
BOOK REVIEWS

Stanton J. Linden. *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1996. 373p.

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In his introduction to *Darke Hieroglyphicks*, Stanton J. Linden describes his book as a “long labor” (ix), and well it must have been to assemble and analyze all of the literary material about alchemy over the three-hundred-year period from 1385 through the Restoration. The ambitious thesis of this fine study is as follows: with *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, Chaucer begins “a long tradition of alchemical satire” (2) that is interrupted by a “new tradition of spiritual alchemy” (3) in the poetry of Donne, Herbert, and others, before a return in the work of Butler to the earlier satirical tradition.

This old-fashioned (in the best sense of that phrase) scholarly study relies upon close readings of many examples, liberally illustrated by quotations and twenty-eight magnificently apt illustrations. The extensive bibliography, index, and more than forty pages of endnotes are executed with care, providing both pertinent ancillary information and helpful cross references. Although Linden modestly disclaims any intention of providing a general history and practice of alchemy in the period (5), his introductory chapter comes as close as any thirty pages might to doing that very thing. In it we learn, among other things, that the title of his book is taken from a 1623 work by Patrick Scot in which the author argues that philosophers sometimes “pourtrey *Wisdome* in darke *hieroglyphicks*” (31). Similarly, the chapters on Chaucer, Bacon, Jonson, and others have titles that gloss their subject with an adroit quotation from the works discussed. His knowledge of his subject is such that I regret his decision to pass over some texts and authors, such as *The Faerie Queene*, *The Tempest*, and Marvell (4) discussed by other scholars.

This book has many strengths. In addition to those already noted above, Linden provides insightful readings of difficult allusions, many of which are obvious because of the use of words such as “philosopher’s stone,” “elixir,” “alembic,” and many of which are more veiled. He discusses not only familiar authors and texts (e.g., Donne’s “Loves Alchymie”) but also less familiar ones (Reginald Scot’s

Discoverie of Witchcraft or Henry More's *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, and many, many others). Throughout, in every chapter the reader finds a wealth of information on the literary uses of alchemical imagery.

However, I am not quite persuaded by Linden's thesis in its most narrowly stated version: that "the purposes it [alchemy] served in literature from Chaucer through Jonson were narrowly satirical" (dust jacket), that this "nearly monolithic tradition" (155) with its "nearly formulaic use of alchemy" (158) is replaced by new, innovative—often spiritual—uses of alchemical imagery in the seventeenth century, that at the end of the century, "Butler . . . represents a return to the long tradition of alchemical satire" (280). My first reason for hesitation is that satire, for which Linden never provides his own definition [one taken from John Wilders appears late in the book (282)], encompasses a range of attitudes so wide as to decrease the helpfulness of the term *satire*: the comic (44, 90, 100, 120, 139), ridicule (47), criticism (68), simplification (71, 76), satiric social criticism (74, 85), irony (79), burlesque (81), skepticism (82, 84), and mock heroic (282). My second reason lies in the fact that the statement "the tradition of alchemical satire, begun by Chaucer and continued by Langland, Gower, and Lydgate" (63) rests on only one clear fourteenth-century example, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, and is itself contradicted by earlier statements (57, 61). Similarly, at the end of this tradition, Butler's connection to alchemy narrowly conceived is tenuous (282). My third reason for hesitation grows from Linden's meticulous scholarship itself: whenever there are exceptions to his generalization, he notes them. Thus, in the early period of "formulaic" usage, there are nonsatirical examples (57, 85, 88, 92-93, 99, 173) and in the period of innovative usage, there is still satire (156, 160, 184, 186, 192).

However, these hesitations recede when Linden expands and synthesizes the results of his study in the final chapter of the book, "*Cauda Pavonis*" (a title taken from the anonymous *Stone of the Philosophers*). Here he has the luxury of explaining the course of the alchemical tradition in the multiplicity and variety that he has discovered. With this book, he has made a valuable contribution, both in its original scholarship and in the wealth of information collected therein. ✿