



BRILL

Introduction

Pseudo-Paracelsus: Forgery and Early Modern Alchemy, Medicine and Natural Philosophy

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Over the last 40 years, a number of major publications have considerably expanded our knowledge of the works of the Swiss physician Paracelsus (1493/94–1541) and his followers. As a result, Paracelsianism appears more clearly as a driving force in widening the horizons of alchemy by offering it a platform for more serious consideration than it had hitherto been afforded, and in exerting considerable influence on the shaping of modern biology and medicine in an environment of fierce scholarly controversies.

Despite much progress, there are still wide gaps in the research literature. The internal chronology of Paracelsus' works is not known in detail. Often, this led historians to deem his system static although closer study indicates that his ideas constantly evolved. The bulk of spurious works attributed to Paracelsus throughout the second half of the sixteenth century has made it even more difficult to establish an internal chronology, either for the authentic or inauthentic works.

The production of forgeries under Paracelsus' name was an integral part of the diffusion of Paracelsianism. Many of those forgeries were widely read and extremely influential, not only in the fields of medicine and "chymistry" (alchemy/chemistry), but also in cosmology, anthropology, theology and magic. For many cases, we know neither when exactly they were first attributed to Paracelsus, nor who their authors were, nor even how much they may derive from authentic works by Paracelsus. A whole strand of German Paracelsianism, although widely influential far beyond the German borders – extending to Central Europe, the Low Countries, France, England and Italy – is thus entirely

out of our hands. Charles Webster in 1982 was amongst the first to remark upon the impact of Paracelsian forgeries on the formation of both Paracelsus' popular image and Paracelsianism.¹

Paracelsian forgeries have yet to be studied in their own right. Discussing their content, sources, topics, potential authorship and composition dates will be beneficial on many levels. It will reveal their distinctive and common features, their mutual connections and their kinship, in style and content, with the genuine works of Paracelsus, thereby compelling scholars to renew their focus on the latter. These reciprocal consequences will result in a much sharper and more detailed knowledge both of Paracelsus himself and of Paracelsianism.

It is, of course, important to understand that most of these forgeries were considered authentic by early modern readers, who considered the works of Paracelsus as a whole without any further consideration into the chronological developments within the works. Although Johann Huser, the first editor of Paracelsus' complete philosophical and medical works (1589-1591), tried to differentiate between authentic and spurious treatises, this, along with the setting of a chronological order, only became a project seriously taken up by Karl Sudhoff between 1894 and 1933. Today's historians need this critical approach, in addition to an understanding of how early modern Paracelsians received the works now deemed spurious.

All these considerations have led us to conceive a wide-ranging, collective research project on both Paracelsus and pseudo-Paracelsus. A special panel on these topics was held in Boston at the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in April 2016. Three months later, we organized another conference at Villa Vigoni (Italy) under the title: "Pseudo-Paracelsus: Alchemy and Forgery in Early Modern Medicine and Natural Philosophy." The papers collected here represent part of the results of this conference.² In parallel, a digitization of the Huser edition of Paracelsus has been made available via the

1 Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton. Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (New York, 1996; 1st ed. 1982), 57. See also Charles D. Gunnoe, "Erastus and Paracelsianism: Theological Motifs in Thomas Erastus' Rejection of Paracelsian Natural Philosophy," in Allen G. Debus and Michael T. Walton, eds., *Reading the Book of Nature: The Other Side of the Scientific Revolution* (Kirksville, MO, 1998), 45-66, on 64 n. 64.

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