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Review by Kate Gartner Frost

Albrecht, Roberta. *The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 2005. 258 pages.

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In the present lively competition for scholarly commitment, from close reading to postmodern theory, the conjunction of alchemy and premodern literature has appealed generally to a small but informed audience. Alchemical criticism has had limited influence because its method more often lies in uncovering alchemical reference rather than enlightening engagement with the text. Recent major studies, for example, Stanton Linden's *Dark Hieroglyphicks* and Lyndy Abrahams' *Marvell and Alchemy*, suffer from this limitation, although they have encouraged more intense confrontation with individual authors and texts. Roberta Albrecht's study of Donne's Marian alchemical *topoi*, while it purports such a confrontation, follows the customary practice of primarily identifying the existence and positioning of alchemical references without questioning their poetic foundations. Albrecht demonstrates a wide knowledge of alchemy and a sharp eye for its implications in Donne's divine discourse. However, her study falls outside present critical discourse and seems destined to be mined selectively by an academic community unaware of and even hostile to Donne's use of the "occult."

Albrecht's study is hampered in that it fails to position its assumptions in a coherent poetics and thus provides no rationale for Donne's alchemical reference. Lacking an awareness of obscurantist criticism, her efforts are often reduced to discursive image hunting with little connection to structure or context. And she often proves unsure of the function of the images she finds. Donne's intentions, she opines, perhaps are literary: he employs hidden alchemical referents "in order to complicate his texts, thus proving his virtuosity" (49), or perhaps they are social and political: "[he] used poetry to heal the rifts made by religious and political upheaval" (23). Moreover, she limits her investigation for the most part to Donne's sermons and divine poetry, excluding his secular

verse—most especially his overt employment of alchemical topoi in “Love’s Alchemy” —a crippling limitation. The scarcity or vagueness of direct references to the Virgin Mary in his work limits her investigation to proof texts, and she often is forced to milk what images she finds.

The book’s Preface establishes an intriguing and ambitious three-part aim: Albrecht will examine how hermetic thought, Lull’s *ars combinatoria*, and Reformation theological controversy influenced Donne’s “doctrine” of the Virgin. Any one of these merits a full length study. And any such study demands wide and deep learning as well as solid, complex argument. Unfortunately, *The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne* too often presents unsupported statements of “fact” and argument that are either overlapping or scattered, making it difficult for the reader to discern a coherent plan of development. And from the outset, Albrecht is handicapped by failure to define her basic terms. The very first page of text, for example, plops down the term “alchemical code” without contextual definition or an explanation of its application or rationale for use. Just what does she mean by a “code”? Are we asked to accept that Donne planted in his work a system of buzz words with meanings available only, as she implies, to a select few? Or, as she uses the terms interchangeably later on, are we merely speaking of emblems? Moreover, she consistently identifies religion with “magic,” also given no contextual definition. Does she mean “white” magic? sacrament? superstition?

The fundamental confusion of Albrecht’s study is due, I think, to its avoidance of obscurantist poetics (indeed, it is difficult to discern any poetics at work in her perception of the interaction of alchemy and literature). Fundamentally detrimental as well is the failure to define just what is meant by the seventeenth-century “community of adept readers” to whom Donne addresses his alchemical codes. Nowhere is this community identified or delineated (and it is doubtful that sufficient information is available at this time to do so). Who are these adepts? Can they be identified, for example, by library holdings? correspondence? dedications? Albrecht seems certain enough of their existence: “[Donne] understood that esoteric codes, woven into poetry and sermons, would be recognized by a certain community of reader” (22). “Most Renaissance readers know the alchemical doctrine of multiplication” (61). “Renaissance ladies, as well as men, were

keen students of the Hermetic arts” (77). We hear of these “certain readers” over and over; nowhere are they pinned down to an identifiable population as Albrecht would have us believe.

As a major contention, Albrecht would have us accept Donne’s intent as “linking the Mary of alchemy with the Mary of Counter-Reformation theology” (15). In a process comparable to the alchemical work, Donne aims to “reconstitute” the Catholic cult of the Virgin for Protestant sensibilities, and, to do so, “devises his own version of theological alchemy” (95). Such a conclusion, stemming from research that appears to be a selective dipping into secondary, mostly new historical, sources leads in peculiar directions. We are told that Mary is Donne’s Muse because her picture hung in the Deanery dining room, and the book depicted in the Princess Elizabeth Stuart portrait must be a missal because its donor was Catholic.

*The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne* would have benefited mightily by scholarly vetting in its early stages, preventing an unquestioning reliance on research that seems to pick and choose from critical discourse, ignoring both import and implications. Competent editing, moreover, might have forestalled a bibliographical net spread wide but without focus, an overplentitude of notes (which do not always jibe with text), and a plethora of annoying “meanwhile back at the ranch” subheadings. Such, unfortunately, seems not to have been the case, making Albrecht’s study, for this reviewer, a very unrewarding read.

*Kate Gartner Frost*