Roberta Albrecht. *The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne.*

The Apple Zimmerman Series in Early Modern Culture 3. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2005. 260 pp. index. illus. gloss. bibl. $50. ISBN: 1–57591–094–2.

This book is framed by two oddities. The back-cover blurb, curiously describing the author as "a *Privatgelehrte*" (why not "independent scholar"?), descends into the cringingly embarrassing: "When [the author and her husband] retire someday . . . they plan to get a cat. Maybe his name will be Gus (short for Trismegistus)." At least the jacket can be discarded. But although appropriate enough for a conference paper, Roberta Albrecht's study comes with one of the most cumbersome book-titles I have ever seen.

Albrecht has written a study in which wide learning mingles with some strange observations and assertions. Of these, more later. At the macrolevel, Albrecht's book takes its place among a number of studies that have appeared in the past two

decades, returning to the pioneering work of Louis Martz, which first appeared in 1954 and initiated a "line of enquiry" that was, as Albrecht (a student of Martz) puts it, "interrupted by Barbara Lewalski's *Protestant Poetics* (1979)" (14). For Albrecht the revisionism of scholars such as Lewalski and Richard Strier has itself been subject, during the past two decades, to a further wave of revisionism, so that we are now back to the older thinking that postulates a "residual Catholicism" (158, 180), in which there was no sudden break in religious, meditative, theological practice — in its literary forms — with the onset of the Reformation. The lively endurance of patristic writings into the seventeenth century, such as the *Duodecim Principia Philosophiae* by the *Doctor Illuminatus*, Raymond Lully (Ramon Lull), of which it has long been known that John Donne possessed a copy, is for Albrecht *prima facie* evidence for that view.

Lully — who was long believed to have been stoned to death by Saracens in Tunis in 1315, aged around eighty, but was more likely expelled to his native Majorca — cannot, however, be seen as an orthodox pre-Reformation Catholic, whatever that may be. His mission was to convert Muslims and Jews (including even Averröist commentators on Aquinas) to Christianity, managing along the way to obscure the distinction between faith and reason. This challenged Arabic practice insofar as it held that, as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* puts it, "what is false in philosophy may be true in theology."

It is Lully the alchemist and mystic that absorbs Albrecht's attention in this rich and eccentric study. Her introduction notes Donne's attraction to the belief that "names express the essential nature of things. Like Ramon Lull, he believed that 'names are to instruct us, and express natures and essences'" (30). The role of memory is central to this understanding, and Albrecht draws usefully on the work of Frances Yates. Albrecht inventories various emblems, some of them quite unexpected and even bizarre, that convey the sense of the Virgin Mary suckling her child. These references are for the most part covert. A striking group of avian emblems (to which Albrecht returns) includes the phoenix, the hatching hen, and the pelican. Albrecht suggests further that "the 'mother' pelican [could be] conflated with the androgynous phoenix" (77). There is a fine account of *La Corona* (134–45), and the innocent reader will in general be educated by the alchemical arcana.

Such material shows Albrecht at her strongest. But there are moments when the erudition as it were floods out the more commonplace but equally interesting. A section on Donne's strange poem "The Annuntiation and Passion" uses the cyclical idea of the "Ouroboros" (roughly, a figure — like the phoenix — of self-consumption in which the snake eats its own tail: 98ff.). An endnote superfluously points out that in 1608, March 25 was the date of both feasts (209). In fact, in England in 1608 — but not Scotland, although both countries still adhered to the Julian calendar — March 25 was the beginning of the legal year, so that the Annunciation and the Passion both fell on New Year's Day. Hence, surely, the primary sense of the poem's reference to "Th'Abridgement of Christs story." In Donne's lifetime the two dates had coincided in 1597, but after the Gregorian

calendar was introduced in 1752 such a conjunction of feasts falling on March 25 was in the nature of things rarer. I calculate only seven instances, the last occurring in 2005.

In short, this book has much esoterically fascinating knowledge to offer, but the presentation of that knowledge could have benefited from a much stronger copyeditor's hand.

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