

Belcher, Margaret. *Bird Imagery in the Lyric Poetry of Tristan L'Hermite*. Biblio 17, No. 28. (Paris, Seattle and Tübingen: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1987). 179 pp.

Margaret Belcher is a keen and well-informed ornithologist. Tristan L'Hermite was not. In fact, his poetry suggests he was less interested in birds than many of his contemporaries, and there is nothing to indicate that he would have shared his critic's knowledgeable enthusiasm. That, however, makes her study all the more interesting and valuable, since his use of bird imagery is not self-conscious or exaggerated and is thus a more reliable index of the character of his poetic style. To claim, as Margaret Belcher does, that students who tend to react against Tristan because he evidently owes so much to literary tradition and seems not always to write from the heart will find a ready mode of access through an appreciation of his response to the perennial human fascination with flight is perhaps speculative. What is more certain is that they will certainly benefit from a series of apt demonstrations of the way in which reading, convention and personal observation come together in poems whose success in the seventeenth century would be judged more on the aptness of elegance of its imagery than on its originality, which, in any case, would be rated lower than its scholarly and literary erudition. Frequenting the sporting aristocracy, Tristan does evoke falcons with a vivid accuracy that bespeaks close observation of their behaviour on the perch, but there is no less force in a reminiscence of the Prometheus myth in which, most significantly, the poet evidently is not inhibited by any reservations over trite and hackneyed allusions. As well as hawks and caged birds, which were often kept in seventeenth-century households, heraldic eagles, the whole aviary of the emblem books and such fabulous winged creatures as the phoenix and the griffon all have their place in the poet's repertory of images. Personal familiarity with the species on the one hand is counterbalanced by a readiness to deal in the common currency of poetic discourse, notwithstanding the growing trend of such natural historians as Conrad Gesner and

Pierre Belon to insist on the need to discriminate between fact and time-honoured, oft-repeated fiction. What Margaret Belcher shows, in effect, is how Tristan functioned as a poet in the literary world of his time. As an intelligent human being he sees, notes and responds to all that surrounds him, and since he is highly literate, the long literary tradition of which his time was the proud heir has no less impact on his sensibility than the material surroundings in which he lived. We shall read him all the better for being reminded that life and art were not distinct from one another in his emotional experience and that responding to one rather than the other should not be taken as some guarantee of aesthetic worthiness. To make her points Margaret Belcher presents a good deal of information about the background of Tristan's life and offers alert close analyses of many passages from his work, which means that her study never becomes a mere catalogue of references, though there is a check list of the bird species mentioned. Some instructive parallels are drawn between Tristan and other poets, both French and British, but more could have been done to draw profit from earlier—and admittedly often somewhat unsystematic—studies and anthologies, especially of English poetry. This is, however, only a minor criticism of an interesting and unusual contribution to our knowledge of seventeenth-century French literature. Further investigations on similar lines would be welcome.

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