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THE DARROW COLLECTION OF HELMONTIANA AT WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

by

JAMES HOLLY HANFORD

During the summer of 1930 Western Reserve University acquired by purchase the entire library of Dr. F. S. Darrow, including the collection -- books, pamphlets, prints, etc. -- used by him as materials for research on the Belgian mystic and physician, François Mercure Van Helmont.

This Van Helmont was the son of the distinguished seventeenth century doctor, Jean Baptiste Van Helmont, whose contribution to chemistry is remembered in the history of science -- most concretely by the fact that he invented the word gas. The son was less a scientist, more a philosopher. He wandered throughout Europe, sometimes as a physician to royalty (he was reputed to possess the secret of a panacea inherited from his father), sometimes as a mere adventurer. Always an earnest seeker after spiritual truth he followed the ignis fatuus of seventeenth century occultism as well as the clearer light of Platonism. He was, as might have been expected, a dabbler in the distracting philosophic lore of the Jewish Kabbalah. There was a persistent tradition that he had followed the gypsies in his youth and on this account, and because his personality fits the picture, he is thought by some to be the original of the scholar gypsy described by Joseph Glanvil and commemorated in verse by Matthew Arnold. His personal memoirs, which are extant in manuscript, make no mention of this circumstance. They do tell of his experiences as a prisoner of the inquisition, of his encounter with highwaymen, of his being nearly stoned to death in Germany. In 1670 Van Helmont was called to England to undertake the cure of Lady Ann Conway and from then till her death in 1679 he lived primarily at her country estate,

Ragley, a guide to her in her intellectual pursuits, a physician and consoler in her sufferings. Van Helmont became a Quaker while at Ragley and Lady Conway followed him in ^{that} his profession. After her death he fell out with the sect in a memorable dispute, and returned to the continent.

Of all his innumerable ideas and projects the solidest and most practical appears to have been that of lip reading for deaf mutes. He expounds his method in a work entitled The Alphabet of Nature, in which exact observations on phonetics are strangely intermingled with an attempt to support the case of Hebrew as the original and natural language of mankind by showing that the Hebrew characters constitute a sort of diagram of the position of the speech organs in uttering the sounds which these characters respectively represent. The intermixture of pure science, pure fancy, and a humanitarian proposal for the relief of man's estate is characteristic both of Van Helmont and of his epoch.

The chief facts of Van Helmont's life were rehearsed over and over again when the memory of his fame was still bright, and more recently he has attracted interest from the historians of seventeenth century science and philosophy. There had been, however, no thorough modern research on him until Dr. Darrow, attracted originally by Van Helmont's Platonic notions concerning the preexistence of the soul, but bringing a thorough scholarly training to the task, undertook to write a definitive life.

Dr. Darrow projected his work on a truly monumental scale, embracing within his plan an account not only of Van Helmont's own fascinating and varied career on the continent and in England but of the contemporary individuals and movements with which he stood in personal or intellectual relationship. His collection accordingly represents such varied fields as

Cambridge platonism, Leibnitz, seventeenth century science, theosophy, Kabalistic literature, the early Quakers. Accompanying the collection are the MS notes and bibliographies which represent the results of Dr. Darrow's own intensive labor on this and related subjects over a period of some eight years. There exists among these a proposed outline of chapters, with the dates of Van Helmont's career as established by Dr. Darrow and the mottoes selected by him to indicate the spirit of his hero's life and thought.

The writing of these chapters apparently had not actually been begun, but we have in several drafts an elaborate and systematic bibliography keyed to the MSS and printed material in the collection, which constitutes an admirable working guide to their use by students, whether in the direction aimed at by Darrow himself or in other directions.

The following notes on the material are based on a study of this document and of the books themselves. Dr. Darrow's interest had evidently become to some extent that of a collector and bibliographer, though he never lost sight of his ultimate constructive object.

Of the authentic works of Van Helmont himself, Dr. Darrow lists fifty titles, with full bibliographical description. Thirty-two of these are starred as being in his own library -- a collection which Dr. Darrow himself believed to be more extensive than any previously assembled. An attempt was made by James Crossley of Manchester to gather Van Helmont items, but the catalogues of the Crossley collection published by Sotheby at the time of its dispersal do not show it to have been as nearly complete as Darrow's. The British Museum Catalogue lists only seven of these authentic works.

The 1723 edition of the Thesaurus Novus Experimentiae Medicinae,

the Dutch version of the Thoughts on the four first chapters of Moses (Eenige voor-bedagte en oeverwagene Bedenkingen over de vier eerste Kapittelen des eersten Boeks Moysis.....1698), and the 1700 or 1701 German edition of Chemical Aphorisms (Kurtze vorstellung der zur edlen Chymie gehörigen wissenschaft) are apparently unique copies in the Darrow library.

A further achievement of bibliographical research and of collection is represented by a list of minor contributions of Van Helmont. These appeared in the forms of prefaces, essays, etc., among the works of Van Helmont's father, of Knorr von Rosenroth, of Henry More, and others. Seventeen items are noted, of which the library contains seven originals. For working purposes Darrow had had transcripts made of several of the others, as well as of five of the more important volumes in the earlier list.

Part I of the bibliography proceeds with careful lists of works wrongly attributed to Van Helmont, unidentified works published anonymously or pseudonomously, manuscripts by and concerning Van Helmont, letters published and unpublished, portraits.

Part II is an appendix containing systematized information regarding Van Helmont's publishers, translators, friends and family, places of residence, etc.

Part III is a full bibliography of references extending to over a hundred pages.

Part IV includes a documented statement of "unsolved queries" and an index.

The percentage of all this bibliographical material which is actually accessible in the collection, whether in the form of originals or of transcripts and notes is extraordinarily high. Dr. Darrow was in a sense more than ready to write his work, the one important missing body of data

being the unpublished material (including correspondence with Leibnitz) now in Hanover.

How deeply it is to be regretted that he did not live to complete his study will be best appreciated by those who have read the brilliant chapter on Van Helmont in Miss Marjorie Nicolson's recent Conway Letters. Miss Nicolson was in correspondence with Dr. Darrow just before his death and she had the advantage of consulting his unpublished bibliography (see Preface p.xiv), some of the ground of which she had already traversed in her own researches. She expresses herself in correspondence as amazed at the extent and accuracy of Dr. Darrow's knowledge of his field. And as sharing his conviction that Van Helmont is a link between various English and continental thinkers and deserves serious treatment, in spite of his being (to the modern mind) a superstitious believer in the occult or a quack in medicine. It is fair to say that Dr. Darrow and Miss Nicolson did not mean the same thing by calling Van Helmont an important thinker, for the one worked as a sharer of Van Helmont's views, the other as a purely objective historian with an eye for the picturesque and human. But Darrow's conviction, while it sometimes sent him into strange directions (with passion), did not invalidate his factual scholarship, and his biography of Van Helmont would undoubtedly have been a mine of interesting ideas and information not included in Miss Nicolson's published work. She herself, except by brief reference in her footnotes, refrained from making use of his discoveries, particularly in regard to the facts of Van Helmont's early life. These undoubtedly should now be worked up and published. The bibliographical lists of Helmont's writings can and should also be made available, and if a new full scale account of this extraordinary person is ever to be written, it should be done at Western Reserve University on the foundations laid by Dr. Darrow.

Meanwhile there are, for those who are well equipped in languages, abundant materials for miscellaneous exploration in the byways of the human mind, and no person at all versed in the philosophy, science, or religious history of the seventeenth century could possibly turn over these mouldering volumes without excitement.