

Weaving Voices Article (Feb-July 2000)

Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

We are always on the lookout for material for Weaving Voices. If you would like to submit an article of 1700 words or suggest something, please contact one of the committee members.

A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery Cambridge University Press, 1999 by Lyndy Abraham

REVIEWED BY TONY LAURENT

Alchemy – that mysterious art of transmutation: as Lyndy Abraham points out in her introduction, a symbolic language concerned with the metaphysical, where the material and metaphorical worlds are yet undivided.

A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery is a reference book drawing on her research in the Ferguson Collection of alchemical books and manuscripts held at the University of Glasgow. The book details imagery uncovered from this collection and is supported by example of literary usage from the late 16th century till the present, including such recent references as the works of Patrick White and Jackson Pollock. The alchemical terms are given a general overview with cross references to varied usages found in the original sources, and illustrated by the literary usage found in poetry, drama and literature.

The dictionary is a source for the mediaeval European tradition, inheriting its knowledge of this ancient art through the confrontation with Islamic practice in Spain during the 12th century. By the late 16th century, alchemy was an intellectually respected science in Europe and considered a scientific system providing a mode of thought for perceiving the nature of substances, processes, relationships and the cosmos itself. This cosmology, a predecessor of the material sciences, was a science of the soul and a powerful imagery for the literary arts.

Lyndy's succinct introduction traces historical references to the many literary figures who drew on these images to provide a physical, psychological, spiritual or cosmological background to their work. She points out the nature of medieval thinking, where emblems were a mode of conveying thought, where as underlying inherent unity was best approached through recognizing the multiplicities of form. Hence, the terms of alchemy are varied and fraught with contradiction. Her intention is to make available the storehouse of alchemical images to historians, philosophers, scientists and visual artists. Her selections of usage from English literature is not exhaustive, nor does it attempt to address the specialized scholar, for whom she details more detailed source and collections outside the period. Her images are indicators of symbolic interpretation, and she introduces the reader to the varied impact of alchemical thought in the English literary tradition. The definitions are supported with graphic images, selected emblems from the chosen texts.

This highly readable collection and succinct representation of images provides clues for the reader, traces of meaning that could help those interested find their way through the alchemical terms of contradiction, and provides a source for the literary minded to a realm of usage where opposites stand complementary.