
As a Franciscan and an alchemist, John of Rupescissa has mostly been read by two groups of scholars: historians of science interested in the medieval origins of chemical medicine, and historians of religion who wish to understand the apocalyptic aspects of the Franciscan Spiritual reforms in the later middle ages. Leah DeVun shows that these two groups of historians have much to learn from one another, and in so doing she also makes a point about the limits of modern disciplinary assumptions when reading historical texts. This interdisciplinary book bears fruits luscious enough to tempt most of us out of mutual ignorance, and draws welcome attention to an influential figure long known but poorly understood.

DeVun sets Rupescissa against the background of early-fourteenth-century apocalyptic writing, in the Franciscan tradition which called itself “Spiritual”. Immediately she distinguishes herself with a clear writing style, disciplining herself to just what is essential to her narrative. Nodding to patristic ambivalent attitudes on the “last things”—Augustine discouraged dwelling on them—DeVun tells the story of how fourteenth-century extremists of the Franciscan order nevertheless turned to eschatology in their hour of rhetorical need. Conventual Franciscans thought it permissible to own some temporal property, especially since papal authority concurred. Spirituals thought Conventuals had betrayed the distinctive tradition of usus pauper (“poor use,” a kind of voluntary poverty) taught by Francis of Assisi (d. 1226). In the tradition of Joachim of Fiore, a twelfth-century writer on the “millennium” of the last times, the Franciscans found in apocalyptic prophecy a tool for criticizing what they saw as a lax majority position—most of the Franciscan order and the papacy saw it as realistic. Rupescissa's biography makes sense as a part of a late wave of Spiritual Franciscans. He seems to have joined the Franciscans after beginning his studies at Toulouse in the late 1320s. Visionary experiences stimulated prophetic preaching, earning him a place in French Franciscan prisons from 1344 onward. After 1349 Rupescissa was in Avignon, behind papal bars, and there Rupescissa wrote both prophetic and alchemical works.

Most of the book exegetes these texts, moving from the prophetic to the alchemical works, or,
as DeVun also puts it, from direct revelation to the book of nature. In both cases, DeVun's eye is on
epistemology and ethics. That is, for Rupescissa prophecy and alchemy were supposed to enrich
understanding of the world; and this better understanding implied something about what people were to
do about it. Moreover, the alchemical and the prophetic parts of his writings borrowed from each other
in these two respects. Rupescissa's prophecy looked at the natural world, including human history, as
sick, going through a time of painful purging from infidels and faithless clergy, culminating in battle
and the Antichrist's defeat. This sickness is as natural (or social) as it is spiritual. By claiming “spiritual
intelligence,” Rupescissa offered a way for understanding the signs of the times (48), and then a way
also to fix it—through the faithful conduct of both temporal power (the French king) and spiritual
authority (the Franciscan order, on the Spiritual model of voluntary poverty). Rupescissa's prophetic
knowledge spurred people to faithful living, where faithfulness meant that the world simply looked
more Franciscan.

Historians of religion will find little new in this description of prophecy. But this book's value is
in applying that prophetic model to alchemy. In a chapter especially valuable to historians of science,
DeVun sorts out the sources of Rupescissa's alchemy, with special attention to the “quintessence.” She
args that Rupescissa is the real author of the Pseudo-Llullian notion of quintessence which would
become popular when redacted as Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia and taken up by
early modern Paracelsians (98-99). Perhaps DeVun protests a bit too much against a newer
historiography of chemistry, in order to root her thesis that the alchemical “code names” (Denknamen,
she repeats several times) do not simply refer to substances and operations, but that the cultural echoes
of those names are also significant for understanding the point of alchemy. Still, DeVun's point here is
perhaps more significant than she lets on—also for students of religion. Older historians of alchemy
were often tempted by the imaginative spiritual associations Carl Jung saw in alchemical literature, to
the point of entirely misunderstanding the naturalistic project that most alchemy was.¹ DeVun offers a
way to read alchemical texts which respects the fully naturalistic referents of alchemical language,
while still seeing the spiritual message such language carried with it. So when Rupescissa talked about
the quintessence as a heavenly, perfect essence that could ameliorate earthly imperfections, he was
certainly describing operations he expected to result in better health and gold—since longevity and

¹ The literature is expanding, but fundamental insights are found in Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman,
“Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy,” in Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern
gold were both needed to fight the war against the Antichrist. Nevertheless, the implications of death, redemption, and resurrection were present, right in the natural elements and operations of the alchemical work. That is, for Rupescissa, “the reenactment of Christian history through alchemy could lead to the return of Christ and the defeat of Antichrist in a world on the brink of a new age” (128).

The moral to this tale of prophetic alchemy is certainly historical: it enriches our understanding of both alchemy and the history of medieval Christianity. With admirable and rare clarity, DeVun succeeds in addressing two groups of specialists. Unlike some writing on alchemy and prophecy, the book is eminently readable, with technical discussions reserved mostly for endnotes. Clarity meets concision: DeVun limits herself to 163 pages of text. Like most virtues, these render her vulnerable too. Some readers will want more nuance on some questions. She might over-cut, for example, the distinction many modern scholars of the period make between science and religion. And historians of the Franciscan order will probably observe that recent trends in their field call into question the neat distinction between spirituals and conventuals of that order (at least for the earlier century). Her narrative of Rupescissa's own dramatic life, measured by European crises, may leave newcomers to the field of late medieval religion with the impression that the old canard of a decadent later middle ages is still au courant. Rupescissa's case may tell us more about the literary figure of the holy friar bearing supernatural knowledge, or the message gained through spiritual feats of endurance.

DeVun has her own prophetic message, one likely to find a more receptive ear than did Rupescissa's. Throughout, DeVun marks a distinction between naturalistic inquiry and its ends or purposes (cf. 116). This helps understand how prophetic inspiration and naturalism can work together in the same texts, the same person. Modern scholarly divisions of labor blind us, she reminds us, to these sorts of relationships. The key judgment is that a distinction of disciplines does not entail that they study different bodies of knowledge (99). DeVun teaches us that Rupescissa's texts cannot be understood without recognizing that fact. The payoff is new sources for understanding late medieval religiosity: Rupescissa's naturalistic project served a highly distinctive vision of piety, of European society, and of world history. And this mattered beyond the fourteenth century: in alchemical works on the quintessence, Rupescissa's vision was copied and printed into the eighteenth century. DeVun's example of Rupescissa offers a historically careful method for students of religion—not only of apocalypticism—to read a genre of texts which has been largely left to historians of science or
practitioners of psychoanalysis.

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