A Philosophical Path for Paracelsian Medicine: The Ideas, Intellectual Context, and Influence of Petrus Severinus (1540-1602) (review)

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modern habit of grouping such topics as magic and alchemy under a single, seemingly unproblematic rubric, such as 'the occult sciences' or 'the occult'" (p. 44) and view the past through the "optative glasses of historical myopia" (p. 159).

Although somewhat given to formulations such as "the first half of this argument, of course, is vintage Avicenna" (p. 128) or "Giulio Camillo, the well-known writer on the 'memory-theater'" (p. 223), Newman generally wears his learning lightly. Though *Promethean Ambitions* is certainly not light reading, it does not assume any vast stock of prior knowledge and should be as accessible and illuminating to the interested layperson as to the specialist scholar. Newman's dense scholarship is leavened by dry wit, with such delightfully deadpan pronouncements as "it seems, however, that not all sodomitic relations produce offspring as horrible as the Huns" (pp. 190–91)[1] and "the medieval West was not a fertile breeding ground for homunculi" (p. 195).

Erudite, fascinating, and thought-provoking, this book is something of a roller-coaster ride, swooping from century to century and from discipline to discipline, leaving the reader—or, at any rate, this reader—feeling exhilarated but also rather giddy. But the framework of the Nature/Art debate, as conducted over the centuries, provides Newman with a context in which the multiple corollaries that he identifies become increasingly apparent as the specific examples multiply. He convincingly argues that the theoretical and ethical issues associated with alchemy are anything but obsolete—and, by the same token, that the debates about those issues conducted in the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods are far from being of merely academic interest today. On the contrary: the dreams and nightmares associated with human modification of the material fabric of the world have acquired new pertinence in the age of quantum physics and genetic engineering.

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Jole Shackelford. *A Philosophical Path for Paracelsian Medicine: The Ideas, Intellectual Context, and Influence of Petrus Severinus (1540–1602).* Acta Scientiarum Naturalium et Medicinalium, vol. 46. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004. 519 pp. Ill. $83.00 (87-7289-817-8).

It has been customary for historians of medicine and science to downplay the work of Paracelsus and his followers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is understandable because the Paracelsians reflect a mystical, Neoplatonic, and Hermetic worldview that often seems far removed from the modern world.

1. I should perhaps stress that here Newman is paraphrasing the thirteenth-century theologian William of Auvergne, not expressing his own opinion.

Their medicine was mixed with chemistry, alchemy, and religion, subjects that many historians of medicine may not wish to consider. And yet, the intense debates of the period between chemical physicians and Galenists indicate the need to explore the differences between them. In this book Jole Shackelford has given us an essential work that contributes to our understanding of this debate.

The *Idea medicinae philosophicae* (1571) of Petrus Severinus was one of the first attempts to synthesize the complex and difficult work of Paracelsus. It was also one of the most frequently read books of this genre, having been published in three editions (1571, 1616, and 1660)—indeed, some authors came to refer to a "Severinian School" of chemical physicians. In this work Severinus called for fresh observations in nature that would lead to a true philosophy of the macrocosm and the microcosm. However, like others of the period, he did not disown the work of the ancients; the best of their work was to be accepted, especially that of Hippocrates. Basic to his scheme were the *semina:* fundamental, immaterial principles out of which material bodies arise and to which they return. The *semina* were necessary for understanding the human body as well as the universe about us. It was important also to realize that they operated chemically and could be studied in the laboratory. As Shackelford notes, "Severinus' therapy, like that of Paracelsus, is based on the understanding that the world operates on a chemical basis, and that what the chemist may see in the laboratory can reveal the hidden principles of physiology that are valid both in the microcosm and the macrocosm" (p. 195). Although his book is not a chemical text, it is not surprising to find Severinus advocating chemically prepared medicines and suggesting that even poisons such as antimony might be prescribed in limited dosage after having been detoxified by chemical means.

An important part of Shackelford's book is the discussion of the widespread influence of Severinus. On the one hand, we are introduced to relatively unknown figures such as his fellow Paracelsian and professor of medicine at the University of Copenhagen, Johannes Pratensis—but we are also treated to a discussion of his relationship with Tycho Brahe, where we are presented with a reappraisal of his "terrestrial astronomy" and with information on his Paracelsian interests. In Shackelford's survey of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century medical literature he examines a wide spectrum of references to the *Idea medicinae philosophicae.* Prominent among Severinus's opponents was Thomas Erastus, whose attack on Paracelsus was penned almost immediately after the appearance of the *Idea.* Among English authors we find references to the Paracelsian apologies of Robert Bostocke and of Thomas Moffett (who dedicated his book to Severinus). Edward Jorden was influenced by Severinus, and even Francis Bacon had words of approval for the *Idea.* Among French authors Shackelford discusses Joseph Duchesne (Quercetanus) and Guy de la Brosse, and the references to Severinus in the work of Central European authors include books by Gregor Horst and Daniel Sennert. Important for our understanding of the course of the scientific revolution is the section on Ole Worm, who actively sought information on Paracelsus as a young medical student, but who had rejected this school of thought by 1618 for its philosophical as well as its heretical views.

Shackelford gives the reader a detailed account of the commentary on Severinus's work by the relatively unknown Ambrosius Rhodius (1643), and he devotes many pages to the lengthy commentaries by William Davidson (1660, 1663), the first of which accompanied the last printed edition of the *Idea* and dwarfed Severinus's text.

In short, Shackelford's study cuts across many boundaries. It is, of course, a much-needed account of Severinus and his synthesis of Paracelsian thought. For some readers it will also serve as an introduction to the meaning of Paracelsianism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. However, in addition, the author examines this influence in many national settings, creating a survey of the key figures of European chemical philosophy. Historians of medicine have always had an interest in early modem developments, but Paracelsian studies have been relatively uncommon. This book is a welcome exception and should be considered required reading for anyone interested in that period.

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Willem de Blécourt and Cornelie Usborne, eds. *Cultural Approaches to the History of Medicine: Mediating Medicine in Early Modern and Modern Europe.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xxiii + 241 pp. Ill. $50.00 (1-4039-1569-5).

This wide-ranging collection originated at a truly international conference held in Amsterdam in 1999. The contributing authors work (or worked) in nine different countries; the twelve chapters discuss case studies from five western European nations. Such a diverse line-up presented the editors with a real challenge—how were they to craft a book that was more than the sum of its parts? The subtitle reveals how they went about this task: the contributors were asked to focus on the ways in which the meaning of medical conditions and the nature of medical practice were (and are) mediated through multifaceted and complex social interactions, through forms of representation, and through sets of values and beliefs.

As a result, the editors instilled far more coherence than one would expect in a collection that ranges from the levitations of the sixteenth-century Roman saint Philip Neri to the orthopedic institutes of Restoration Paris, and to 1980s British TV documentaries. No one will read through these essays without seeing how laypersons have regularly imposed their own interpretations upon the meaning of particular bodily states, and how they have not simply passively accepted and internalized the dictates of medical authority. The reader will also swiftly grasp that the emergence of new forms of treatment needs to be seen as the result of interaction between social actors: the media, various kinds of medical practitioner, different sections of society, the state, and so forth. With characteristic generosity,