

### Book Reviews

*Aufgang der Arzney-Kunst*, translated by CHRISTIAN KNORR VON ROSENROTH. Facsimile reprint with contributions by WALTER PAGEL and FRIEDHELM KEMP, Munich, Kösel-Verlag, 1971, 2 vols., pp. 1414, illus., £37.50.

Reviewed by Marianne Winder, Assistant Librarian, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

J. B. Van Helmont's works were published posthumously under the title *Ortus Medicinae* in Latin by his son Franciscus Mercurius Van Helmont in 1648. This was translated into English by John Chandler and published in London in 1662, second edition 1664. Though essentially a good translation, it contains errors in many places. There was an inadequate French translation by Jean Leconte published in 1670, merely of a few extracts. The best form in which Van Helmont's works have been made accessible to readers is the German translation by Knorr von Rosenroth published in 1683 of which the work under review is a facsimile reprint. This translation is absolutely correct and, as it were, more than complete because it includes passages otherwise only found in Van Helmont's Flemish works. These Flemish works are different from the *Ortus*. They were put together by J. B. Van Helmont himself, not by his son like the *Ortus Medicinae*. The son also collaborated with Knorr von Rosenroth in the German translation. From the account of Rosenroth's life and work by Friedhelm Kemp at the back of volume two of the present reprint one can see how Rosenroth's preoccupation with alchemical and cabalistic studies and his poetic gift made him most suitable to be the translator of such a work. The publishers, however, should not have omitted J. B. Van Helmont's name from their modern title-page though it, of course, appears on the facsimile title-page. But here we have the best version of Van Helmont's work beautifully produced, typographically satisfying, with a reprint of the original engraving showing the earlier masters of medicine groping for the truth, and with the only reliable portrait of J. B. Van Helmont, except for some vignettes. This is a welcome facsimile reprint of a rare and expensive book in an elegant format, which promises well to be of substantial help to students of medical history as well as of baroque literature and philosophy. Van Helmont's Latin is often obscure as he used complicated sentences and an idiom of his own. Therefore even a German translation is valuable for a better understanding.

Of particular topical interest to the reader of medical history today is Van Helmont's part in the reformation of the general concept of disease. Following Paracelsus, he denied the traditional ancient view of diseases as an upset of humoral balance (*dyscrasia*) varying with the individual mixture of humours and qualities. In this view there were no diseases as such, but only diseased individuals. By contrast Van Helmont regarded each disease as a being (*Ens*) in its own right. What is this *Ens morbi*? It is not the vital principle (*Archeus*) of the individual, although his *Archeus* is the begetter of the morbid *Ens*, because the *Archeus* conceives a morbid seed which is the essence of disease. This seed is made active and fertile by virtue of its indwelling idea or image of disease—a distinct plan of action. This idea or image is the *Ens Morbi*. The image comes into being when the *Archeus* imagines an object it is becoming desirous of (*res imaginata*). The objects imagined can be outside morbidic agents such as poisons, the saliva of the rabid dog, the virus of plague, in short, what Van Helmont calls the *spinae infixae*, something of the nature of thorns stuck

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from the outside into the healthy flesh. Their penetrative power varies in proportion to their spirituality and subtlety. It is lowest in the heavy passive Galenic *materia peccans*, i.e. the humoral residues. These outside objects have each also their own *Archeus* or organizing principle. The *Archeus* of the object represents the object in its "middle life", a Paracelsian term denoting a state of reduced vitality. In this state the *Archeus* of the object cannot be assimilated and thus neutralized by the *Archeus* of the host who is forced to conceive the morbid seed containing the idea or image of the disease. As seeds elsewhere in nature, the morbid seed soon gains independence of its begetter. It is externalized and becomes parasitic and forces its own life schedule on the autosite *Archeus* of the patient or host and thus destroys his organism unless the host's *Archeus* wins in the dialogue between the two *Archei* in which case the patient recovers. The disease-plan of action becomes reality ("flesh") from being first an idea. This is a Platonic view indicating the conversion of the spiritual into material effects. There are, then, as many diseases as there are morbid ideas, *Entia morborum*. This is Van Helmont's ontological parasitist concept of disease. Diseases vary with the specific images conceived and the plans of action thus imposed. They do not vary with individual reactivity as such; what varies is not the subject, the patient—but the object, the disease. In content as well as terminology this ontological concept closely follows Paracelsus, for instance with regard to the view of disease as being basically spiritual, the seeds and *Entia morborum*, seminal analogies, foreignness of the *Ens*, the *Magnum Oportet* or inability to absorb completely what comes from the outside, the *Spinae infixae*, the Middle Life and Corpus, Tartar, Imago and Idea, the relationship of passion, fury and disease, the conversion of imagination and passion into corporeal effects, and much else.

We understand that this ontological concept of disease will be the subject of a comprehensive paper by one of the editors of the book under review, Walter Pagel, in the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, (in press). In this article at the back of volume two, which deals with Van Helmont's position in the history of science, medicine and philosophy the emphasis is laid not so much on the history of diseases, but on Van Helmont's discovery of gas acid gastric digestion. In both these points the same principle of conversion of spirit into body is recognizable. The extensive bibliography of the works of J. B. Van Helmont by Walter Pagel and those of Knorr von Rosenroth by Friedhelm Kemp will be found useful.

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*Bibliography of the history of medicine 1964–1969*, Bethesda, Md., National Library of Medicine, 1972, pp. vi, 1475, \$12.00.

This volume is the first of the proposed five-yearly cumulations of the annual bibliographies on the history of medicine produced by the National Library of Medicine. It includes several thousand additional articles and monographs covering the year 1968–1969. The arrangement is by person, subject and author, as previously, and the work should prove a quick and useful key to recent references in this field.