



To the Editor:

On page 60 of the July Digest, Marvin Bowen says: "<Roger> Bacon actually spent a number of years in prison for practicing witchcraft and died there."

Nobody knows why Bacon was imprisoned; there is no record of his trial, nor any contemporary reference to the imprisonment. The very first such known occurs in a manuscript written a full century later, and says only that he was imprisoned for "certain dangerous doctrines" and that his writings were forbidden. One Bacon scholar argues that the charge must have been Spiritualism--not at all what we mean by this word today, but an influential Franciscan heresy of the period--and indeed a strong current of sympathy for this doctrine runs through Bacon's major works; but nobody yet knows the facts.

It is a pretty firm fact that he did not die in prison. In his last work, the unfinished Compendium Studii Theologicae, Bacon himself says he has been released, and he began this book a good two years before his death. It is generally accepted that he died and was buried at Oxford (he was imprisoned either at Paris or Ancona--the latter if the charge really was Spiritualism).

It would have been difficult to charge him with witchcraft, since he spent a large part of his active life denouncing both magic and alchemy as frauds. His scientific interests were the standard ones of the 13th century, not differing very much in kind from those of his teachers, Robert Grosseteste and Albertus Magnus, both highly respected men. The difference in quality was vast, but in his own time nobody was in a position to recognize this.

James Blish

P.O. Box 278
Milford, Pike Co.
Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

Some further research indicates that I slipped up in stating that Roger Bacon died in prison. Will Durant states (The Age of Faith) that Bacon was released from prison two years before his death at about the age of eighty, after being in prison for a number of years. (White says 14 years on page 388, Volume 1, of The History of the Warfare of Science with Theology.) No other source immediately available to me mentions where he died.

As for the reason for his incarceration, White states (page 387):

He was condemned, as his opponents expressly declared, 'on account of certain suspicious novel-ties'--'propter quasdam novitates suspectus.'

This does appear quite vague. White then goes on to say:

In an age when theological subtilizing was alone thought to give the title of scholar, he insisted on real reasoning and the aid of natural science by mathematics; in an age when experimenting was sure to cost a man his reputation, and was likely to cost him his life, he insisted on experimenting, and braved all its risks.

It seems to be true that Bacon attacked magic. It is also true that he was an experimental scientist in our sense of the word. But one of his methods of experimentation was alchemy. A.C. Crombie quotes Bacon's Opus Tertium on page 54, Volume 1, of Medieval and Early Modern Science:

But there is another alchemy <after discussing speculative alchemy>, operative and practical, which teaches how to make the noble metals and colours and many other things better and more abundantly by art than they are made in nature. And science of this kind is greater than all those preceding because it produces greater utilities. For not only can it yield wealth and very many other things for the public welfare, but it also teaches how to discover such things as are capable of prolonging human life for much longer periods than can be accomplished by nature...Therefore this science has special utilities of that nature; while nevertheless it confirms theoretical alchemy through its works.

Henry Lea states on page 424 of A History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages that alchemy was one of the sept ars demoniaca, for the aid of Satan was necessary to the transmutation of metals. Bacon himself, however, did assume natural means.

I hope all this inspires interest in this fascinating man who, among other things, recognized the refraction of light through raindrops. (Although he had a distorted view of the nature of light--as who didn't?)

Marvin A. Bowen

Rhodomagnetic Digest

To the Editor:

Comments on the "new" RD:

1) Japanese Mythology: Those interested in Mr Warren's article should consult the current series, on Japanese science-fiction, by Takumi Shibano in Roy Tackett's Dynatron; in particular, they ought to be cognisant of Shibano's "Random History of Japanese SF" in the 7th issue.

Possibly, Roy will reprint this series if enough interest is shown; the address is 915 Green Valley Road NW, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

2) Hugo Gernsback: Evidently the typesetter ran out of "k's" to insert in this gentleman's last name, and therefore used "h's" instead. Let us at least show Mr Gernsback the courtesy of spelling his name correctly.

3) Necronomicon: The "advertisement" reprinted from the Antiquarian Bookman was just a poor imitation of a similar one, printed in Fantasy Aspects, May 1947:

THE NECRONOMICON: by Abdul Alhazred. Translated from the Arabic into Latin by Olaus Wormius. With many woodcut tables of mystic signs and symbols, Madrid, 1647. Small folio, full calf with elaborate overall stamping...One of only fourteen known copies of the first Latin edition...The author, Alhazred, is said to have been hopelessly mad...several incoherent passages lending credence to this story. Yet Von Junzt, in his Unaussprechlichen Kulten states..."es steht ausser Zweifer, dass dieses Buch ist die Grundlage der Okkultliteratur."

See how much more knowledgable this ad-writer was--not only in Lovecraftiana and the "history" of Abdul's book but also in the general "antiquarian" terminology.

4) Synesthesia: From Anthony More's comments on Dark Universe I infer that its author had in mind something similar to Poe's thoughts when he said:

The orange ray of the spectrum and the buzz of the gnat affect me with nearly similar sensations. In hearing the gnat, I perceive the color. In perceiving the color, I seem to hear the gnat.

This in turn, is just Baudelaire's synesthesia or transposition of senses. In Dark Universe, of course, there is not transposition but substitution, since the sense of sight is lacking. And as More shows convincingly, Dark Universe fails to give the kind of insight which is derived from a Poe or a Baudelaire.

Leland Sapiro

Department of Mathematics
University of Southern California
Los Angeles 7, California

IN COMING ISSUES

We have some excellent material scheduled for publication in the next few issues. Poul Anderson is currently revising his translation of The Song of Gurre, a Danish poem of the fourteenth century which has never been translated before. Poul's translation will be published along with his introduction, notes, the original Danish and the numerous ink drawings he made for his personal copy. We think you will agree with us when you see it that it is a very beautiful work. Bill Donaho is working on a critical review of the first two years of Analog, with the emphasis on 1962. This will be the first of what we hope is a series of annual reviews of the current science fiction magazines. Alva Rogers has promised us an article on the art of Charles Schneeman, which will be illustrated by the artist's works from the pages of Astounding. We've heard rumors that Dana Warren (author of last issue's article on Japanese myth) is interested in writing another article along the same lines. We'll try and get that for you soon. Bill Collins has expressed an interest in doing an article on Cuchulainn, the great hero of Irish mythology. Tony Boucher's review of science fiction in 1962 is forthcoming. In addition, the final installment of Lee Sapiro's article on "The Myst Renaissance" will be published next issue, as well as another portion of "The Glossary of Middle-earth." So things are looking up for us around here these days. We'd like to hear from you; your criticisms or suggestions will be most appreciated. Our letter column this issue is small, not because we're being exclusive, but because we received only the two letters we published.