning a new collection with Medievalist Dr. Susan Kim on John Matthews Manly and Edith Rickert and a monograph on *Fop Intelligence*, an investigation of cryptology and gender identity.