PARACELSUS

An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine
in the Era of the Renaissance

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To
Dr Charles Singer

Preface

The student of the present book will find himself translated to a strange
world removed from modern medicine and the Harveyan spirit to which
it owes its origin. For, as Sir Henry Dale said, Harvey's greatest achievement
was "that he created and displayed for all times the method" by
which discoveries of "profound and permanent significance may be attained
and made secure" (The Harveyan Oration on Some Epochs in Medical

Consequently, the theories, ideas and philosophies which will be discussed
in the following essays are difficult to digest and without obvious
value to-day. Yet they once helped to create a specific style and period in
the history of science and medicine. They are thus historical facts - though
not what could be called "hard" historical facts. Indeed they are so "soft"
that they may easily be forgotten. On the other hand an attempt may be
made at presenting the "hard" facts of scientific and medical discovery
against the background of the philosophies with which they were intimately
associated. In former times no specialisation prevented the savant from
blending science and medicine with philosophy, religion and cosmology. To understand him fully we require an understanding of all these. Why, in such an attempt, Paracelsus was chosen as the focal point for a discussion of Philosophical Medicine in the era of the Renaissance and the limitations and shortcomings of this venture are set out in the General Introduction which follows. The main purpose of the book is to explain the origin of his medical ideas in the light of his general philosophy and their influence in Medical History. From this point of view the core of the book is to be found in Part II (Medicine).

A few words may be added about the illustrations. Books on Paracelsus and editions of his works usually abound in portraits of Paracelsus and reproductions of title-pages and facsimiles of Paracelsean texts. There was no point in repeating this in the present book. Instead emphasis was laid on portraits of other savants treated in our text.1 In addition a few comparatively little known pictures were given to illustrate the spirit of the time. Fig. 6 (p.46) for example - the flaying of Marsyas by Apollo - shows in a nutshell the cruelty of the age - a target of Paracelsus’ censure. How

1 The portraits of Leonicenus and Manardus were included, although the role of these men in the academic education of Paracelsus is open to doubt. This particularly applies to Manardus who left Italy for Hungary as early as 1513.

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many contemporaries must have looked upon Paracelsus as one of these presumptuous "fools".2 Figs.24 and 25 (p.237 and 238) are of interest as a comparison with fig.23 (p. 235) — early Rosicrucian symbols before 1615. The closed eye of the angel in Fig. 24 and 25 is suggestive, even if it only resulted from the printer's whim.3

It remains for the author to express his gratitude to those who enabled him to continue his research — first and foremost to the Wellcome Trust under whose auspices the present book was brought to completion. Personally he wishes to thank Sir Henry Dale, O.M. F. R. S. and Dr F.H.K. Green, C... F.R.C.P. for support and encouragement. Much help was extended to the author from the Historical-Medical institutions of the Wellcome Foundation under the directorship of Dr E.Ash worth Underwood. This applies in particular to the essential and almost continuous assistance given to him at the incomparable Wellcome Historical-Medical Library by its Librarian Dr.F.N.L. Poynter, who never tired of placing bibliographical information at the disposal of the author. He also provided many of the portraits and some of the illustrations given in this book. The present text owes much to its careful revision by Dr Bernard E. J.
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It also gives the author great pleasure to acknowledge the personal
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Finally the author wishes to thank Dr Dr. h. c. Heinz Karger and Dr
Fritz Karger for their courteous and highly efficient work in publishing the
present book.

2It is significant in this respect that this picture from Sebastian Brant's Ship of Fools
should have found access to a book of sermons (those of Geyler of Keisersberg - see
below p. 44) at all. - For the medical allusions in late mediaeval sermons reference
should be made to Kotelmann, L. Gesundheitspflege im Mittelalter. Kulturgeschichtliche
1890; on Geyler of Keisersberg p. 188-242. - Our Fig. 7 depicting the doctor-fool who
allows his patient to die while working out his complexion from the urine according
to scholastic rules closely illustrates Brant's original text rather than Geyler's somewhat
wavering appraisal of urine examination.

3Perhaps it is no accident that this picture illustrates a text of Suso in whose speculation
particular importance is attached to the purified and wise "eye" that can contemplate
divine simplicity beyond the multiplicity of things that are "this and that". The
classical locus may be found in the seventh chapter of the "Theologia Deutsch": "Von
zwein geistlichen ougen, mit den der mensch sihet in die ewigkeit und in die zit, und wie

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