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Leah Devun. *Prophecy, alchemy, and the end of time: john of rupecissa in the late middle ages..* [S.l.]: Columbia University Press, 2013. pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-14539-8.

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As a result of the modernist prejudice that alchemy is primitive and science is advanced, the default position in many traditional narratives of the history of western science was to purge from its ranks those fanatics in the past who practiced magic, and to remove all traces of alchemy from those deemed to belong in the progressive genealogy of science. Combined with the disciplinary dichotomy in the academy between the sciences and the humanities, this tendency means that only rarely are the religious dimensions of a scientist's life considered by historians of science, nor are the scientific inquiries of a thinker often explored by historians of religion. In this book, fortunately, these modernist categorizations are shattered and we are presented with an interesting and valuable holistic study of a real late medieval personality who stands at the intersection of these subjects. I commend Leah DeVun for her cutting-edge approach in crossing traditional academic borders and for her use of the life and thought of Rupescissa to illuminate broad currents in fourteenth-century western European culture. The result is an excellent study.

Not only is DeVun's approach valuable, her central character is fascinating. John of Rupescissa (c.1310-c.1362) was quite a personality. He was full of contradictions and surprises, a man whose interests in the natural and supernatural were mixed together and blended by the dual fires of this-worldly persecution by church authorities and of the eagerly anticipated imminent arrival of the apocalypse. He could have walked straight out of a backroom in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1980), and his name provokes images of bubbling cauldrons or esoteric books.

A Franciscan friar, author of numerous books, and habitué of prisons, by the time he was forty-six, Rupescissa had spent more than a decade of his life bound in chains and locked under a staircase. He was tried before the papal court at Avignon for his writings, but rather than simply dying, which would have been more convenient for the church authorities, he kept up his

defiant writing from confinement. In gruesome detail, he proclaimed that the real horrors, the horrors of the Antichrist, were about to begin. One quickly gets the impression that this was one tough monastic. Although he never claimed to have the "gift of prophecy," he did state that his authority came from "spiritual understanding" (***intellectus spiritualis***) that God gave as a weapon for the conflict of the Last Days. He wrote with the conviction of a man on a divine mission.

Although he is best known as a progenitor of Paracelsus and early contributor to "medical chemistry," Rupescissa's apocalypticism is the fundamental context in which he should be understood. He was rooted in the tradition of the Spiritual Franciscans and Joachim of Fiore. His alchemical research was directly related to his quest to create medicines that would enable the faithful to survive the onslaughts of the Antichrist and to defeat him. Rupescissa's beliefs about the "end times" are a far cry from later escapist forms found in some Christian thought. He advocated the development of a small cadre of adepts who, using the alchemical substances he claimed to discover as a result of divine guidance, would turn the table on the seemingly unstoppable Antichrist and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat for the forces of good. As a result of their violent defense, a literal thousand-year reign of Christ would then unfold on earth. DeVun rightly notes how innovative these eschatological concepts are.

The scientific context for Rupescissa comes from the writings of Roger Bacon (1214-92), Arnald of Vilanova (c.1240-1311) and Ramon Llull (c. 1232-1316). Based on these earlier works, Rupescissa developed the concept of the "quintessence," a kind of perfect, universal, fundamental building-block substance that regulated the celestial bodies in the superlunary sphere and radiating from it to earth, could be purified from ordinary substances. In practice, for Rupescissa the quintessence seems to have been a distillation of alcohol related to the metal gold and the light of the sun. Although Rupescissa's quintessence had transformative powers, he focused on its preservative function as a result of its ability to perfectly balance the four humors. These ideas, too, were innovations that had lasting influence specifically through their adaptation by Paracelsus.

This book also includes a close examination of Rupescissa's two main alchemical treatises, the ***Liber lucis*** (c. 1350) and the ***Liber de consideratione quinte essentie omnium rerum*** (1351-52). DeVun is especially observant of rhetorical aspects of Rupescissa's works, including his code names, metaphors, and similes. DeVun's arguments here are especially important: religious terminology should not be seen as historical cultural "baggage" to be ignored as culturally "required" language in order to to get down to the "real science," but rather is essential to Rupescissa's ideas. The use of metaphors such as "crucifixion" and "resurrection" to describe alchemical processes are not incidental to his description, but important framing concepts that shape his understanding of natural operations. By highlighting this use of language, DeVun yet again provides a holistic understanding that serves as a corrective to some traditional approaches to this material.

For Rupescissa the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture were ultimately two parallel sources of religious truth that did not contradict but rather complemented each other. And, in the crises of the fourteenth century, each had a great deal to say about what Rupescissa believed to be the imminent apocalypse. In particular, through astrology and through holy scripture, insight could be gained about the unfolding of end-times events, and through alchemy ordinary humans could be super-powered, so to speak, and learn to survive and even defeat the rule of the Antichrist. In combining these two areas, Rupescissa created a thoroughly Christian alchemy, a significant accomplishment.

Rupescissa is much less known today than he was in the late Middle Ages. Numerous medieval

editions of his alchemical texts have been documented, including printed editions into the eighteenth century. His prophetic guidebook, ***Vade mecum in tribulatione*** (1356), survives in translations in seven different European vernaculars. Portions of his work were interpolated into other alchemical and apocalyptic texts, including those associated with Llull. He was a recognized authority, and in the eyes of some of the church hierarchy, a dangerous man whose influence had to be neutralized.

After reading this book, no one could deny the essential role that religious thinking played at a critical moment in the development of western science, unless one discounts Rupescissa as an aberration (and he clearly was not). Yet Rupescissa is unique. Although he drew on the ideas of others, only he brought together quintessence, medicine, and the tribulations of the Last Days into a cohesive system. DeVun's valuable work on him is important not only for its careful description of an underappreciated figure, but also because of the important theoretical contributions she makes to a more holistic approach to our understanding of the history of science and to late medieval culture.