

Charles Webster. *Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic and Mission at the End of Time*.

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Theophrastus von Hohenheim, or Paracelsus, as he is better known, has always been a difficult figure to grasp. Recognized variously for his revolutionary ideas about matter theory, the origins of disease and therapeutics, an unconventional theology that hovered somewhere between Catholicism and that of the Reformers, spirited polemics with the medical establishment, and his valorization of magical German folk culture, this charismatic early sixteenth-century figure has so far defied attempts to integrate his wide-ranging ideas and activities. Charles Webster has accomplished just this in this masterful new book, integrating Paracelsus's various pursuits as a coherent and urgent mission to reform a world in crisis on the brink of the End Times.

Webster overcomes a particular bifurcation in Paracelsus studies between the “‘philosophical’ (scientific and medical) and ‘theological’ (religious, ethical, social) aspects of his mission” (244). The roots of this split go back to Paracelsus himself, who was largely circumspect about his religious and ethical commitments, yet took on the medical establishment with bravado both in public and in print, suggesting that he distinguished between the two or even privileged medical over religious reform. Webster argues, however, that for Paracelsus salvation and healing were deeply intertwined. He was equally critical of religious institutions and the professions, lamenting that priests and physicians alike were increasingly mired in a “culture of commodification” (245), failing in their divinely ordained duty to attend to the neediest in society. Indeed, he believed that pervasive corruption required a complete break with the existing order and its complete renewal from the ground up. In matters of faith, this was to be done by spreading the Gospel and embracing the apostolic mission of the early church. In medicine, Paracelsus posited an entirely new foundation for matter theory and medical therapeutics, drawing on magic and kabbalah to ensure that his renewal of the arts would be guided by spiritual insight. Together, he optimistically believed, these philosophical and theological reforms would renew the world and rescue it from its social and spiritual crisis. Paracelsus, however, chose his battles carefully. If he was relatively private about his religious views, Webster argues, it was because he recognized that “the pursuit of a radical agenda was the passport to prison and an early grave” in central Europe after 1525. Paracelsus's skills in the arena of medicine, however, allowed him “to switch gears and satisfy his reformist ambitions in this specialized context” (247).

By linking Paracelsus's philosophical and theological agendas, Webster contextualizes and deepens our understanding of the Reformer's sense of “mission” and makes it accessible to scholars of the period who may not be immersed in specialist literatures on medicine or theology. Particularly notable is the way that Webster situates this mission in the turbulent climate of religious

reform in the early years of the Reformation. Although he felt that Luther and the magisterial Reformers had made an important start in breaking with the institutional Catholic Church, Paracelsus, like many radical reformers, felt that they offered little improvement over the old order once they were in power. Although Webster emphasizes Paracelsus's independent stance on religious matters, he also demonstrates that Paracelsus was deeply conversant with contemporary debates among the radicals and tended towards a congregationalist and spiritualist form of piety. Indeed, Webster suggests, Paracelsus's views on the Lord's Supper and baptism aligned him closely (although not entirely) with the Anabaptists. Some may not be convinced that Anabaptism is the key to Paracelsus's theology, but Webster wisely stops short of trying to slot Paracelsus into a particular faction while nonetheless exploring possible lines of influence. Moreover, Webster underlines the sense of eschatological and apocalyptic urgency that Paracelsus shared with many of his contemporaries in the early sixteenth century, heightening his commitment to reform.

In exploring the religious, ethical, and medical dimensions of Paracelsus's mission and so carefully situating it in its social, intellectual, and religious context, Webster has skillfully integrated the multiple facets of this complicated figure. Moreover, he has normalized Paracelsus, dispelling his sensationalist image as a bizarre and unpleasant controversialist and giving purpose and context to his polemics, style of argument, and even manners. This learned, engaging, and comprehensive study will certainly remain the standard study of Paracelsus for some time, and deservedly so.

TARA NUMMEDAL

Brown University