

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Moran, Bruce T. Paracelsus: An Alchemical Life

Janice Liedl

Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081178ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37095>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Liedl, J. (2021). Review of [Moran, Bruce T. Paracelsus: An Alchemical Life].
Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme, 44(1), 284–286.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37095>

peuvent être établis avec la structure argumentative du *Liber de sceleribus*, mais aussi avec ses développements sur le livre de Daniel et sur Mahomet comme bête de l'*Apocalypse*. De même, on aimerait être renseigné sur d'éventuels échos qu'aurait laissés la réception de l'œuvre, si ténus qu'ils aient probablement été.

Il faut noter pour conclure que ces deux curiosités sont la simple contrepartie d'une introduction très bien faite. Les résumés de cette introduction, nécessaires à l'entrée dans le texte latin, donnent une vue très claire sur la pensée profondément hiéocratique de Sánchez de Arévalo : une pensée judicieusement rapportée à l'anticonciliarisme de l'auteur, qui se manifeste dès le concile de Bâle, et encore médiévale en ceci qu'elle demeure largement imperméable à la critique humaniste de la fausse donation de Constantin.

On ne peut qu'applaudir au travail de Giuseppe Mazzanti, car il est vraiment de grande qualité, et louer l'ambition de la collection « *Diritto cultura società* », pour la place qu'elle fait ainsi à la meilleure érudition philologique.

TRISTAN VIGLIANO

Aix-Marseille Université

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37094>

Moran, Bruce T.

Paracelsus: An Alchemical Life.

London: Reaktion Books, 2019. Pp. liv, 216 + 20 ill. ISBN 978-1-78914-144-3 (hardcover) US\$22.50.

Deeply involved in the radical reshaping of early modern ideas and practices regarding medicine, faith, science, and philosophy, Theophrastus von Hohenheim, or Paracelsus as he is best remembered, offers up a life story that is endlessly fascinating as well as revelatory about the world in which he worked. Bruce Moran employs his Renaissance subject as a door to multiple aspects of the early modern world in which he lived and worked. This slim but utterly engaging volume is less a biography and more a guided tour of Paracelsus's life and times, beautifully informed by Moran's own profound understanding of the alchemical philosophy that informs his subject's wide-ranging work.

In seven chapters, we encounter seven distinctively significant yet clearly intertwined aspects of Paracelsus's life, including how much these aspects

challenged conventions of the era. In organizing this book, Moran deliberately evokes his subject's unpublished final composition, *Septem defensiones*, in which Paracelsus justified his ideas and achievements against his critics. Each chapter thoughtfully introduces one key element of von Hohenheim's life work, explaining the early modern understandings and practices within which he emerged, before offering up fascinating anecdotes of the early modern physician's relentless pursuit of the deep wisdom that he believed was central to true healing.

The opening chapters deal with Paracelsian attacks on mainstream early modern medical practice and education. Moran sketches out the broad strokes of the cultural and philosophical world in which his subject emerged, but there is little narrative of his background and youth. Instead, readers are plunged right into the thick of things in the 1520s when Paracelsus came to notice in Strasbourg and Basel by confronting and condemning the medical norms. Moran shines when he explains the philosophies, scientific and spiritual, that informed the new medicine that Paracelsus so ardently espoused. His attacks upon a medical culture that valued faithfulness to Galenic models over learned experience come through vividly in Moran's recounting.

Next, in "The Alchemy of Things in the Making: Medicines as Poisons and Poisons as Medicines," readers learn how Paracelsus drew on and advanced the alchemical science of his times. Theophrastus von Hohenheim and his philosophically aligned contemporaries considered alchemy to be "the work of completing nature" (77). Thus, the health challenges of the era, rife with new or newly worrisome diseases and maladies, demanded innovative treatments based on close observation and alchemical wisdom. Success in this changing world of medical problems, Paracelsus argued, necessitated experience of the world that went far beyond the neighbourhood or even national contexts. Travel is the focus of Moran's fourth chapter, where he shows that more than simply the pursuit of knowledge but a spiritually informed openness to the world inspired Paracelsus to journey and learn. Encounters with miners and leatherworkers led to ground-breaking publications such as *Von der Bergsucht oder Bergkranckheiten drey Bücher* (Concerning miners' consumptions; or, three books of mining illnesses).

His travels led Paracelsus to challenge the complacency of Europe's medical establishment and put a priority on spiritual endeavours, as shown in chapter five. Moran deftly touches on the major reformers and Catholic advocates

whose lives intersected with his subject's, but rightly is more concerned with Paracelsus's own thoughts on these matters. That leads helpfully into the sixth chapter, "Invisible Beings and Invisible Diseases: Magic and Insanity in an Age of Faith," where the unity of Paracelsian thought and medicine are made clear. Moran reveals his subject's deep thoughts on the body, the mind, and the soul, drawing on occult, spiritual, and medical wisdom. Readers learn how Paracelsus understood and advised treating disorders such as mania, epilepsy, or melancholy, grounded in the particular mixture of wisdom he had carefully cultivated in his widespread studies. In his conclusion, Moran explores Paracelsus's long and shifting legacy, from early interests in his medical scholarship through the Romantic revival as a Faustian knowledge-seeker and even to a strained reinvention by some Nazi propagandists as a nationalist Teutonic icon.

Just as Paracelsus's life defies easy categorization, so does this study. It is not a simple popularization of the polymath's career and innovations, although these elements are the chief focus. Nor is it a handy reference for students needing details on the inquiries and events of the man's career or publications, although Moran does draw heavily upon Paracelsus's treatises to flavour his work. *Paracelsus: An Alchemical Life* is an engaging, sometimes audacious, eclectic life story well-suited for readers outside the academy but also rewarding for those within.

JANICE LIEDL

Laurentian University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37095>

Nevola, Fabrizio.

Street Life in Renaissance Italy.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. 320 + 150 ill. ISBN 978-0-3001-7543-1 (hardcover) US\$60.

Investigations of urban architectural typologies have long dominated the history of Renaissance cities. Studies of churches, government halls, and palaces, for example, have produced a narrative of top-down city planning and improvement that places administrators, princely rulers, and theorists at the